

The Next Ex

**By
Maren Smith**

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Dedication

Although I'm not sure it's a good thing to dedicate a
book titled, 'The Next Ex' to your husband, this
wouldn't have happened without you.
My mountain, my love.

CHAPTER ONE

Travis Dorsett owned one of the largest international distribution firms in the lumber industry. He was considered a powerful and influential man by his colleagues, a masterful strategist in the boardroom by his peers. He was a man who stood firm against opposition and always came out on top no matter how the odds were stacked. He was called The Mountain behind his back, not just for his broad and massive size, but because of his inflexibility. The Mountain never wavered, never backed down, and never lost. Ever. Not once.

Until now.

Fifty-seven restaurants in the down-town Seattle area and he had to come to this one, Travis thought bitterly. He forced himself to smile and extend his hand in greeting. "Maxwell."

Halfway out the front door of the Golden Goose restaurant, Max Bicos smoothly extricated himself from his two companions, Kuronabe Yuko and Tetsuo--Japanese businessmen that Travis had been in heavy negotiation with for more than six months now. He grasped Travis's hand, a gesture the casual observer might have mistaken as friendly. Anyone looking more closely, however, might have noticed how the two clasped hands just a little too tightly and how neither man's smile reached quite as far as his eyes.

"Travis," Max said, his smile broadening just a bit. "What brings you out of the gutter?"

"Unlike you, I could never get used to the stench." Travis squeezed Max's hand as he asked, "How's my wife?"

"My wife now," Max replied, and their hands abruptly parted. "Marsha's fine and doesn't speak of you at all."

Travis glanced to Max's lunch companions. They bowed their heads, a polite gesture that he returned even as he fought to keep from showing his frustration. As the Japanese men climbed into the

back of his opponent's car, it was everything he could do to keep from laying Max out on the concrete sidewalk.

"I'm moving up in the world, don't you think?" Max asked with a grin. "Quite the stepping stool you've given me. I know this must be very painful for you to accept. Seeing them with me, I mean. You were so close to netting that account. But, sadly for you and fortunately for me, they have decided to go with the better man."

Travis clenched his fist.

"Turns out, they prefer to do business with men who are stable, responsible and obligated. The strong family man type. You know the Japanese, business and family go hand in hand. I'm afraid they view you as something of a cold fish, what with your long line of broken relationships and that messy divorce last year. Imagine, they turned to me because... well," he laughed, "because I have your wife."

"And all the nasty social diseases that come with her."

"Low blow, old friend."

"The truth hurts." Travis cast a quick bow to the Japanese men as they glanced out at him from the back of Max's car. "Have a good day."

By the window, Yuko impassively dipped his head in return, and Travis moved to the edge of the curb where his own car and driver still waited.

"What about your reservation?" Max called after him, smugly bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet. "These people charge whether you show up or not."

"I've lost my appetite." Travis climbed into the back of the car and snapped, "Dorsett Building."

Half an hour later, as his driver pulled up to the Building's front steps, it struck Travis that taking a client to lunch was a business tactic used to garner business, not celebrate a done deal. One quick call on his cellular phone to the Kuronabe's hotel confirmed his suspicions. He set up a dinner

appointment to discuss a suitable counter to Maxwell's offer. Though they had to fly back to Japan that night, they invited him to visit their corporation in two weeks' time.

"That gives me fourteen days," Travis said to no one in particular. Fourteen days to find a wife and change the Kuronabe's opinion of him from cold fish to family man.

And just when he thought he'd got his life back in order after Marsha, too. He shook his head in disgust, unable to believe he was about to dive headfirst right back into another mess of a marriage. He needed another wife like he needed another divorce lawyer with an alimony suit breathing down his neck.

He stalked through the lower lobby of the Building, heading for the glass elevators. Strange. He had walked through this lobby a thousand times and never once noticed how many women worked here. A plump blonde sat at the switchboard, her pleasant round face smiling and animated as she helped a customer find the office number of the executive he sought. A brunette in glasses and a business skirt was bent over the water fountain. One of the three security guards stationed near the front entrance was a woman.

He stopped to glance behind him, back out the large picture windows that overlooked the busy Seattle street. There were literally hundreds upon hundreds of women out there. The problem was finding one unscrupulous or greedy or desperate enough to agree to be his wife and further his ambitions.

He stepped onto the elevator next to a tall, dark-haired woman. Not too old, he noted. Perhaps in her forties. When the doors closed, he used their reflections in the polished metal to study her hands.

Damn. A ring.

One down; half a billion more to go. How was he going to sift through them all in the next fourteen days? He was probably courting disaster by

considering any of the women in this building as possible nominees for the position of his next ex. No, from now on he would only look for a woman outside the company, or at least one who didn't work in his home office.

Maybe he could advertise: Attractive, wealthy businessman seeks single woman for matrimony.

And spanking. Lots of spanking.

Couldn't hurt to be honest. And anyway, if he was going to be desperate enough to advertise, he may as well get what he wanted.

Of course, the papers would have a field day with an ad like that, especially if they found out who placed it. And once that became public knowledge, then there would be no way to hide the fact that he was marrying to snatch a business contract out of Max's grasping clutches. An extremely lucrative contract, and one that he had poured a lot of effort into winning. But he wasn't likely to fool his Japanese associates that way, and it certainly wouldn't count in his favor if they did find out. It might even count against him.

The elevator stopped on a lower floor. The brunette disembarked and another young woman stepped on, wheeling a janitor's cart in behind her. At first irritated at being forced to make room for the bulky cleaning cart, Travis then found himself studying the woman.

She was lovely, whistling softly as she bobbed up and down on the heels of her ratty sneakers, staring at the neon numbers above the elevator doors that indicated the passing floors. The nametag on the left side of her grey sweatshirt read 'Jamie M.'

He forced his attention back to the closed elevator doors, only to find himself watching her in the reflection instead. He shouldn't even consider it. She was definitely an employee, and in his home office to boot. And what had he just decided about employees, he told himself sternly. But a moment

later, as the elevator made its slow ascent, he found himself looking at her again.

She was a red-head; that was the first point in her favor. Travis generally did not like carrot-tops. He was attracted to blondes first, then brunettes. Red ranked somewhere between black-haired women and grey-headed ninety-year-old ladies.

Her blue eyes were a point against her, though. He was very much attracted to blue eyes. However, they were framed by long red lashes that would constantly remind him of her carrot-top so he could probably live with that.

The second point in her favor was her diminutive height. Standing several inches over six feet himself, Travis usually gravitated towards amazons, with long slender legs and nubile bodies that wouldn't be crushed beneath his own. The shortest woman he'd ever dated had stood in at five foot six inches. He sized Jamie M. up and down, finally deciding she might be five feet even, give or take an inch, and maybe with heels on. He doubted if the top of her head came to his shoulders. He'd probably get a crick in his neck every time he bent to kiss her.

Travis frowned. He banished that rebel thought from his mind. Kissing her was definitely not on the agenda.

Although, were she so inclined, he wasn't likely to reject the opportunity, either. He was only human after all.

By rights, she should have been as stubby as she was short. But nature had been abundantly kind in that department and had formed her exquisitely with plump breasts that would be a pleasant handful, a trim waist, round hips, a pert little bottom that just begged to be turned over the knee and given a sexy slap or two... or twenty. Oh, who was he kidding? He could make a night out of smacking those pretty, little nether cheeks.

Although she probably wouldn't like it.

Nope. Under the pale fluorescent elevator lights, she was really looking quite vanilla to him. Another point in her favor, since that would make it easier to leave in two years time. He had no intention of spending the rest of his life with a woman who didn't share his interest in spanking, either for fun or otherwise. He'd done that already with Marsha and once was more than enough for Travis, thank you very much. There was absolutely no way that he would consider another life-long marriage without a means of accountability.

Marriage for a year or two, now that was an entirely different matter. And he stepped sideways, looking at the reflection they made together in the silver shine of the elevator doors. She might not be the stuff that poet's vied one another to write sonnets over, but she looked... well, she looked like someone's wife. His, to be exact. He glanced at her hands, resting lightly on the handle of her cleaning cart.

No ring.

Perfect.

He opened his mouth to introduce himself, catching himself in the nick of time and abruptly stepping back again. What in the world was he doing? He was a businessman for heaven's sake, cool, calm, reasonable and--reputedly--somewhat intelligent. She was an employee in his main office, the stuff that lawsuits for sexual harassment were made of. If one intended to run a business without yielding half of everything one earned to a grasping woman's lawyer, than one did so without seducing the staff.

They reached the twentieth floor and Jamie M.'s destination. Whistling softly under her breath and without once glancing at him, she wheeled her bulky cart out of the elevator. As she passed him, Travis detected the faintest scent of baby lotion. Ooo, big point against her. He found himself not only liking the smell, but certain feelings began to

stir in a place that gave credence to sexual harassment lawsuits.

Yet, when the elevator doors started to close after her disembarkment, Travis caught them and pushed them firmly open again.

This was the data entry floor. There were over a hundred desks, placed side by side with little more than a three-foot distance between them for walking. Each desk had a computer, dictation recorder, phone, and an overflowing 'In' box. A community laser printer dotted the end of each row. Without a single cubicle to block his view, Travis watched Jamie over a virtual sea of hunched shoulders and rapidly typing fingers.

With this many clacking keys, ringing phones, and more than a hundred laughing, gossiping women, the noise level was all but deafening, and yet Jamie paid little attention to any of it. She simply steered her cleaning cart to the middle of the first row of desks and tapped the wheel brakes down with her foot. Weaving her way between crowded clerks and office chairs, she began emptying trashcans and recycling bins.

The seat of her jeans was so worn; it was a wonder they did not split every time she bent over. Her sneakers weren't much better, either. There was barely enough material stitched together to keep them on her feet. His mouth tightened briefly. While the company dress code did not require daytime janitors to look glamorous, they didn't have to look homeless, either. But that also was perfect. She obviously needed money, and that was one thing which he had in abundance.

There was a beep from the intercom above his head. "Hey, who's holding up the elevator?"

That was when Travis became aware of the small group of people to either side of him, waiting patiently for him to decide whether he was going up or down. Suddenly irritated again, he let go of the doors, sealing out the sight of Jamie M.'s beautifully upturned and entirely too-spankable backside.

Though he had spent several minutes watching her, not once had she so much as glanced in his direction. He wondered what she was thinking about so intently.

"Come here, young lady," the man told her sternly.

Jamie sifted through her trash cart, her hands fairly flying as she sorted the garbage from the recyclables. As her daydream spun webs of fantasy over the monotony of her life, a soft smile curved her generous lips. Eyes drooping half-closed, she was the very depiction of seduction as her imagination took her from the data entry pool to the private living room--no, kitchen, No! Bedroom--yes, to the private bedroom of an as-yet-unknown Mister Right.

He reached up to take her hand as she drew near and pulled her to the foot of his bed. A small wooden paddle was already waiting there. As he sat on the end, he maneuvered her to stand between his knees, taking her smaller hands in his, his eyes locking firmly with hers.

"You were late to work again this morning, weren't you, Jamie?" he said, his tone calm and reasonable and set in that Your-Bottom-Is-In-Danger-Here voice.

Jamie felt herself tense and her breath catch in the back of her throat. She was not so lost in the daydream as to reach back and protect her cringing backside with her hand, the way she'd likely do if ever this scenario were to play out in real life. But her fantasy self had no such inhibitions. And in fact, she didn't use just one hand, she used both.

"Yes, sir," she told Mister Right, her voice quavery and soft.

"Why were you late?" he asked, still calm, very authoritative. Oh yeah, Mister Right was authoritative all right, and he was giving her a Look that matched his tone. It was loving, but stern, and

it made her knees go weak, her heart pound, and her hands turn palm-up over her defenseless bottom.

She swallowed hard as she whisperingly admitted, "I--I over slept."

He only nodded, his mouth tightening as he reached up to unfasten her jeans and tug them all the way down to her knees. She moaned when he did the same to her panties, baring her to view, and her hands darted forward to cover her exposed front. He didn't allow that for long though. As soon as her panties were worked down past her knees, he took her hands in his again.

"Jamie, this makes three times this year." With patient rationality, he asked, "What did we decide would happen if you were ever late to work again?"

"You--" Her eyes fell to the wooden paddle, no bigger really than the palm of his hand, sitting on the bed beside him. "You said you would sp-spank me."

"Is there any reason you can give me why I shouldn't follow through with that?" Mister Right asked. When she shook her head, he transferred his hand to her arm and the command came, "Over my knee, young lady."

Oblivious to those working around her, Jamie reached for another trashcan. She was not quite successful in stifling a soft, half-wistful, half-apprehensive groan.

At the desk beside her, a woman paused in the middle of typing a memo to cast Jamie a sympathetic smile. "Don't I know it. I've been doing this so long, yesterday I sorted my kids into categories and cross-referenced them for my husband. He told me to ask for vacation time."

His hand came to a brief, warm rest on the curve of her right bottom cheek. He rubbed a small circle over first one bare summit, and then the other, as if drawing an invisible bull's-eye that only dominants could see. "I would much rather be doing this for fun."

Clutching his leg with both hands, Jamie squeezed her eyes tightly shut. She didn't say anything; she couldn't say anything. And when his hand abruptly left her skin, her entire body braced to receive the first hardy swat.

"Looks like you've lost your admirer," said the woman next to Jamie, craning her neck to see the now closed elevator doors beyond the shoulders of the woman sitting in front of her. When no response to her observation was forthcoming, she turned back to Jamie. "Jamie, honey?"

Smack!

The woman raised her voice, "Jamie!"

Jamie jumped, dropping a half-full recycling box to the floor even as she cried out, "Ow!"

The office came suddenly and sharply back into focus, and she turned a slow hot shade of red as she saw those nearest to her turning in their chairs to look at her in surprise.

Concerned, the woman next to her asked, "What happened? Did you hurt yourself?"

Jamie quickly stuck a finger in her mouth. "Paper cut. It's nothing. What did you say?"

The woman shook her head, a wry smile turning up the corners of her mouth. "Girl, if I had a dime for every one of your daydreams, I wouldn't need to work here."

Caught, Jamie blushed and took her finger from her mouth. "Sorry, Nita. I didn't mean to ignore you."

"It's not me you ought to feel sorry for." Leaning closer, Nita said in a conspiratorial whisper, "You missed that gorgeous hunk of man flesh giving you the once over."

Blinking twice, Jamie glanced back over her shoulder. "Where?"

"At the elevators. Like I said, you missed him."

"Those elevators," Jamie thumbed over her shoulder to the glass elevators. "You're kidding! I just came from there. I didn't see anyone."

"Maybe if you kept your head on your shoulders, instead of in the clouds..."

"Do you know who that was?" asked a blonde woman, as she passed them on her way to the desk behind Nita's. She set her fresh coffee cup down.

"Wasn't he delicious?" Nita said, fanning her face with her hands. "He looked so familiar, too. I wonder where I've seen him before."

Growing a little curious, Jamie said, "I wish I'd seen him to begin with."

"How could you not see him?" a forth woman interrupted, a stack of collated insurance packets fresh off the copier in her arms. "He was practically drooling on you when you came off the elevators."

"Who was he?" Nita asked her.

"You didn't recognize him?" The blonde woman asked incredulously. "That was the big man himself."

Eyes grown wide as saucers, Nita sat back in her chair with a gasp. "No! Mister Dorsett? Really?"

"I didn't know he was back in town," the forth one mused. "Watch yourself, Jamie. He was staring at you something fierce."

"I wonder what he wants," Nita said.

"I'd say he wants Jamie," the blonde woman said, and she and the copier woman giggled at Jamie's sudden, obvious discomfort.

A heavy-set black woman came to join the group. She clapped her hands twice, commanding attention. "Get busy, girls. We've got a quota to meet."

Jamie pushed her cleaning cart to the center of the next row, glancing back over her shoulder at the closed elevator doors as she reached down to pick up another trashcan. How in the world could she have missed seeing the company president? Even worse, how could she have possibly missed his seeing her? She swallowed, a tremor of unease tickling down her spine as she hoped to high heaven that she hadn't done something wrong.

Like using the customer's elevator instead of the service shaft located at the back of the building.

Jamie groaned, leaning on her cart as she covered her eyes with one hand. Why oh why, when she first discovered she'd slept through her alarm, couldn't she have followed her instincts and called in sick?

At a few minutes to four o'clock and the end of her shift, Jamie's supervisor handed her a note. In a bold, neat pen, her immediate presence was requested on the top executive floor. And by all means, someone had scrawled across the bottom, use the main elevator.

Think positive, Jamie, she told herself. Maybe there was a stopped sink or a clogged toilet, or something had been knocked over. Maybe she was only being summoned to vacuum paper punch holes off the rug or mop up an unexpected mess. It wasn't likely, but she could always hope. So once again, Jamie wheeled her bulky cleaning cart into one of the Dorsett Building's three main elevators and pressed the button for the top floor.

These elevators were among the grandest of features of all Seattle based superstructures. Made almost completely of glass, they attached to the outside of the building and gave their passengers an unobstructed view of the city, sprawling as far as the eye could see in all directions. Since none of the surrounding buildings were higher than fifteen floors, once the elevator rose above that, the view was absolutely awe-inspiring. At eighteen stories high and to the right, Jamie saw the Space Needle only a few blocks away, as well as the Woodland Park Zoo. She leaned forward to rest her forehead against the cool, transparent panes. She loved riding these elevators. Surrounded by luxury, glass and gold, she would imagine she was someone else. It didn't matter who, so long as she wasn't a

cleaning lady trapped in a mind-numbing job, with a mountain of bad debts holding her hostage there.

But this trip to the top was different. This time, Jamie was too nervous to daydream. Travis Dorsett, the same phantom who had supposedly been watching her earlier, had requested her presence personally.

This would be her first time meeting the legendary recluse face-to-face. For years, it had been rumored that he didn't really exist. That the entire Dorsett Corporation was run by a huge, inter-galactic space alien, with three eyes in the middle of his stomach and an elephant's trunk that stuck out of one ear. Today had pretty much dispelled that myth for what it was, since everyone but Jamie, it seemed, had seen him. According to Nita, he looked just like the dark, solemn portrait of him that dominated the entrance lobby.

She really hoped he had a stopped up sink.

As the world shrank far below her, Jamie quietly cleaned the glass where she'd touched it and fogged it with her breath. Above the doors, the red neon lights dinged the sixty-third floor and her destination, and she drew a deep, fortifying breath. Turning around, she wheeled her cart into the company president's reception room. Her eyes slid to the waiting area, but the long L-shaped couch by the window was vacant, so it was safe to talk.

Despite her nervousness, she cast a quick smile to Travis's very pregnant secretary. "Hi, Greta."

Glancing up from her computer, Greta grinned. "Jamie! I haven't seen you for days! Where have you been keeping yourself?"

Greta was a pretty woman, with long, dark brown hair and laughing brown eyes that could coax even the most irritated individuals into more cheerful dispositions. As her secretarial skills were nothing out of the ordinary, this was probably the reason she worked directly for Travis. It had also been rumored that Mister Dorsett was not a chipper man.

"What's the news?" Jamie gestured towards the secretary's child-swollen belly. "When's the little fellow going to make his birth day debut?"

"He's his father's boy." Greta grimaced. "There's not a force on Earth that could ever make Jim arrive anywhere on time, either. Nine months come and gone, and my stomach still sticks out to here. He's just as happy as a little clam, staying where he is and kicking my insides black and blue."

"If I was you, I'd just take the maternity leave and stay home all day. Put your feet up, and eat bonbons while you can still say you're eating for two."

"Jamie, you have no idea what staying at home with a soon-to-be, first-time father is like," Greta said, then caught herself. Her eyes widened, and then softened with sympathy. "Oh, Jamie, I'm sorry. I said it without thinking."

Waving her hand, Jamie shrugged. "That's okay. Don't worry about it. I'm glad you've got someone there for you. Put all that nervous energy to good use and make him rub your feet."

"He already does that." Greta grinned and her eyes fell to the cart Jamie leaned against. "You can leave that out here; you won't need it." She nodded her head meaningfully at the giant twin doors, the entrance to the only office on the entire floor. "He wants to see you."

Gnawing at her bottom lip, Jamie studied the doors. "Do you, um, know why? Does he need his rug vacuumed or his plants dusted? You know, this isn't my floor. Don and Jim have everything above the fiftieth floor. They should be here in about an hour..."

"He asked for you," Greta said gently. "First thing after lunch he requested your personnel file. Then a little while ago, he asked to see you before you went home. I don't know his reasons; I'm just a secretary. But I do know there's nothing wrong with his rug."

"He looked at my personnel file?" Jamie echoed dully. "Does it already show I was late this morning?"

"Among other things."

Great.

He was going to fire her. Jamie clutched the handle on her cleaning cart so hard her fingers turned white. "What am I going to do, Greta? I can't afford to lose my job! I just can't!"

"Oh no, no, it's nothing like that," Greta hastened to assure her. "Think, sweetie. If he wanted you canned, he wouldn't bring you up to his office to do it. Your supervisor would have handed you your severance check at the end of your shift. Don't worry about that. Just go on in, find out what he wants, and let me know, okay? The curiosity's just been killing me all afternoon."

Not at all comforted by the secretary's reassurances, Jamie crept towards the giant office doors. As Greta picked up the phone to announce her, Jamie took another fortifying breath. Too bad the option to cover her head and run screaming back to the elevators wasn't a practical one. Swallowing, she reached for the silver door handle and pushed her way inside.

Travis's office was quite possibly the largest single office that she had ever seen, with plush blue carpeting, soothing white walls, and several pictures and plants for decoration. A mammoth desk dominated the room, big enough for three people to work at and shaped like a great, mahogany horseshoe. The window behind it stretched the length and width of the entire wall and provided an uninterrupted view of Seattle. From sixty-three stories, it was even more spectacular than the view in the elevator. And at the bow of the 'shoe,' like a king on a leather-covered throne of a chair, Travis sat studying a small stack of papers on the otherwise immaculate surface.

A space alien would have been easier to believe. For an instant, Jamie felt a fleeting sense of

betrayal that the rumors could have allowed her to work here for so long without knowing the truth. Travis was like a well-imagined dream. There was simply no other way to put it; he was beautiful.

And not paying the slightest bit of attention to her.

He made several corrections on the page in front of him, then turned it over and studied the one beneath. As she watched, one dark eyebrow arched slightly above the other and there was a noticeable tightening in that square, clean-shaven jaw. He glared at the paper, as though that single, innocuous-looking page had committed some horrible offense--gracious, he was even more handsome when he was mad--and he made a note in the margin.

His hair was dark, almost blue-black in color and cut at a neat, professional length. There was a hint of curl at the sides, just long enough to almost be able to run fingers through. His age she placed somewhere in the mid-to-late thirties. Jamie could well image what one smile from a man like that could do to a girl. Here he hadn't even done that, and already Jamie felt as if she was melting. A kiss--why, a kiss could very well bring about the end of the world. If only the situation weren't quite so scary, the idea of such a kiss from him might have been more appealing.

Travis raised his head from his papers and looked at her. His eyes--a deep amber, flecked with hints of light brown and golden yellow--settled on her face, clear and penetrating. He smiled slightly, though only with his mouth, and set the papers aside.

"Come in, Miss Miracle." He stood up, resting his fingers lightly on top of his desk. "No need to hover in doorways. I've been waiting for you."

Hover? Jamie started, glancing back over her shoulder. At her desk, Greta was making shooing motions with her hands, encouraging Jamie further into Travis's office. A sudden warmth filled her belly,

spreading up to her cheeks. She didn't know which was more embarrassing: this awful, uncertain, lock-legged, teenager-with-a-crush feeling that left her unable to move and feeling like an idiot; or the fact that he'd noticed.

Clearing her throat, Jamie softly closed his door. "Sorry."

The corners of his handsome mouth turned up a little more. "No need to be. Come in, please."

Jamie took a hesitant step, but then stopped again. Her ratty sneakers looked atrocious on the dark blue carpeting. She tucked the worst looking one behind her right leg, hiding it from sight and hoping he hadn't already seen it. Oh for heaven's sake, now she looked like a stork! Biting her lip, she put her tattered shoe back on the floor. Her face flushed even hotter. She felt so foolish, at this point getting fired would almost have been a kindness on his part.

She cleared her throat again. "Look, Mister Dorsett. I--I know I wasn't supposed to take the cleaning cart into the glass elevator, but the service lift was in use and--"

"I didn't ask you here to reprimand you," Travis said.

"You didn't?" Jamie shifted her feet nervously. "Well, um... why am I here then?"

He gestured to one of two vacant chairs on her side of the horseshoe desk. "Would you like to sit down?"

She shook her head. "This... This isn't my floor. If you need something cleaned or repaired, um... I could get Don for you."

The corners of his mouth went up a little more, and this time his eyes seemed to warm. "It's not Don I want to talk to. I really do promise not to bite. Please." He indicated the chair again. "Sit down. If I have to talk to you from this distance, I'll grow hoarse."

Rubbing her sweaty palms against her jean-clad thighs, Jamie hesitantly approached his desk and

sat down. As he returned to his chair as well, she jiggled her leg nervously up and down. Now that she was up close, all she could see was how truly huge he was. A virtual mountain of a man. And he was staring right at her, hands folded over his desk, amber eyes studying her intently.

Not used to being scrutinized, Jamie shifted nervously. She cleared her throat, then stretched her hand out over his desk. "Jamie Miracle. How do you do?"

There it went again, that light in his amber eyes that suggested he might be laughing at her. But obligingly the mountain stood up again and reached across the desk to take her hand. His completely engulfed hers in a firm shake that sent a sudden spark leaping up through her arm the instant their fingers touched. Jamie all but snatched her hand back, staring at it as though horribly betrayed, then blushed profusely as she realized how ridiculous she must look.

"I, uh..." she cleared her throat and tried to collect her scattered thoughts. Her leg began to jiggle up and down again. "Why am I here?"

Travis sat back down again and leaned back in his chair. Bracing his elbows on the rests, he steepled his fingers. "I have something I want you to do for me."

Jamie glanced first into the near empty garbage can to the right of his desk, then at the spotless rug beneath her. "What?"

"Boost my career," he said bluntly. "I'm willing to pay you for it. How does two million dollars sound?"

Her nervous fidgeting abruptly ceased. "I'm sorry. How much?"

"Two million," he enunciated, his smile widening by the barest of degrees. "Are you interested?"

She looked around the office again, this time for a hidden camera. "Am I on America's Funniest Practical Jokes or something?"

"My offer is genuine."

"Sir... I'm a janitor."

Again that spark of amusement. "I saw the cleaning cart, yes."

"Two million dollars," Jamie repeated. She eyed him suspiciously. "What, do you need me to kill somebody? I'll warn you now, I'm a terrible shot."

For the first time since she'd walked into the room, that spark of humor touched both his mouth and eyes at the same time. A low, rumbling chuckle rolled from him. "I don't want you to shoot anyone."

Warily, she asked, "Then what do you want?"

"Miss Miracle." He smiled at her. "I want you to marry me."

CHAPTER TWO

Cheeks flushing slightly, Jamie leaned forward in her chair. She tipped her head to one side, as though unsure if she'd heard him correctly. "I'm sorry?"

She spoke a little hesitantly perhaps, but her voice was as angelical as her face, feminine and sweet, as he knew the rest of her would be. His gaze dipped to her pert breasts, outlined beneath her baggy grey sweatshirt. She really was quite attractive. If he had to have a wife, he decided, there certainly were benefits to be had in gaining such a pretty one. In spite of all those carrot curls that tumbled past her shoulders to hang midway down her back. In spite of himself, too, because for a moment he could almost imagine how those curls would feel running through his fingers. How she would feel, warm and soft, stretched out in his bed next to him. Beneath him...

Travis stiffened, sharply dismissing that wayward thought. How attractive she was didn't figure into the matter. He couldn't let himself forget that this was just a temporary arrangement, a means to an end. A very lucrative end in Japan's lumber markets.

As he studied her, Travis couldn't help but think Kuronabe Yuko and Tetsuo would like Jamie. They might even believe her capable of capturing his reputedly iceberg affections. Not that she had. That was ridiculous, of course. He barely knew her after all. But the Kuronabes' didn't have to know that, and just the appearance of her on his arm might be enough to remake their cold, bachelor image of him into someone they'd be willing to sign contracts with.

All of Max's best efforts be damned. The Mountain never lost. Not when he wanted something enough to fight for it. And Travis wanted this so badly that he could already feel that contract in his hands.

All he really had to do now was convince the red-headed woman, softly clearing her throat before him, to go along with it.

"Um... I-I don't think I heard you right," Jamie said, but the worried look in those baby blue eyes told him there was absolutely nothing wrong with her hearing.

"It won't be a real marriage, of course," Travis said smoothly. "But I need a wife. Urgently. Tonight would be ideal."

"Oh." Jamie blinked twice. Her cheeks flushed even brighter. Her obvious discomfort was almost endearing, and he couldn't help but feel a little sorry for doing this to her when she stammered, "Well... um, there's a singles' paper in the break room. I could get it for you?"

Standing, Travis rounded to her side of the desk and sat down on the edge to face her more intimately. Jamie stared up at him, looking for all the world like a frightened doe caught in the headlights of a big truck, and he gentled his tone accordingly. "Miss Miracle, I have fourteen days to find a woman willing to pose as my wife. I would like that woman to be you, and I'm willing to offer a lot of money to tempt you to do it."

"Two million dollars," Jamie said softly, her brows drawing together uncertainly. "What's the punch line?"

"My dear, ask anyone you like. They will all tell you I don't have a sense of humor, and I never joke."

A touch of panic crept into her eyes. "But this is the exception, right?"

Gently, he said, "I'm not going to fire you if you say no, Jamie, though I do ask that you keep our conversation here a secret. I'm sure you understand the need for discretion."

"No--Yes--I mean, I understand discretion, but--"

"All I ask is that you consider my offer carefully. Would fifteen minutes be sufficient?" He checked his watch.

"Fifteen minutes?" Then she laughed, though there was little amusement in it. "I don't believe this!"

"You don't believe you're hearing it, or don't believe you're considering it already? I prefer the latter. That was quick. Good girl."

"What? No!"

"You're not considering it?" In the process of standing up, Travis sat back down on the edge of his desk, braced a hand upon his thigh, and looked mildly inquisitive. "May I ask why not?"

"Because this isn't how it's done!"

"I beg your pardon. I had no idea there was a set procedure for proposing a fake marriage." He folded his arms across his broad chest. "All right, Miss Miracle. Educate me. How is it usually done?"

"I-I don't know," she floundered for logic. "But I'm pretty sure this isn't it!"

"Ah," he said, knowingly. "Are you perhaps referring to the lack of romance?"

"Well, I... yes... I-I guess."

"Your words are my food, your breath is my wine. You are everything to me."

She looked almost horrified. "What was that?"

"Sarah Bernhardt. It's a line from one of my favorite poems. I'll admit I am rather old school when it comes to amorous advances, but poetry does still constitute as romance, doesn't it?"

"This is wrong," she protested. "It's so wrong, I don't even know where to begin trying to fix it."

"I could cover you in roses," he suggested. "I'll clean out every flower shop in the greater Seattle area if that's what it takes for me to win your acquiesce."

"I-I'm allergic to flowers." Jamie stood up. She looked at him, her hands held up as though to ward him off. "I should just go."

She turned to walk away, but he caught one of her hands, bringing it to his lips and pressing a warm kiss into her small palm. He could feel her trembling. "Are you allergic to chocolates?"

She pulled her hand from his, rubbing at her palm as though trying to scrub the feel of his kiss from her skin. "I'm on a diet."

She tried again to leave, but he caught her other hand. The left this time, and he kissed it as well, saying, "You don't need to be a size six to marry me."

"I really have to go now." She tried to pull away, but he refused to let her go.

"No flowers, no chocolates. Unfortunately I don't have time for long, leisurely walks along moon-lit beaches."

"I hate the smell of the ocean anyway," Jamie said weakly, tugging at her imprisoned hand.

"My, my," he purred. "We are difficult to please, aren't we? What to do, what to do."

"Give up?" She looked so hopeful, he almost felt sorry for dashing her hopes to pieces.

"I never give up, sweetheart." He let her go, but followed as she backed towards the office door. "How about a romantic dinner? Go home, change into something nice, and I'll pick you up at five. I'll wine and dine you in the appropriate manner, surrounded by candlelight and soft music. We could catch a movie around seven thirty, then stop by a judge I know. By ten, we'll be married and happily settled into our new life before midnight."

Jamie actually looked pained. "Has no one ever told you 'no' before?"

"Not with any lasting conviction."

"This will be a new experience for you."

Again, Jamie tried to escape, and again, he stopped her. "New experiences are overrated. Why not consider my offer?"

"This isn't how it's done!" Jamie protested, her laugh bordering on hysteria. "You can't recite poetry to me! We've never met before today! We don't

know each other well enough for that, and it's not sincere!"

"I should think, for two million dollars, love at first sight wouldn't be too far out of the question," Travis said.

There was that pained look again, followed very quickly by a flash of irritation.

"I'm leaving now," she told him.

"You're single, twenty-six, and lived here all your life," Travis called after her, effectively slowing her retreat until she stopped altogether not twenty feet from the door. "You quit school at seventeen, worked as a waitress for six years at a variety of restaurants before applying here. You work thirty hours a week and make minimum wage. Your marriage of four months fell apart last year. According to the police report, he cleaned out your apartment and bank account, ran up a mammoth debt on your credit cards, and disappeared. You've been struggling financially ever since. Having been abandoned for a year, you just received your annulment last week."

She turned, staring back at him with wide, blue eyes.

"You're three months behind on your rent," Travis said gently. "Washington Mutual Bank repossessed your car. You have no phone, your shoes are falling apart, and you probably haven't eaten a decent meal in weeks. We also share a mutual interest in certain magazines, whose subscriptions you've allowed to lapse in the last six months. I was very pleased to discover that, by the way."

"Maga--" Her voice faltered as her eyes widened and her cheeks turned an alluring shade of pink. Then she glared at him. "You didn't get that from my personnel file."

"It's amazing what you can discover with a birth date and a social security number. Don't be embarrassed. I've enjoyed Stand Corrected for years. In fact, I have over twenty issues in my

collection. It ranks right up there with Sassy Ladies, Strictly Speaking Spanking, and my all time favorite, Bare Bottoms. Espousal rights do include access to those, as well as to my Blue Moon, Masquerade, and Black Pearl novels. Marry me. I'll let you read them."

"Now look here, buster..."

"Travis," he corrected.

"No!"

"That's what my birth certificate claims."

"I mean no to the rest of it!"

"I can help you, Jamie," Travis coaxed. "We can help each other. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity; think about it before you say no."

He offered her what he hoped was a friendly smile. Sadly, he wasn't very practiced with those. Such skills were hardly necessary in board meetings where everything was a matter of business politics and the only smiles needed were the shark-like kind. Besides, most of the women he knew were more interested in his money than his grin, or lack thereof.

Jamie wasn't swayed by either.

"Why me?" she asked, exasperation pitching her voice higher than normal. "Have dinner with Greta."

"Her husband would probably object. He's a big man, in case you haven't met him. He could probably clean my clock in record time." Once again hoping his smile was charming, he raised her captured hand and brushed his lips across it. "Besides, I like you, Jamie. I need you."

"You don't need me," she argued. "I'm nobody. You can have anyone you want."

"Then say yes, because I want you."

"No!"

"Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I will pledge with mine; or leave a kiss but in the cup, and I'll not look for wine."

"Would you stop with the poetry!"

He stepped closer. "If pretty phrases don't attract you, then perhaps you are a woman who values actions above words."

Jamie's eyes widened as a single long-legged stride closed the gap between them. She swallowed hard as his arm twined around her waist, drawing her up against him.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she stammered.

"I'm wooing you," he said softly. She fit in his arms perfectly, and Travis found himself stroking the smooth slope of her back, enjoying the feel of her there. "Since my money doesn't appeal to you, I must find another lure. You are proving to be more of a challenge than I first thought. But never fear, I love a good challenge."

"Please let me go," Jamie whispered. But she was looking at his mouth as she said it. And she was trembling. Did she feel it too, he wondered. That electrifying spark that jumped through him the instant their bodies had touched.

"Be my wife," he countered. "You're perfect."

"You're insane," she said, shakily.

"Completely," he agreed, and cupped her chin in his palm. Her eyes grew large, but she didn't pull away. An encouraging sign.

He knew he shouldn't do this, she was already hard enough to resist, but it was too late to let her go now. She felt too good, tucked so neatly in his embrace, the curves of her body molding to the planes of his, as though she'd been made just for him. And while he knew the allure of her wasn't real, that it was most likely due to the fact that he hadn't held a woman since Marsha--and that had been over a year ago--he simply could not make his arms let go.

He tried to focus on her hair, to sternly remind himself that he really wasn't fond of red heads. Unfortunately, he was having the very devil of a time just looking away from her eyes. Those baby blue bedevilers.

Fringed by orange lashes, he reminded himself.

His hand glided up her back to cup the soft nape of her neck--orange, smorange--and lowered his mouth close to hers. She didn't even try to pull away.

"Have dinner with me," he murmured against her lips. She opened her mouth and he kissed her before she could tell him 'no' again.

He meant to be casual. Charming. Suave. But if merely touching her made his body spark with awareness, kissing her was like trying to extinguish a match with gasoline. He was completely consumed. One kiss became two, and then an addiction as he coaxed her unmoving lips to open to him. Her hands came up to his chest, but instead of pushing him away Jamie seemed to melt against him, yielding to his invasion with no more protest than a mere breathy sigh of surrender.

He could handle the feel of her breasts cushioned against his chest, and the way her hands clutched his lapel, as if she couldn't pull him close enough. Even her perfume--the maddening scent of baby lotion and apples, of all things--that assaulted his senses with every breath were bearable. But the sigh undid him. One minute they were both standing on their own, and in the next, he had Jamie's lush, spankable, jean-clad bottom in both hands, lifting her hips into the cradle of his, leaving her feet to dangle a good six inches off the ground.

He had to stop. Now. Before she wound up flat on her back on the carpet, breathing those breathy little sighs into his mouth while he pressed himself right into the molten heart of her.

But in the end, it wasn't so much that he stopped as Travis simply lifted his head. He didn't let her go. As limp as she was, if he loosened his hold she'd have collapsed straight to the floor.

That was as good an excuse as any to keep holding her, his lovely, intoxicating Jamie. All his. He could get very accustomed to thinking like that.

Travis gazed down at her, her pink lips moist and slightly apart, her cheeks flushed, her blue eyes

half-closed. Red hair or not, if she didn't stop looking at him like that, so dazed and thoroughly seduce-able, he was going to exercise his husbandly rights before she even accepted his proposal.

"You'll have dinner with me tonight," he told her, struggling to put a firm rein on his rampaging desires. "I'll pick you up at six o'clock sharp."

Jamie only gazed at him through half-closed eyes, a sultry hum her only comment, and he nearly lost control again. He was the one trembling now. And he bent his head to recapture her seductive mouth, barely catching himself in time. Only through an extreme force of will did he keep from losing himself in her touch all over again.

Lowering her back to her own feet was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. And letting go wasn't his first inclination either, but he made his hands release her bottom without laying so much as one palm-itchingly tempting slap upon it. "Go home, Jamie. I'll see you in a few hours."

Dazed, she only hummed again.

The Mountain checked his watch. Only four hours after formulating his plan and he'd already found his bride. Thirteen days ahead of schedule. Wonderful.

Jamie didn't realize Travis had walked her out his office door until she suddenly found herself staring across the spacious reception area at her cleaning cart. Though still a little befuddled, her mind was clearing fast enough for her to realize she'd just agreed to have dinner with him.

"Wait," she started to say, but then he touched her again, his warm hand cupping her cheek, the pad of his thumb gliding across her bottom lip, and suddenly she couldn't remember what she was objecting to.

"Six o'clock," he said huskily. His large hand smoothed from her shoulder to the small of her back. The heat of his breath against her ear sent

shivers all through her as he whispered, "Wear something fit to be married in."

Hot on the heels of that shiver came the cold splash of reality as his words sank in.

"Wait!" she said, but the door closed. Jamie stared at the twin panels of polished wood, blinked twice, and glanced down at the doorknob. She was half-tempted to march back in there and tell Travis where he could stick his dinner invitation, but the man was too damn bewitching! And dangerous. And oh so very tempting. There was no telling what she'd wind up agreeing to if she went back in there and he laid his hands on her again.

And he knew what kind of magazines she liked. She covered her eyes with one hand, horribly embarrassed. Having a boss that spanked used to be a favorite fantasy of hers. For all she knew, that was probably in her file, too. Although, in the space of the last few minutes, the fantasy had lost something of its seductive appeal.

And oh heavens, but he wanted to marry her!

Well, there was just no way she could do that. She didn't even know him! In all the years she'd been working here, she'd had a conversation with the man one time. This one time. And it had lasted--she checked her Mickey Mouse watch--less than twenty minutes. What kind of marriage could she expect based on twenty minutes of conversation, a kiss that scattered her wits to the four winds, and two million dollars?

What was she thinking? Two million dollars was two million dollars. Jamie stared at the doorknob again, her shoulders drooping. She'd been in debt for so long now she couldn't remember what it was like to sit at home, hear the phone ring, and not have to worry about which bill collector might be on the line. Of course, since the phone had been disconnected last month, she didn't have that particular worry anyway.

Behind her, Greta stood poised at the filing cabinet with a small handful of papers. She watched

Jamie expectantly. "Well? What did he say, Jamie? Come on, spill it! Inquiring minds want to know!"

Jamie turned around slowly, unsure how much she could say and still maintain some measure of discretion. Finally, she ventured, "He wants to have dinner with me."

Greta's smile slowly faded. "He asked you out? You're kidding."

Jamie shook her head.

"Well... so, what did you say?"

"I'm not sure. I think I said yes."

At two minutes to six, a long gray stretch limousine pulled up to the chipped cement steps of Jamie's run-down apartment building. Three young teenaged boys lounged on the stoop, listening to rap music on a portable stereo and watching in utter silence as the chauffeur got out. He jogged smartly around the car to open the door for Travis, who did his best to avoid the worst of the curb-side garbage as he got out. He stepped up on the sidewalk and looked up at the five-story, red-brick slum in disapproving silence.

"Are you sure you want to go in there?" his chauffeur asked softly. "I took boxing for two years at the academy. Would you like me to come with you?"

"I don't think boxing is going to help much, Ben," Travis said. "I'd rather you stay with the car and keep the motor running in case we need to beat a hasty retreat." He bent to take the gift-wrapped dress he'd bought for Jamie from the back seat. If her sneakers were any indication, she might not have had anything nicer to wear to a formal dinner, and he'd made reservations at the Canlis. Though not likely to be crowded at this time on a Tuesday night, the more he and Jamie were seen together, the more realistic it would make his story later on. "I'll be back in a minute. I hope."

As he approached the stoop, the boys eyed his immaculate three-piece suit and the neatly wrapped gift box with its shiny, silver bow. While they didn't move aside as he stepped sideways up the stairs between them, they didn't exactly block his path, either.

"Got a dollar?" one kid finally asked just as Travis reached for the door.

His hand on the latch, Travis paused. He glanced back down the street. His limousine had attracted unwanted attention from another group of teens coming out of a building a half a block down. They were looking at him and pointing, talking and nodding amongst themselves as they headed for the car.

Travis's first instinct was to rush in, grab Jamie, and hope the limo was still intact by the time he hustled her back out to it. Since that wasn't too likely, he bid his custom-made hubcaps a fond farewell and thanked God and State Farm that he was insured.

"Just a dollar," the kid said again. "We want a pop from the corner store."

"Come on," a second boy piped up. "You can spare us a pop, can't ya?"

"How about twenty," Travis said, "if nothing happens to my car before I get back."

The first boy grinned, "Hey, you got it!"

And the lot of them rushed down the steps and hopped up to sit on the limo's hood. While Ben locked the doors and made a flurry of ineffective shooing motions, one boy waggled his tongue and made faces back at him through the glass.

Travis still said goodbye to his hubcaps, his hood ornament, and--after tonight--most likely his favorite driver.

Inside, the first floor light was out, the halls were claustrophobically narrow, and the stairs creaked ominously beneath his weight. He covered his nose when he reached the second floor landing. The smell wafting from the worn fifties-style carpet

was worse than the garbage-strewn streets outside, and he quickly continued up the stairs.

The first apartment on the third floor was sealed off with bright yellow, crime-scene police tape. From the stairwell to the fourth floor, he heard the demanding screams of a baby and Jamie's apartment at the end of the hall was right next door to one that housed a barking dog. And a very large dog at that, from the sounds of it.

That momentary twinge of conscience that Travis had been feeling for the way he intended to use Jamie died right there in the hallway as he stepped over the sprawling legs of a drunk asleep on the floor. As far as he was concerned, this had just become a rescue mission.

He knocked at her door and waited.

And waited.

One minute stretched into two, and something touched his shoe. Travis looked down to find the drunk had raised his head as well as Travis's pants leg by about an inch.

"I can see my face," he slurred, peering at his reflection in Travis's shiny black shoes. He looked up at Travis with blood shot eyes. "Is tha' re-real leather?"

It took everything Travis had not to take a giant step backwards. "Yes."

"Nish shoes."

"Thank you." He knocked again, a little louder this time.

"Go away," Jamie called from the other side. "I've changed my mind."

"Jamie," Travis commanded in his most authoritative tone. "There's a man out here fondling my leg. You don't get to change your mind."

"I mean it. I'm not coming out so you may as well just leave!"

"I don't think coming out is a good idea," Travis told her through the door. "However, if you wanted to invite me in, I wouldn't object too strenuously."

"So you can kiss me insensible again? No, thank you!"

Travis arched at eyebrow at the door and a corner of his mouth curled slightly upwards. "I kissed you insensible? Really? Do you suppose that will happen every time we kiss? Open the door, sweetheart. Let's find out."

"Oh, go to hell," she grumbled.

"Tsk, tsk," Travis said with mock sternness. "Sweetheart, baby, darling--that is no way to speak to your intended. Especially not when your neighbors can overhear."

"Let them hear. God knows I've listened to them often enough."

Her footsteps receded into the bowels of the apartment, and Travis knocked again, a little harder this time. "Seriously now, Jamie. Open the door."

The drunk stroked Travis's leg. "Nish shuit, too. Arrrmani?"

"Valentino." Travis beat his fist against the door again. "Jamie!" What little sense of humor he'd been coddling was beginning to dissipate as he watched a bug crawl up the doorjamb and heard the squeak of a rodent somewhere down the other end of the hall. "Open the door right now, sweetheart. I promise not to kiss you, but I'd like to talk to you... inside if I may."

When Jamie did not reply, Travis knocked again. "Jamie?"

Below him, the drunk beat his fist on the door. "Open up here, woman! We jus' wanna talk!"

"Thank you, but I think I can handle this." Travis removed his leg from the drunk man's hand. He knocked one final time. "Jamie?"

Still no answer.

The Mountain never lost. Ever. Not once.

"All right," he grimly told the door. "Just remember, young lady, you brought this on yourself."

And with that, he turned and went back down the hall.

"Hey!" the drunk called and hiccupped at once.
"You givin' up?"

"I never give up."

Out of habit, he took hold of the banister as he headed downstairs, only to draw his hand quickly back again. Strings of well-chewed gum clung to his fingers. He stifled a sound of disgust. Barely.

He found the manager's apartment on the first floor and knocked on the door. A round-faced black man with glasses and a cigar answered. He looked Travis over once. "Yeah?"

Offering his best disarming smile--twice in one day, he was really starting to get the hang of this--Travis said, "I apologize for the inconvenience, but I seem to have misplaced my key. Do you have an extra for apartment three-twelve?"

The manager looked deliberately at Travis's clothes. "Buddy, if you live here, I ain't chargin' enough rent."

He started to close the door, but Travis caught it halfway. He tried not to lose his smile. "It's my fiancée's apartment."

"Three-twelve?"

"That's right."

"Jamie lives in three-twelve."

Again, the manager tried to close the door, but Travis forced it back open. He smiled through gritted teeth. "That's right. Jamie Miracle, my one and only. Heart of my heart. Love of my life. The only angel to ever fall from heaven with halo intact. Do you have a key or not?"

"She didn't mention nobody was movin' in with her." The manager chewed on the end of his cigar. "That's against the rules of the lease. I got half a mind to throw the lot of you out."

"Really?" After a moment, Travis tipped his head calculatingly to one side. "How much to throw us out tonight?"

The manager looked at him as if he were crazy. "You want me to throw you out?"

"Absolutely. Tonight. Right now if possible. How about two hundred dollars?"

The manager held out his hand. Bracing his foot against the bottom of the door to keep it from being slammed in his face, Travis pulled his wallet from his jacket and withdrew several bills. He handed them over. The manager looked at the money and chewed on his cigar. "She owes back rent, too. I gotta live, you know."

Travis re-opened his wallet. "How much?"

"Three months at six-fifty a month, that's--nineteen hundred fifty dollars. You pay me up-to-date, and I'll throw her butt out on the streets anytime you want."

"Six hundred and fifty dollars," Travis looked pointedly at the filthy hall around him, "for all this luxury?"

"Per month," the manager enunciated.

"You're joking."

"I don't joke."

A kindred spirit.

When Travis didn't immediately open his wallet, the manager said, "You want me to evict you guys or not?"

He was being fleeced and he knew it, but Travis counted out the remainder of his money. "I only have three hundred dollars on me."

The manager chewed the end of his cigar. "That your limo outside?"

Warily, Travis said, "Yes."

Showing tobacco-stained teeth, the manager smiled. "Well then, from you I'll take a check."

Every well-laid plan had its little unforeseen hitch. With legs crossed and one hand resting lightly on his knee, Travis sat in the back of the limo, already heading for home, and contemplated his little 'hitch,' buckled as it was in a well-patched car seat, gurgling blissfully and playing with its toes. If asked to hazard a guess, Travis gauged the baby's

age at maybe six months. So much for private investigators. They were nowhere near as thorough as they used to be.

One arm draped protectively across the back of the car seat, Jamie was glaring at him. "I can't believe you got me evicted."

"I told you, I don't give up," Travis said. "What I can't believe is that you would live in a place like that with a baby."

"You're absolutely right. What was I thinking? I should be living at the Elysian Heights or Paradise Corners or--I know!" She covered Megan's ears. "How about Rich Bastard Row? Except, oh yeah! I don't make that kind of money."

"Your sarcasm has been duly noted, but I'm only trying to help."

"By getting me evicted?"

"Yes."

"If you really want to help, then get your company to offer paid maternity and sick leave for part-time employees. Or put in an affordable daycare. That would be helping me. I don't want to get married again. Believe me, once was more than enough."

Considering his own failed marriage, Travis wasn't about to argue. But it was still the best two thousand dollars he'd ever spent, and the baby obviously agreed with him. It was smiling at him around a mouthful of small, pink toes. Like the top of a fluffy dandelion, thick reddish-blond hair stuck straight up all over its head. He tried to tell what sex the child was, but dressed in only a plain white t-shirt and diaper, it was too difficult to guess. Especially for a man whose experiences with children were limited to the occasional obligatory glances he'd cast at the photographs his colleagues carried in their wallets.

Noticing the direction of his steady gaze, Jamie asked, "What's the matter, Travis? Is your perfect plan falling apart?"

"Actually, it's getting better all the time," he said with a slight smile. "Nothing says 'family man' better than a small child."

Her face flushed angrily. "I won't let you use Megan."

Ah, the carrot-topped dandelion was a little girl.

"I could help you both, you know." Travis reached over to tickle the bottom of one little, pink foot. Megan grinned at him, showing the white crown of a single budding tooth on her lower gum.

"We don't need your help!" Jamie said fiercely. "Megan has the best of everything I can give her. And it's getting better all the time." Her voice cracked. "It is." She bit the inside of her lip in an effort to still her quivering chin and turned her glare out the window so he wouldn't see the traitorous tears building in her eyes.

"Of course it is." He looked at the baby again. "Did your ex know about Megan before he left?"

"Why do you think he left?" Jamie sniffled. "We get by."

"It's still deplorable."

She snorted. "Like you can talk."

"Had I known about Megan, I wouldn't have evicted you."

She shrugged, but still didn't look at him. "That's okay. I was on borrowed time anyway."

Travis settled back in his seat, studying mother and daughter with equal care. While taking a wife bespoke volumes on his willingness to commit, gaining a child virtually screamed it. All he had to do was convince Jamie that it was in her and Megan's best interests, and in two weeks time, Dorsett lumber would be making its way to the shores of Japan.

"Are you sure you don't want my help?"

Jamie only shrugged again, staring out the window. Then she sniffed again and covered her eyes with her hand, but not before Travis glimpsed the first fat tear spilling over her lashes.

The urge to pull her onto his lap and cradle her was almost overwhelming. Instead, he said, "I know a nice house where you can live free of rent for the first two years and no deposit required. Utilities and phone are paid." He offered her a thin smile. "Free DSL hookups and satellite TV. Two hundred channels, including HBO and Showtime."

"Why me?" she asked, lowering her hand. "Did you wake up this morning and think, 'You know, I just won't be happy today unless I get Miracle'?"

"I didn't use those exact words. But now that you are homeless, I do feel a bit of responsibility for you."

"Says the man responsible for making me homeless. Gee, I should hope so!"

"Jamie, have you heard of APEC?" She gave Travis a blank look, which he took to mean no. "It's a cooperation that amounts to more than five hundred billion dollars worth of exports world wide. Japan is a member of the APEC, and has opened its markets to US trade, but only for a select few industries. Lumber is one of them."

"I have been struggling for years to get my foot in the door over there. Six months ago, I finally succeeded in gaining an audience with the Kuronabe brothers, whose company handles almost forty percent of all the construction business in the whole of Japan. Negotiations on this contract were to finalize in two weeks, but this morning I discovered a rival eagerly attempting to seduce them into contracting with him instead. Not because he offers a better product at a better price, but because he's married. To the Japanese, a family man is one who understands and values commitment, stability and solid, working relationships."

"So you want to win them back by proving you can commit?"

"Exactly."

"How 'committed' to me are you planning to be?"

Travis settled back in his seat, at once a lean and predatory sparkle glittering in his eyes. "How committed do you want me to be?"

Jamie just glared. "I don't want to get married in the first place."

"That's why you're perfect for the job. You won't cling when it's over." He leaned over to take her hands in his. "Allow me to sweeten the pot for you, darling. Not only will I give you two million dollars, but I'll give you a house, free and clear, in a nice neighborhood with a good school system and a yard for Megan to run and play in. Imagine the white picket fence and the walk-in closets. Jamie, Megan will never want for anything. And neither will you." He raised her hand, pressing a kiss into her smooth palm. He felt her shiver and her eyes almost closed at the touch. "Trust me to take care of you, sweetheart. There's nothing I want to do more."

Abruptly Jamie snatched her hand back. "No!"

"No? To what part?"

"If I agree to this phony marriage, then you can't do that anymore!"

"What? Touch you?"

She began to count off on her fingers. "No touching! No kissing!" She suddenly pointed straight at him. "And none of that either!"

"None of what?"

"That! Looking at me like I'm the last piece of candy in the dish. If we're going to do this, then it has to be a business arrangement straight across the board!"

Travis blinked, then leaned back in his seat. His expression abruptly closed and he could have been negotiating any other boardroom contract as he said, "All right. What else?"

"I get my own room," Jamie said.

"Of course."

"And you don't so much as set foot inside it! Ever! If I'm on fire, squirt me with a hose from the doorway. But if you come inside, the second I'm extinguished I'm going for a divorce."

"You've made your point. However, in public that rule does not apply. In front of witnesses, I will touch you and kiss you, if appropriate, and there may even be an occasional need to share a room when we travel."

She grumbled. "I guess I can do that."

"Loving, doting, soon-to-be-wives generally don't scowl at the thought of having to share a room with their fiancées."

"I've only been a soon-to-be wife for a few seconds," she protested. "Give me a minute to get used to the idea."

"I don't have a minute, Jamie. One mistake in front of the right person and the truth will ruin me. Perhaps we should practice the loving and doting part."

"Stow it, buster. I'll give you points for the original come-on line, but I'm not sleeping with you."

"I don't demand that you do."

"Well..." Jamie fidgeted with her fingers. "What kind of practice do you mean then?"

"I'll be satisfied if you can kiss me without that deer-in-the-headlights look crossing your face." Travis smiled dryly. "Yes. That's the one."

Jamie quickly looked out the nearest window.

"If you can't even touch me," Travis reasoned, "then we aren't going to fool anyone and this will have been a waste of both our times."

He heard her swallow. "What about Megan?"

"I very much doubt if the sight of us kissing will scar her for life. Besides, she's more interested in her toes. She's fine. Come here, Jamie."

Reluctantly, she crossed the distance between them and sat down on his left, the alluring scent of baby lotion and apples following her to his side. He didn't know whether he should be irritated or amused at the fortifying deep breath she took before turning sideways on the seat to face him.

"You agreed you wouldn't touch me," she pointed out.

"No touching, I promise," he said in his most convincing tone. "I will sit here, hands in my lap, and let you do all the work."

"Okay." She shifted, as though steeling herself, and frowned at him. Then she shook her hands, loosening up. With a slow exhale, she rolled her head from shoulder to shoulder and looked at him again. "Okay. A kiss."

He couldn't help but tease. "Is this how Megan was conceived?"

"Do you want me to do this or not?" she grumbled.

"By all means."

"Then shut up," she said, but there was a note of nervous uncertainty in her voice. As she leaned in towards him, he settled back in his seat to enjoy himself. Jamie paused for a second, then darted in to peck his cheek.

"Oh yes," Travis drawled. "That'll convince everybody."

"I'm not done yet!" Jamie huffed and squared her shoulders. She leaned over him. It took three hesitant attempts before she could bring herself to actually set her hand on his broad shoulder. She lowered her mouth to within inches of his and paused again.

"Would you like me to help you?" he asked with a smile. The heat of her hand was sinking into his skin and spreading all through him.

"No, thank you," Jamie said primly. She held her breath, then hesitantly dipped in and those lovely, kissable lips of hers softly touched his own. Though he expected her to withdraw almost immediately, she surprised him by lingering. One kiss became two, then three, and his resolve to let her do all the work dissipated into thin air. She felt warm, smelled good, and the tips of her round breasts were stiff and hard and prodding his arm where she leaned against him. He simply could not help himself. He had to kiss her back.

The limo hit a slight bump in the road and Travis brought his hand up to cup her nape. He was only steadying her, he told himself. But when they hit another bump, Jamie obligingly bounced right into his lap. Travis caught her and, despite her no-touching rule, found himself clutching the curve of her bottom in his hand.

Note to self, Travis thought, double Ben's Christmas bonus. He'd just earned it.

Jamie didn't even notice. Lost in a kiss, for the second time that day she melted in his embrace. Her mouth softened above his, parting as she felt the flick of his tongue commanding entrance. Her own crept shyly out to meet his halfway, and he drank her throaty moan of pleasure.

His hand moved almost without his thinking. Drawing back, he delivered a firm but gentle swat right to the seat of those luscious jeans, and Jamie's entire body convulsed in response. Her breath caught and her back arched. She unwittingly pressed those soft breasts with their easily-felt pebbled tips against his chest. A second swat had her moaning soft, submissive cries into his mouth; a sound that went straight to his groin.

And his heart, which startled him. How could that even be possible? According to his ex-wife, he wasn't supposed to have one.

Travis drew back. He had to. One more minute of this and he wouldn't be able to stop even if he wanted to.

Jamie stared at his mouth. Her blue eyes smoldered, her soft, full mouth was swollen and flushed. She looked absolutely dazed. "Was--was that loving and doting enough?"

His heart was thoroughly convinced.

"Jamie," he murmured huskily. "This is going to be a long two years."

CHAPTER THREE

Dorsett Building rumor number one: Travis Dorsett was an intergalactic space alien. False. While she had yet to see his stomach, she had seen his ears and there was no elephant's trunk sprouting from them.

Dorsett Building rumor number two: Travis Dorsett was not a chipper man. Also false. Personally, Jamie was a firm believer in the capability of money buying happiness if one used some basic common sense. If that hunch was true, well then, Travis had to be about the happiest person she'd ever met. Just look at his house.

From the outside, it didn't seem that ostentatious: a two-story home, tucked back off a private road, curtained by towering Washington pines and a landscaped yard in full, springtime bloom. Her own dinky apartment could have fit inside this house three times over. Per floor.

"Oh, wow," she said as Ben opened the limo's door for her and she climbed slowly out of the car.

From behind her, still on the backseat, Travis said, "Welcome to my home."

While Jamie unbuckled Megan from her car seat, Ben popped the trunk, and he and Travis began to unload her luggage, the majority of which consisted of Megan's things, hastily thrown into paper and plastic grocery bags. As Jamie lifted the wide-eyed baby to her shoulder, Travis caught her eyes and held up Megan's well-patched cloth playpen.

"Tomorrow we'll go shopping."

She flushed. "It does what it's supposed to. It's fine."

"Jamie," he said. "No one is going to believe I love you or that I'm an affectionate father if this is what I provide for Megan."

"It's what I could afford."

"But it's not what I can afford."

"Megan is my responsibility," Jamie told him. "Not yours."

"What kind of family man would I be if I didn't contribute to the care of my wife's infant daughter? My daughter in fact, when we finally," a ghost of a smile graced his lips, "tie the knot."

She frowned. "I don't want you paying for my things. I'm a big girl; I'll do it myself or I don't need it."

He put the playpen back in the trunk and frowned right back at her. He was infinitely better at it than she was. "I could give Megan the moon and it wouldn't make a dent in my bank accounts."

"Megan doesn't need the moon."

"But she does need a playpen."

Jamie looked at the pile of her things Ben was unobtrusively stacking on the cultivated sand and step-stone walkway. The playpen with its ratty cloth exterior was among the nicest. It had been bought used and was what she could afford, she told herself fiercely. There was no reason for her to be embarrassed for having done the best she could.

"Let's compromise," Travis suggested. "Tomorrow we'll go shopping, and anything we buy for Megan will be deducted from your allotment as soon as we get divorced. Will that appease your pride?"

Megan kicked against her shoulder, cooing and gurgling around the pudgy fist she'd stuffed into her mouth and was avidly chewing on. Jamie patted her back absently. That would be almost like using her own money. And Megan really did need some new things. They both did.

"All right," she finally agreed. "I can do that."

Travis picked up the playpen and a plastic grocery bag full of toys and started up the walk to his front door. "Are you always going to make it this hard for me to be nice?"

"Getting me evicted is your idea of nice?"

He flashed her an amused look over his shoulder as he fished his house keys out of his pocket. "That was exceptional niceness on my part. Were I you, I

wouldn't expect such grand treatment on a regular basis."

Then he opened the door.

Like Alice stepping through the looking glass, Jamie passed through Travis's front door and found herself in a whole new world. One of neat, impeccable elegance. And forget three times; her apartment could have easily fit in here four times per floor. And dear God, it was all decorated in immaculate white. One bout of Megan's infamous upset stomachs and the whole place would need re-carpeting.

Jamie stopped at the top of the sunken living room stairs, holding her daughter in a near death grip that quickly had the baby kicking and fussing in protest. There was an ancient looking Greek vase on a three-legged mahogany display table. The coffee and end tables were made of glass. She couldn't even imagine herself sitting on the white leather couch that stretched the length of the marble fireplace. After two years, those white walls would have hand prints and crayon markings and heaven only knew what else on them. The tables would be scratched, if not broken; the carpet a patchwork of Play Dough. That vase would never survive the crawling phase, much less Megan's toddlerhood, and that was only if Jamie didn't accidentally knock it over herself.

Travis set Megan's toys and playpen at the base of the white-carpeted staircase, resting a hand lightly on the carved oak banister. "Jamie? Are you all right?"

"Megan can't live here," she said, her voice wavering slightly. She was pretty sure she couldn't, either.

His dark eyebrows arched in mild surprise, and his mouth turned up at the corners. "Why not? Not including the pool house, garage or Ben's cottage, there is still over six thousand square feet of living space. That isn't big enough for the three of us?"

Jamie turned, staring at him as though he'd suddenly sprouted a second head. "It's not the size I'm worried about!"

"Ah. In that case, let me assure you the carpet is stain resistant," he said. "The walls are washable, and there is nothing in here that can't be replaced."

Jamie looked again at the Greek vase. Oh dear, and there was another one on a short table tucked up against the wall by the stairs. She clutched Megan even tighter while Travis followed the direction of her wide-eyed stare.

"All right," he conceded. "When she starts crawling, we'll do some baby-proofing and put up a few velvet ropes around the breakables. The place will look like a museum, but once we teach her which side of the ropes to play on..."

His second head must have turned purple and sprouted horns.

"I thought you said you didn't joke," she accused.

Travis raised an eyebrow questioningly. "You don't think Megan will respect a velvet rope?"

"She's six months old!"

"I'm not suggesting we cordon things off without first explaining to her--"

"Travis, she's six months old!"

"Six months. Yes. I understand that. But we can reason with her--"

Jamie laughed, a quick barking sound of disbelief. "In twenty years, maybe, but not in two."

"I wasn't planning on committing for that long." Travis clasped his hands behind his back and studied the infant gurgling at him. "I suppose for the next few years I could arrange to tour a few things through the Historical Treasury of the Arts."

Jamie looked at the Grecian vase, then back at him. "Good idea. Much better than the first."

"Excellent. Then catastrophe has been averted." Opening the coat closet near the front door, Travis stashed the eyesore playpen inside. He motioned Ben to bring in the rest of her things and the

already pitiful looking stack of grocery bags piled at the bottom of the stairs grew wider. "Come with me. I'll give you the grand tour."

Half-heartedly wondering how she might keep Megan small and immobile for the next two years, Jamie followed Travis through the formal living and dining rooms, into a kitchen built to feed a small army, a pantry that contained not one box of hamburger helper, and more bathrooms than she cared to think about scrubbing.

His den was like his office, comfortably furnished in blue, but with a smaller, polished oak desk and a grey, L-shaped cloth couch near the fireplace. In the adjacent library, books of all kinds overflowed the bookshelves. There was a hunter green sofa and two matching overstuffed chairs situated by a window that overlooked a floral garden. The center piece was a magnificent stone fountain. A gentle waterfall trickled down a simple, chest-high rock structure, dotted with moss and ferns, into a medium-sized pond. As Jamie pulled back the curtain to get a better look, a flash of orange touched the surface of the pond, and then quickly disappeared beneath the lily pad surface again.

"Koi?" she asked. But when she glanced back at Travis, she was startled to find that, instead of in the doorway where she'd left him, he was standing right behind her, playing with one of Megan's tiny hands and studying the fountain over her shoulder. In that instant as she felt the warm heat of his breath against the back of her neck, every nerve ending in her body came suddenly, achingly to life. She didn't know what aftershave he was wearing, but it instantly replaced Old Spice as her favorite.

"Mm," he hummed, his voice a soft, low-pitched baritone. Rumbling almost. The vibrations of which trembled through her. "There's nine, I believe."

Nine? Nine, what? She couldn't remember what she'd asked!

He leaned slightly closer, tipping his head as he looked off to the left and the hard length of his

chest pressed against her back, sending her blood speeding through her veins and igniting a slow, languid heat in her belly.

"Look," he murmured. "Through those trees. Can you see the deer?"

She couldn't even see the koi anymore, and the pond was barely ten feet from the window. But Jamie nodded anyway.

Travis pressed a little closer, but instead of watching the deer, now he was watching her. The look in those smoldering, amber eyes was enough to catch her breath in her throat. If ever she was going to step away, this was the time to do it. Come on, she begged her leaden limbs. Move, feet, move!

Softly, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." But her trembling voice gave her away. And Jamie groaned when that damned knowing smile of his curled the corners of his sensual mouth--a mouth so close to her own, if only she tipped just a little bit forward, they could be practicing that loving and doting part all over again. Her bottom began to tingle where he'd swatted her in the car and the sensation spread, trickling down into other areas as well. Unable to help herself, the tip of her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

"Mm," he hummed again. "Are you sure you want to adhere to this no touching rule?"

Not trusting herself to speak, Jamie nodded instead.

"I think you want me."

She shook her head, emphatically.

"You desire me," he murmured, his lips so close to hers that it was all she could do to keep from leaning into them.

"No," she whispered.

"You like me then." His arms came around her as he braced his hands against the window pane. "Now don't deny that, Jamie, my dear. Your eyes betray you."

"They don't." But it was a feeble protest, and she knew it. What was worse, he knew it, too.

"You're trembling," he pointed out. "That's what happens when you begin to like someone. As he draws close to you, you feel the heat of his body, the beating of his heart in time with your own. Then the flames of desire take hold within you, and you begin to tremble because you... want." He made the word sound like an erotic sin. "Tell me, sweetheart, my soon-to-be wife: do you want me?"

She shook her head. Her mouth moved to say, "No," but the denial had no sound behind it.

"Liar." Travis chuckled, a low, rumbling sound from deep down in his chest that just made her want to lean against him and feel the vibrations of it shiver all through her.

She couldn't do this. She just couldn't. Not for two years. Not if she wanted to keep her sanity.

"I never knew it could be so arousing to seduce a woman holding her child," Travis said. "Are you sure you don't want me to touch you? I would love to make you feel good."

"Positive." She hated how shaky she sounded. Sounded? Her knees were all but knocking together!

"Are you a more modern-thinking woman, perhaps?" Travis flashed a wolfish smile. "You may seduce me instead, if you like. You'll find I'm very flexible and open to new ideas." He leaned slowly down, bringing his mouth to mere inches from her own. "It's easy, sweetheart. Just lean into me, press those bewitching lips to mine, and I'm all yours."

Jamie moaned, and Megan became her sudden, saving grace. The baby began to fuss, kicking her legs and whining, a sound Jamie recognized as the prelude to an angry fit unless a dry diaper was very quick in coming. It was all the excuse she needed to help break away from Travis's overwhelming magnetism. She stepped sideways, away from the allure of his cologne, the warm touch of his chest, and that seductive, beguiling mouth.

"I'd like to go to my room now," she said shakily.

Travis closed his eyes briefly, then bowed his head and shook it ruefully. With a gentle touch of his finger, he tickled the baby beneath her chin, winning a gurgled laugh and a huge grin from the infant. "Megan, darling, we need to work on your timing."

"That's one of the dangers of trying to seduce a woman with a child," Jamie told him, fighting hard to pull herself together again. "Babies don't like to wait."

He sighed, though his smile faded only slightly. "Your room's upstairs. This way."

By the time they returned to the front room, Ben had already unloaded the car and left. They were now completely alone together. Jamie felt a trill of panic at the thought, but instead of immediately pouncing on her and continuing where they'd left off in the library, Travis started picking through her luggage.

"What do you need first?" he asked, opening several of the paper bags stacked in front of the stairs. "Baby clothes... Baby clothes... Jamie clothes... Diapers..."

"That one."

He selected the diapers, Megan's well used baby bag, and a variety of other sacks. "All the bedrooms are upstairs."

Jamie followed him up the carpeted stairs to the second floor. Four guest rooms separated Travis's master suite at the left end of the hall from Jamie's slightly smaller one to the far right.

Travis paused at the door just before her room and opened it. "Will this perhaps do for Megan?"

It was decorated in soft lavender with a huge king sized bed, a walnut dresser with a large square vanity mirror on top, and an adjoined bathroom that was egg-shell white with lavender carpeting. A few lavender tiles were thrown sporadically among a sea of white ones surrounding the shower and sink.

"I realize we'll have to redecorate," Travis told her. "Put in a baby bed and whatever else Megan is

likely to need. Since it's my house, I'll pay for the renovations." He held up his hand as Jamie opened her mouth to object. "Who's to say I won't have children of my own someday? I'll need a nursery then anyway."

Jamie hesitated for only a moment, then gave in with a nod. "All right. But nothing extravagant."

"I promise. No crystal baby rattles or silk nappies."

"No diamond diaper pins," she added. "Or Chardonnay flavored pacifiers."

"Very well, but I must insist on at least one caviar teething nook. Osetra. Not Beluga. No reason to go overboard."

Though she glared at him with irritated eyes, genuine amusement tugged at her mouth as she edged past him and went to the bed.

"What about you?" he asked as she lay Megan on the burgundy goose-down comforter. The baby sank deep into the plush bedding, almost disappearing from sight. "Do you plan to ever marry again? After this--us--I mean, is over."

Jamie shook her head. "Never. Hand me the diaper bag, please."

"Not all men leave, you know." Travis handed her one of the sacks he carried. "I know a good many colleagues who absolutely adore their children. I don't think any of them would ever dream of abandoning them, or their wives for that matter."

"Those are some lucky kids then."

"Jamie," he admonished gently, then repeated, "not all men leave."

"Okay, fine. But how many of those men you know would feel that devoted to someone else's kid?" she countered. "I wouldn't give Megan up for anything, but since I've had her I've learned babies are pretty much the napalm of the dating jungle. A woman can be swarming with men, but whip out a baby and suddenly everyone disappears."

"I haven't disappeared."

"You're also marrying me to further your career ambitions and for only two years." Having spread a protective changing pad over the bed and lain the baby in the middle of it, Jamie looked up from the wet diaper she was changing to flash him a quick smile. "That doesn't exactly make you Mister Right. You're more like Mister Right Now."

Had she been looking, she might have noticed the almost imperceptible tightening of his jaw and mouth. But Travis didn't say anything, and Jamie didn't look. Instead, she rolled the dirty diaper in on itself and used the sticky tabs to secure it in a tight ball before handing it to him. "Here. Can you throw this away, please?"

Travis took the diaper between two fingers and carried it into the adjacent bathroom. When he returned, Megan had a clean diaper on and Jamie was struggling to work a one-piece pink-and-white sleeper onto an infant who was suddenly as boneless as a jelly fish and infinitely more interested in rolling over than getting dressed. The battle was close, but Jamie won. With the pajamas zipped up into place, Megan was lifted from the changing pad.

"That feels so much better, doesn't it?" Jamie cooed, gently rubbing noses with the baby, who promptly clasped her mother's face in return and grinned.

Standing in the bathroom doorway, it suddenly became very, very easy to imagine Jamie surrounded by babies. Dark haired, blue eyed babies with her cute as a button nose and his chin.

Travis stiffened, trying his best to banish that thought.

Noticing him staring, Jamie lowered Megan to her lap. "What?"

"I didn't say anything."

"You have a funny look on your face."

"Is it that Last-Candy-in-the-Dish look again? If so, I apologize, I've sent my eyes a memo detailing

intra-expressive reforms. They must not have received it yet."

She smiled and shook her head. "If nothing else, you'll be good for my ego. Two years of that and I won't be able to fit my head through the door to leave."

Lacking her mother's attention, Megan began to fuss and Jamie turned back to bouncing and cooing silly, nonsensical baby things to soothe her.

"May I?" Travis indicated to the baby.

"She doesn't usually like strangers," Jamie said and lifted the baby to her shoulder again.

"She'll have to get used to me sooner or later," he reasoned. "I promise not to drop her."

After a slight hesitation, Jamie reluctantly nodded, and Travis returned to the bed. As he took Megan, his large hands overlapping where they wrapped around her middle, the baby grinned and reached for him, kicking her pudgy legs. She didn't seem at all concerned over the possibility of being dropped, which added one more good reason to the list for why children should have eighteen years to wizen up before being tossed out into the world to fend for themselves.

Travis held Megan at arms' length and stared at her. Now what?

Jamie smiled in spite of herself. "You've never held a baby before?"

"A real one?" he asked. "No. Is it that obvious?"

"You could hold her a little closer. She's not a bomb; she won't explode."

Gingerly, Travis lay Megan to his shoulder the way he'd seen Jamie do. His eyebrows arched. "All right. This isn't so bad. I can do this."

"But it's pretty easy right now," Jamie said with a smile. "Megan isn't crying, the phone isn't ringing, no one's knocking at the door, the washing machine isn't walking across the floor because the load's unbalanced, and dinner isn't burning in the oven. When all that happens and you can still smile and

say, 'This isn't so bad, I can do this,' then I'll be impressed."

"My, my," Travis drawled. "We really are hard to please, aren't we? All right." He turned and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Downstairs," he tossed back over his shoulder. "I'm going to call a judge to marry us, and hope someone comes knocking on my door as I'm doing it. I'm not entirely sure where my washing machine is located, or if I even have one, but I'm almost certain I can burn something in the oven." He paused in the hallway just outside the door. "While Megan and I get to know one another, why don't you unpack, settle in, make a list of anything you need. Whatever it is, we'll get it tomorrow."

"Judas," Jamie called after Megan, who was touching Travis's face with exploring hands and making absolutely no effort to live up to her stranger-disliking reputation. Apparently the effects of tall, dark and handsome on feminine sensibilities knew no age limit.

Halfway down the stairs, Travis happened to glance through the half-moon window above the door and spotted a car pulling into the driveway.

"Well now," he said the Megan. "Looks like we're going to have company after all."

He took a moment to toss the remainder of Jamie's things into the closet with the playpen. Then he did his best to smooth Megan's dandelion fluff of cowlicks down around her head before he opened the front door. He froze. The Kuronabes, Yuko and Tetsuo, climbed out of the back of their cab. Yuko waved while his brother simply stared, and they came up the walk together.

"Hello," Travis said with surprise, bowing as they did, though in his head he kept thinking: Jamie's upstairs, I've got a baby in my arms, and they've dropped in unannounced so it doesn't look contrived.

Perfect.

And Megan, the darling little dandelion child, as the Kuronabes stepped up to the door, she curled shyly into Travis's broad shoulder and hugged him.

Note to self: Give baby an allowance.

He smiled. "What an unexpected pleasure."

You could always tell the parents from the bachelors and the childless. Yuko was a parent.

"Who is this?" He gushed, all grins for the baby's sake.

Why, the darling daughter of the woman I picked to become my fake wife, just to appease you, of course.

"Where are my manners?" Travis drawled. "This is my Megan. She's not that fond of strangers."

He tried to coax the suddenly shy baby to turn again, but she only looked at the Kuronabes before squirming back around to clutch his neck, carefully watching the Japanese businessmen while clinging as close to Travis as she could possibly get.

An allowance and, if she keeps this up, she can pretty well consider her college tuition paid. He didn't know if six-month-olds could talk yet, but one well placed 'da-da' right about now would land her a Ferrari for her sixteenth birthday.

"How old?" Yuko asked, tickling the bottom of Megan's foot.

"Six months."

"Poof poof," he said in a sing-song voice as he patted Megan's dandelion top. Then he beamed at Travis, held up one finger and reached into his jacket pocket.

Oh, here we go. Baby pictures in the wallet.

As Travis stared obligingly at the photos of Yuko's three children, making appropriate noises of adorability, he found himself thinking, cute as they were, Megan had them all beat.

"That is my daughter, Ayame," Yuko said proudly. "Three years old, already reads."

"Really?"

Megan came out from behind his lapel long enough to reach for the proffered wallet. She

brought it to her mouth and Travis barely caught it in time to keep her single budding tooth from going to work on the fine leather.

"You know babies," he said apologetically, handing the wallet back to its owner. "Everything goes straight to their mouths."

Addendum to previous note: what do you know, that really was true.

Tetsuo cleared his throat. "We are here to get clarification on two points of your contract."

Unlike his brother's smooth, well-practiced English, Tetsuo had a rougher, gravelly voice and he spoke slower, as though carefully considering each word.

Travis held open the door and stepped aside to let them in.

And from the stairs, he heard Jamie say, "I thought I heard voices."

She had changed into a lovely rose colored, button-down-the-front shirt and jeans that, while faded, did not seem quite so worn. She must not have had a nicer pair of shoes than the sneakers, because she came down the stairs with only white socks on her feet.

"Jamie." He congratulated himself on how normal he sounded, when in all honesty, as she came to stand on the bottommost step at his shoulder, he felt anything but. "May I introduce the Kuronabes, Tetsuo and Yuko, associates of mine from Japan. Gentlemen, this is my Jamie."

Jamie flushed a little at his introduction, but as both men bowed, she dipped awkwardly into a returning courtesy and hoped that she was doing it correctly.

Loving and doting, she told herself as she straightened up again. Loving and doting. Thank God, they'd practiced in the car.

As she reached out to take Megan from him, she lay a barely trembling hand on his broad shoulder and rose up on tiptoes to lightly kiss his cheek. His aftershave smelled so good. Her face flushed, her

stomach warmed, but thankfully, her voice barely had a hitch to it as she said, "Go ahead and take care of your business, honey. I'll get dinner started."

Don't stare after her like a love struck fool, Travis told himself firmly. He could still feel the print of her fingers on his shoulder, his cheek burned where her lips had brushed it, and it didn't work anyway. As Jamie strolled across the living room towards the swinging kitchen door, he watched her the entire way.

After a moment, Tetsuo politely cleared his throat and Travis came back to himself with a start.

"I beg your pardon. Come in, come in." He gestured the brothers into the immaculate living room. "Have a seat."

Yuko grinned at him. "It is always easy to spot the ones in love."

Now it was Travis's turn to clear his throat. "Yes... ah... what was the first question?"

Jamie made it all the way to the kitchen sink before her trembling legs required a counter to lean upon. That wasn't so bad actually. For the two seconds that she'd interacted with them, the Kuronabes had seemed rather nice. Now if she could just make it through the night in a convincingly loving and doting fashion, then it would be one day down and--she quickly did the math--seven hundred and twenty-nine left to go.

She rubbed the hand she'd touched him with against her jean-clad thigh, but it didn't help. Her palm still tingled. So did her lips.

Stop it, Jamie! It isn't real and you know it.

Her shoulders drooped and she sighed. She'd waited a long time for a strong, authoritative man, one who'd take charge and be the boss and who wouldn't hesitate to give her a 'firm hand' when required. So now it seemed she'd found one. And it wasn't even real.

It was a means to an end. It was going to get her out of debt. So she really had nothing to feel depressed about.

She set Megan on the floor, giving her a ring of measuring spoons and a spatula to play with before opening the pantry door. She looked the shelves over and her shoulders drooped again. Not only was there no hamburger helper, but there was no macaroni and cheese, no tuna fish, no ready-made packaged meals of any kind.

Great, what was she supposed to do now? Cook from scratch? Nobody cooked from scratch anymore. She bit her bottom lip. She was well out of her culinary depths.

She moved aside a jar of dried kidney beans, then ducked down to look at the bottles neatly spaced on the bottom pantry shelf. She spied a familiar Prego sauce label. Saved. She could make spaghetti. It was even one of the few things that she could make fairly well.

It took a few minutes to gather what she needed. She found the noodles in one cupboard, fresh mushrooms, peppers and tomatoes in the refrigerator, and hamburger for meatballs in the freezer. While the sauce simmered and a quick batch of garlic butter rolls baked in the oven, she hunted the kitchen for plates. Were the Kuronabes still here? Would they be staying for dinner?

Jamie tiptoed to the swinging door and opened it a crack. Yup, still there. Caught up in a discussion of shipment dates and profit percentages.

Behind her, thinking herself about to be left behind, Megan started to cry, and Jamie returned to start the noodles boiling before picking the baby up. Propping her on her hip, Jamie took a deep breath and pushed through the swinging door.

The Kuronabes were sitting side by side on the couch, with Travis on a straight-backed chair across the coffee table from them. He was currently bent, circling a point on the contract, which was spread out in three piles on the glass surface between

them. He'd removed his jacket and tie, leaving them draped over the back of the chair. His white dress shirt must have been tailored to him; it stretched the breadth of those broad shoulders just tight enough to show off his physique without pinching or restricting his movements.

Jeez, Jamie. It's not as if you've never seen a man before. Quit staring.

She shook her head at herself, but with any luck he'd have some serious personality flaws. Please, God, let him pick his teeth with his thumbnail at the dinner table or play the National Anthem on his armpit. Something, anything to make him less desirable.

She cleared her throat softly and the three men looked up. "Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes. I made plenty for everyone, if you'd like to stay."

"Thank you," Tetsuo said gruffly. "We are not hungry."

And the excuse probably would have served if Yuko's stomach hadn't chosen that moment to grumble. Loudly.

Tetsuo turned and gave his brother a dark look.

Wide-eyed, Yuko shrugged. "It's been hours since lunch."

To an amused Travis, Tetsuo said, "Every time we come to America, we are served sushi."

"Oh," Jamie said. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to make that."

Tetsuo made a rumbling sound. "At least you admit it."

Travis leaned back with a low chuckle. "What's for dinner, sweetheart?"

He said that so easily, the endearment seeming to glide off his tongue as though he meant it.

"Spaghetti," she said.

"I love Italian!" Yuko exclaimed, earning another dark look from Tetsuo. "What? I'm hungry. I can smell the garlic bread from here."

"All right, gentlemen," Travis said as he gathered the contract papers together. "Let's finish this over supper."

Note to self: only inedible things headed straight into babies' mouths. Food went everywhere but. Megan's hair, Travis decided, as he watched her turn her bowl upside down on her highchair tray and gleefully smear spaghetti sauce everywhere, probably wasn't even really red. It was likely left over spaghetti sauce that hadn't been completely washed out.

Needing to catch their homebound flight, the Kuronabes hadn't stayed long after dinner. Which was probably for the best, although Megan did put on her best show once Travis and Jamie were alone. She pounded on the metal, sauce-smear tray and sang wordlessly, cheerfully in fact, quite off key. Then she turned and, with slivers of pasta noodles in her hair and sauce up to her eyebrows, gave him a huge, nearly toothless 'Aren't-I-Talented' grin.

Leaned back in his chair, his elbow on the armrest, chin propped in his palm, Travis smiled back at her. She was absolutely darling, and she knew it. Giggling, she promptly covered her eyes for a very saucy game of peek-a-boo. Thankfully, Jamie had had the foresight to spread two garbage bags on the floor beneath the highchair, otherwise the dining room carpet might have been the first casualty of the marriage.

Travis turned his smile on Jamie, sitting on the other side of the highchair, nursing a glass of wine between her hands. He'd only poured her the one and, as far as he could tell, she hadn't touched a drop of it.

"You don't drink?" he deduced.

She shook her head. "It's not a good idea."

His smile faltered. "Are you a mean drunk or a recovering alcoholic?"

Setting the wine aside, Jamie raised her head to look at him. "Would it break our deal if I were either?"

"No. But I would commend you your strong willpower, thank you heartily for not misbehaving in front of our guests, and not serve you liquor in the future."

For the first time since the Kuronabes left, Jamie smiled. "I breast feed Megan. She doesn't need the alcohol any more than I do."

"Oh." He couldn't help it. His gaze fell to her chest, the plump mounds outlined by her rose-colored shirt. He cleared his throat and made himself look away. "You did very well tonight, by the way. One day down..."

"Seven hundred twenty-nine to go," she finished for him. "Yes, I know."

She was counting?

"Well, give or take a month. It would look rather contrived if we got divorced two years from the anniversary of the day I saw Max trying to steal my contract."

"I suppose it would," she agreed, but the look on her face was anything but happy.

"Am I that much of an ogre that you can't wait to be free of me?" he asked.

The comment won another smile from her. "I'm reserving judgment until I get to know you better."

"Fair enough." Travis lifted his glass, swirling the last swallow of wine in the bottom. "I suppose that's what tomorrow is for. Shopping and getting to know one another."

As he stood up, he draped his napkin over the top of Megan's head and quickly kissed the top before she could pull it off again.

"I'll call the judge," he said as he headed for the dining room door. "It's time we got this arrangement solidified."

CHAPTER FOUR

At a few minutes to five, a full hour before his alarm was set to go off, Travis awoke to an ear piercing shriek. In only a pair of pajama bottoms, he sat bolt upright too close to the edge of the mattress and fell out of bed, dragging half of his bedding and a pillow with him.

It took him a minute to remember last night and figure out why someone was crying in his house. Oh yeah, Megan.

And Jamie!

He flung his pillow aside and kicked frantically to be free of the tangled blankets and sheet around his feet. He knocked over the stand bag in his closet grabbing for a golf club, took two steps and looked at the sand wedge. He quickly exchanged it for a five-iron. Whacking his foot against the corner post of the bed, he stumbled into the door and half-ran half-hopped all the way down the hall.

Megan let out another lusty wail just as Travis flung open Jamie's bedroom door. He hefted the five-iron threateningly even as he slapped at the wall light switch. The sudden illumination nearly blinded him, but not before he caught a glimpse of a perfect--as well as perfectly bare--breast, its dusky nipple peeking just above Megan's questing mouth and framed by the pale folds of her unbuttoned nightshirt.

Propped against the headboard and a small mountain of pillows, Jamie slapped a hand over her eyes and croaked, "What the hell are you doing?"

Travis immediately flicked the wall switch to off and the darkness swallowed them again. But it was too late. He'd already seen it, and the image of that pale round breast was etched in his eyes. He closed them, but could still see it as clearly as with the light on.

"I'm sorry, I-I-I--," he sighed, lowering the golf club to a less threatening posture and feeling a little

foolish. "You know, if there had been an intruder, you'd be thanking me right now."

She flung a pillow at him. "Out!"

"Right." Travis grabbed the doorknob, and he and the five iron retreated backwards out into the hallway. Unlike his entry, his exit was much more sedate and the door closed softly between them.

An hour before his alarm was set to go off and here he was, up. In fact--he looked down--some parts of him were more up than others. He rubbed his tired eyes, scratched his chest and limped back to his bedroom. Since there was now little point in going back to bed, he decided to take a shower--a cold shower--and see if he couldn't coax the first day of his new marriage off to a better start.

It was six-thirty before Jamie carried Megan downstairs to join him in the kitchen. They were both dressed for the day: Megan in a light blue jumper with a bunny on the bib pocket and Jamie, with a diaper bag slung over one shoulder, in jeans, yellow t-shirt and her falling apart shoes. He probably should have dressed down, he thought, feeling a little out of place in a three-piece business suit and tie.

"Good morning, Missus Dorsett," he greeted.

She gave him a half irritated glare as she put Megan in her highchair. "Tiger Woods."

He had the grace to look a little sheepish. He held up an empty coffee cup. "Do you take cream or sugar with your peace offering?"

"Both please." While he fixed her drink, she set the diaper bag on the table and unzipped it. She rummaged through the center compartment, withdrawing a white pint-sized, plastic bottle.

"One teaspoon sugar?" he asked. "Two?"

"Two please." Jamie opened the fridge and set the bottle on one of the shelves. Then she bent down to look inside.

"Here you go." He set her cup on a nearby counter and went back to his own, which he'd left by the coffee pot.

As he lifted his cup to his lips, Jamie said, "I put a bottle of milk in here for Megan last night. Have you seen it?"

Travis turned and promptly spit his mouthful of coffee into the sink. He reached next to the coffee pot, and without turning around, held up a pint-sized, white plastic bottle. "This it?"

"Yep." Jamie closed the fridge door and took it from him, unscrewing the cap to check how much was left inside.

"I wondered why Lucy had the cream in an odd container."

"Who's Lucy?"

"My--our housekeeper." He wiped his mouth on a napkin. "Was it your milk?"

"Yes."

"From you?"

"Yes."

"That's a mean trick to play on an unsuspecting bachelor."

"It has to be refrigerated," Jamie protested. "I didn't know you were going to drink it."

"What's it doing out of the, ah--" his gaze briefly slipped down to her chest, "original container?"

"Megan has to eat, and I have to work. Lots of women use breast pumps these days. My doctor said it's common and the next best thing for a baby when the mother can't stay at home."

Travis poured the rest of his coffee down the sink. "From now on, the top shelf in the fridge is yours. Anything I don't need to eat or drink, please put there."

"Okay." She opened the fridge again and put both bottles on the right shelf. "I'm not used to living with someone else, either. I didn't mean to gross you out. I'm sorry."

"There's no reason to be." He handed her a fresh cup of coffee--sugar, no cream--and his amber eyes caressed the length of her. "You were very flavorful."

Blushing, Jamie took the cup. "Get your caviar off my shelf," she said, and retreated to the kitchen table. She also changed the subject. "Are we still going shopping after work?"

"It being our honeymoon," Travis said, with his head inside the fridge, "I was thinking neither of us would go to work today." He closed the door and went to fix himself a fresh drink. "Do you know what you want to buy?"

"Just the bare necessities. A few things for Megan. Nothing major."

"In that case, I'll be making a few purchases myself then."

"Not for me, you won't," she said, as he took a seat directly across from her. "We had this argument yesterday."

Travis braced his forearms on the table and looked at her. "Jamie, I understand your desire to assume all financial responsibility for Megan and for yourself. I respect that decision because you are her mother and an independent, mature woman in your own right. However, any items purchased solely because you are now my wife and must dress the part, I intent to pay for."

"I don't need you to pay for me," she stated.

"This is your job for the next two years. I am your employer, and I will provide your uniform. End of discussion."

Note to self: when telling Jamie Miracle--er, Dorsett--what to do, however diplomatically, watch carefully. One could all but see her hackles rising.

She thunked her cup down and glared at him. "Hold it right there, buster."

"You sloshed," he calmly interrupted.

She grabbed a napkin from the table's center piece and quickly wiped up the spill.

"Use the saucer, if you please. This table is mahogany. I don't want rings," he said, a ghost of a smile curving his lips as she obediently thunked the cup on the corresponding saucer. "And don't break

the china, either. They were a gift from my mother."

"Oh for heaven's sake!" Jamie exploded. "You can't just end the conversation! Who do you think you are?"

"Your husband."

"On paper only!"

"Which makes it no less legal," he pointed out.

"You still can't tell me what to do!"

"Of course I can. I'm the boss. Bosses get to dictate how the employees do their jobs. That's one of the perks. Which reminds me. Jamie, darling, you're fired."

"What?!"

"No one would ever believe I'd allow my wife to work as a janitor, especially not in my home office. We have to consider appearances now."

Her mouth fell open. "But--but you can't!"

"I've already placed the call. Your locker is to be cleaned out first thing this morning. We'll drive by on our way to the mall." Gently he said, "You can stay in the car if you want; I'll get your things, so there'll be no embarrassment."

Jamie leaned back in her chair, her eyes wide and hurt. "I can't lose my job! What am I going to do?"

"All of your debts will be paid off by the end of today," Travis said as reassuringly as possible. "Consider yourself on a two-years-long vacation. Do whatever you like: go back to school, get your GED, take classes towards a career you'll enjoy. Or stay home and just take care of Megan. Anything your heart desires."

"My heart wants to keep my job."

"Anything but that."

"Did you know you were going to do this yesterday?" she demanded

"I suspected."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"Would you still have agreed to marry me?" he countered calmly.

"No!"

He spread his hands as if to say, 'There you go.' "I don't believe as a child you suddenly woke up one morning and said, 'Gee, my life-long ambition is to become a janitor.'"

"I'm not ashamed of what I do!"

"Nor should you be. In fact, if you hadn't pushed a cleaning cart onto the elevator alongside me, I might not have found you so quickly. But I've given you a better job."

"And you know where you can stick it, too!" Jamie shoved her chair back. "I don't have to take this!"

It was sheer reflex that had Travis immediately on his feet as well. As she bent to unfasten Megan from her highchair, he strode around the end of the table and firmly caught her arm. She tried to yank free of his hand, but before she could even draw breath to let him have it, Travis commandeered her freshly vacated chair and tugged her down to sit on his lap.

"Don't struggle," he said close to her ear. "I don't think either of us wants to frighten Megan."

Jamie immediately stilled, though she perched stiffly on his thighs as unyielding as any statue in his garden.

Through gritted teeth, she bit out, "This is touching!"

"It certainly is," he agreed calmly, and she lost her irate composure to a startled shriek when he suddenly flipped her over. With that one smooth motion, Travis had her face-down over his knees. To be honest, it was a toss up as to who was the more startled: Jamie, staring at the plush white carpet three inches from her nose; or Travis, staring at Jamie's pert little backside, the seat of her jeans already worn a shade lighter than the rest of her Levis.

Jamie's moment of shock vanished and she bucked, trying to right herself. He quickly settled an arm across the small of her back and pinned her

down. It had been three years since he'd last done this. But what do you know, much like riding a bicycle, once learned, the basics of spanking pretty much stayed with a man. Just the sight of her upturned bottom was bringing it all back to him.

Despite her anger of only a moment ago, there was now a hint of panic to her voice as Jamie cried, "No, wait! Please don't! I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean it!"

"I do believe it's too late for that," Travis said automatically, amazed at just how calm he sounded. Absolutely no thought was going into this, which was a little disconcerting since he was normally a man who considered and reconsidered his actions all quite carefully. He caressed her bottom tenderly, tracing a small, imaginary target pattern on the surface of her jeans, something that only a disciplinarian could see, and marveled at how exhilarating it felt to run solely on reflex.

Her entire body stiffened to feel him touching her there. She swallowed hard. "Please, Travis, let me up."

"You put yourself in this position, sweetheart," he said. Yes, sir. It was coming back, all right: the firm hold, the lecture, the itchy palm ready to get underway. Jamie probably wouldn't appreciate the honor, but she was about to join a very exclusive club, one whose membership consisted solely of only the handful of women he'd ever held in this vulnerable position.

He gave his pert, round target a fond pat. Now, what came next--? Oh yes, the lecture.

"I won't ever treat you with disrespect, sweetheart," he told her. "And I won't tolerate anything less than courtesy from you in return. Is that clear?"

"You can't do this!" Jamie protested wildly. "I won't let you! You--you'd better let me up right now. I'll make you so sorry!"

"Will you now? Well, in that case..." Travis raised his hand high above her instantly squirming bottom.

Warm ups were for good girls and good-girl spankings, the sweet, sexy, erotic slaps and smacks that proceeded and heightened the pleasure of love-making. Sadly, this wasn't that kind of spanking, and Travis applied five strong swats right to the centers of each upturned cheek in turn. They were harder than he would normally have started any spanking with, but he had a pair of jeans as well as an attitude to work through. Leniency with either, in his opinion, was never a good idea.

The impact of each smack jolted her over his lap, and Jamie grabbed his leg with both hands. "Oh! No!" Her feet kicked up sharply behind her. Her shoulders jerked up as far as his restraining arm would allow. "Oh! OW! Stop!"

He only tightened his hold around her waist, letting her know in no uncertain terms that she'd be going nowhere until he was through. And by the time the last smack of his hand bounced off her delightful bottom, Jamie was frantic, "Please, Travis! Let me up! Please!"

It was very satisfactory.

"Sorry, sweetheart," Travis said, thoroughly unrepentant. "You may as well settle down and make yourself comfortable. You're going to be here for a while."

Jamie drew a ragged gasp of a breath. "You can't do this," she protested again, even less convincingly than the first time. "I'm a grown woman! My mama marched and burned her bra to stop men like you from--oh!--hulking, great--ow!--oaf--ouch!--Stop it! Ow!"

She escalated into barely muffled yelps as he started over again, his broad hand paddling ten vigorous smacks all around the perimeter of his bull's-eyed target.

"And I'm sure there are a good many suffragettes who have been silently miserable ever

since," he drawled. When his palm again came to rest on the center of her rump, the effect of the spanking could already be felt through her Levis. "Tell me, sweetheart. Were you intending to grab Megan and run away?"

A bit of anger, bravery and, considering her position, foolishness returned. Though her voice shook a little, she said, "You bet I was."

He lay another hardy swat to the center of her bottom, flattening both cheeks, once, twice, then again. On the fourth wallop, with a ragged sob, she snapped back her right hand to grab his. Travis caught her wrist, transferring it into the capable grip of the arm that already held her pinned.

"No!" She hit his leg with her free fist and kicked once in frustration.

"I'm not going to tell you again," Travis said simply. "If you upset Megan, I will take your pants down and paddle your naughty bottom until you howl."

Jamie froze. Her blue eyes widened and her mouth fell open in shock. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Oh no?" He shifted, elevating her hips even more as he reached underneath to unbutton the front of her jeans.

"Okay, okay!" Jamie grabbed his leg again. "I'll be good! Travis, I'll be good, I promise!"

"All right." He left her pants in place. "If you can behave yourself, then I'll allow you to keep your pants on this one time."

"This one time?" Jamie screeched in disbelief. "You mean you're going to do this again?" Her cheeks flushed angrily. "Why you high-handed, conceited, arrogant--No, wait. Wait! WAIT!"

The pants came down, and Travis's warm hand settled partially on her beige cotton panties and partially on bare, pink bottom flesh. "What did I just tell you about respect?"

Jamie squealed through gritted teeth, her eyes squeezed tightly shut as he lay a series of sharp smacks all over her bouncing backside. The sound

was crisper now that he was contacting nearly bare flesh, and if the noises she was making were any indication of her discomfort level, then he was very well satisfied with the results his handiwork was producing. Especially when she kicked her feet up to protect her bottom with her falling-apart sneakers.

"Move them," he ordered.

"Please!" she gasped. "I--I've had enough! Travis, please don't spank me anymore!"

A very encouraging sign.

"You've got six more coming and our discussion isn't over yet. Put your feet down right now, sweetheart, or I'm going to take your panties off and spank your lovely bottom on the bare."

She groaned. Slowly, she lowered her feet to the floor.

"Six more." He gently rubbed her blazing skin, soft circles that traced the tender globes until she moaned and, in spite of herself, her bottom relaxed.

It was a cruel trick, but an effective one that made her jump and gasp as the final fury lit into her. She kept her feet down, but gave into a shrilly vocalized wail for pity, "Oo-oOo-oww! Sto-o-op!"

Once again his hand came to rest on the now well-roasted surface of her scarlet bottom. He gently rubbed her back while she hiccuped and sobbed, and gradually she quieted to sniffles.

In a trembling voice, she asked, "May I please get up now? I promise I'll be good."

"No, sweetheart. Not until we've finished our discussion. And if we have to keep going back over the same points again and again, then we may never get our shopping started."

Jamie hung her head with a long drawn-out whimper, and Travis rubbed the pink fingerprints that flushed the outer edges of her hips, the region unprotected by her panties. He checked Megan real quick, but if the baby was at all concerned for her mother, the minute she saw him looking at her, she split into a wide grin and slapped her hands lightly

on the tray of her highchair. No problem from that quarter.

His hand rubbed her aching hot bottom in small circles before moving lower down, locating his next target--the relatively untouched area just above her thighs, right where she'd have to sit later on. "I don't want to have to worry about you and Megan disappearing every time we have a disagreement. When you give your word, Jamie, do you not intend to keep it?"

Her shoulders drooped as she nodded. "Y-yes, I do. I'm sorry. I was just mad."

"I'm not going to spank you for losing your temper. But did you or did you not promise to uphold our arrangement for the duration of two years?"

She sniffled and nodded again. Her voice cracked, "Yes."

He raised his hand and a string of firecracker-like pops and cracks filled the dining room as he attacked the lower half of her bottom. Each impact jolted her over his lap and quickly had her crying out through gritting her teeth, her feet scrambling against the floor as though she was trying to run right off his lap.

"No more running away," he said, laying a final smack to the backs of each thigh. "Agreed?"

"Yesyesyesyes!" Jamie yelped, sobbing and squirming.

"All right then." He held her over his lap, rubbing her back until she calmed. "I would like an apology for the rudeness, and then I'd like for us to sit down and talk to one another like adults. If you'd stop being stubborn and think about it calmly, you just might realize that I'm not being high-handed or conceited or arrogant. I'm providing you with the best opportunity to become even more self-sufficient and independent later on in your life. Pushing a cleaning cart for seven dollars an hour isn't going to do that for you."

She nodded, her shoulders shaking, still gasping and hiccupping, though they were coming less and less frequently.

"You may get up now, darling," he said, as he let her go.

Instead of scrambling to her feet, Jamie slowly pushed herself up until she could roll over on her hip. She sat on his lap with tears rolling down her face and her bottom lip quivering. She didn't even pull her jeans back up. She just perched on his left thigh, her legs between his, her hands in her lap, not looking at him.

"Let's start with the apology," he cued.

"I'm sorry for being rude and insulting you," she said, in a voice no louder than a whisper. "I didn't mean it. And I'm sincere about that, too. Honestly."

It was quite possibly the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life, but from the moment she pushed herself up, he kept his hands off her. That damn no-touching rule. He'd pushed his luck by spanking her. And though he didn't regret it, despite his stinging hand, he wasn't entirely certain that she wouldn't just pack up and leave the minute she pulled herself back together again. He didn't want to lose her. Of all the women he'd ever spanked and cradled on his lap, Jamie was the one he wanted to keep there indefinitely.

Talk about a thunderbolt realization. It all but jolted him to his toes. Could a man have feelings that strong for a person he'd only known one day?

"Are you--" she hiccuped, a gaspy little breath that made her shoulders jerk and fresh tears flowed past her lashes to slip down her cheeks to her chin. "Are you going to--to do that--often?"

"Are you going to need it often?" he countered softly.

"You h-have a very hard h-ha-hand!" And what little bit of self-control she'd managed to maintain, Jamie lost right there. She dissolved into ragged sobs that quickly had Megan wailing in stereo sympathy.

And 'no touching' went right out the window.

"Here, get up." Travis helped her stand so he could lift Megan from the highchair and handed the baby to her mother. Then he sat back down and pulled Jamie all the way onto his lap, holding and rocking them both. Megan calmed fairly quickly, but Jamie took some time. She still hadn't pulled her jeans up and he could feel the heat of her bottom right through his pants.

"It wasn't supposed to feel like that," she sobbed into his shoulder.

He kissed her forehead as he rocked her. "No?"

"It h-hurt!"

He caressed her back, trying not to laugh. "Jamie, honey, it was meant to hurt. It wouldn't be much of a behavior modifier if it didn't."

"But where's the eroticism?" she hiccupped forlornly as she sat up. "The stories all say it smarts a bit, but it feels good, too. In my fantasies it was always nice and w-warm and sexy. I feel so betrayed."

He looked at her, incredulous. "Jamie, was this your first spanking?"

"Well, gee, you knew everything else about me," she muttered grumpily. "Wasn't that in my file, too?"

"Get snippish with me, young lady, and I'll put you back over my knee."

She looked instantly contrite. "I'm sorry."

"Your first husband never spanked you?"

After a moment, Jamie shook her head, softly admitting, "He thought I was weird."

"Darling," Travis kissed her sad mouth, "you're not weird. And I'm sorry your first spanking had to be a disciplinary one."

"I didn't think it was going to be like that. I thought maybe it would sting." Her bottom lip began to quiver. "But it wasn't supposed to hurt!"

Travis kissed her tear-salty cheek, brushing her hair back so he could see her watery eyes. "I'd love to give you the kind of warm and sexy spanking you

want, but not as a reward for inappropriate behavior." His warm hand cupped her chin. "It's not my intent to be unfair, and I don't want you to feel as though you can't speak your mind to me. But I insist there be no rudeness or name-calling. We can be civil to one another, can't we?"

Nodding, Jamie leaned over to lay her head against his shoulder. "Yes."

"All is forgiven and forgotten then," he murmured, wrapping his arms around her.

She felt good in his lap, a comfortable armful, her and Megan both, who copied her mother and lay her head against Travis's chest as well. No wonder fathers carried pictures in their wallets. Who wouldn't want to carry this comfortable, pleasurable armful with him all the time.

Travis gently wiped a lingering tear from Jamie's cheek, and when she tilted up her face, the most natural thing in the world for him was to drop a tender kiss upon that ribbon pink bow of a mouth. Just one, he told himself. He was offering her comfort, that was all. And it was good to have limits.

Well, all right, maybe one was a bit too restrictive. Two, then. He'd stop at two.

Jamie sighed, raising her hand to touch the side of his face, her mouth opening to him, a silent, seductive invitation for more.

Mountains knew no limits.

His arm tightened around her, and two kisses became a good deal more. Hunger replaced tenderness, passion overtook restraint, and what Travis had initially offered as comfort, began to evolve into something else entirely. It probably would have run away with them both, but for Megan, who drew breath and loudly objected to being squished between them.

The effort to stop left Travis shaking. Tense, his whole body throbbing, he forced himself to let Jamie go. In a half-strangled voice, he said, "Go upstairs, sweetheart. Wash your face, touch up your

make-up, and I'll make breakfast. After we eat, then--then we'll go."

She didn't move right away, but sat looking at his mouth with desire-fogged eyes.

"Jamie." His hand slipped down to pat her pantied bottom, commanding her attention. "Go on."

"We're not going to make it, are we?" she asked softly. "We'll never last two years. Not without..."

They weren't doing very well at trying to make it two days.

"Go on." Travis patted her bottom again. "No more touching, I promise."

And he'd keep it, too. Even if it killed him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Instead of the limo, for shopping Travis had decided to take the Cadillac. More trunk room, he'd said. Less conspicuous, Jamie had thought, and not yet comfortable with her role in this relationship, she was grateful for the opportunity to be low-key.

Except that a Cadillac with a uniformed driver standing on the sidewalk beside it was still very noticeable, especially when parked in front of the Dorsett Building at ten-to-eight on a Wednesday morning, when everyone was hurrying to get to work on time. Morning rush or not, a lot of people were stopping to look.

Jamie sat as slumped in the backseat as her tender bottom would allow. Despite the tinted windows and knowing no one could possibly see inside, she either turned her face away or shielded it with one hand whenever anyone she knew walked by. Travis was still inside cleaning out her locker and collecting her final check. By mid-day, anyone who cared would know she'd been fired. She'd never been fired before. It was horribly, horribly embarrassing. And she'd just as soon nobody saw her, at least until she spied Greta waddling up the sidewalk towards the Dorsett Building's busy glass entrance.

"Oh! Wait!" Jamie fumbled with the multitude of electronic buttons that decorated the door, hurrying to find the magical one that would lower the window for her.

The locks went up and down. The air conditioning gushed chillingly. Gentle music suddenly flowed from the back speakers. Classical. Naturally. Buckled in her car seat and chewing on one fist, Megan tipped her head up to look when the light in the cab turned on.

"How do you--?" Jamie glanced quickly out the window. Oh, to hell with it. Greta was almost in the Building as it was. She gave up and opened the car door, poking her head out and hissing, "Pst! Greta!"

The pregnant woman turned around. She smiled when she saw Jamie, then did a quick double-take as she noticed Ben and the car. Her hand froze halfway into a greeting wave and her smile faltered. But when Jamie beckoned, she came down the short steps and walked up to the curb. "He's only just now taking you home? Can I assume dinner went well?"

Looking up and down the street, Jamie opened the door wider. "Hurry. Get in before someone sees me."

Greta laughed. "Hurry, she says. Get in, she says." But she obligingly bent down and struggled into the back seat next to Megan. "I can't stay long. I'm almost late as it is."

"Don't worry," Jamie said dryly. "You won't get in trouble. I've suddenly got connections."

"I'd be careful with those connections, were I you. You don't want Megan to end up with a sibling." Greta took the baby's hand between two fingers and a thumb and shook it. "Isn't that right, sweet pea? Do you want a brother or a sister, huh?"

"Whatever you're thinking happened between us last night, it gets even better. Trust me." Jamie shut the door. "I'm not supposed to tell anyone, but if I don't talk about it soon, I'm going to explode! Can you keep a secret?"

"Are you kidding?" Greta spread her hands. "Who'm I gonna tell? I don't believe me as it is, and at least I know I'm not lying."

Jamie held out her left hand and wiggled her ring finger meaningfully. "You see what's not on this hand?" Greta's mouth dropped as Jamie said, "Well, it will be in about an hour. The jewelry store is our first stop after this."

"Girl! He proposed to you?"

"Proposed, married, yanked clean out of the dating pool. And that's after he got me evicted from my apartment."

"He got you evicted?"

"Because I wouldn't go out to dinner with him."

"I hate to say it, but I've seen your apartment. You could be living in a cardboard box right now, it would be a step up."

"Did I mention he fired me, too? Apparently, it's too embarrassing having a janitor for a wife." Despite her spanking, the loss of her job still stung, and it surprised her a little when Greta wasn't immediately sympathetic.

"I've seen his tax returns. Believe me, you don't need to work."

"But that's not the point!"

Greta let go of Megan's hand. "What is the point?"

Jamie flapped her hands helplessly in her lap. "I--I have no idea. I'm sorry. This is just happening so fast. I--I'm just confused."

"Do you love him?"

"Don't be silly! I didn't even know him before yesterday!"

"And you agreed to marry him already? He must be hell in the sack."

Blushing, Jamie softly confessed, "Every time he puts his hands on me, I forget what I'm doing."

"We've been friends for a while now, right?" Greta leaned over, laying her hand over Jamie's. "Do you trust me?"

After a moment, Jamie nodded. "Yes."

"Then take my word for it. You could do a whole lot worse than Travis. He's a decent guy."

"That's what I thought about Dale and look how that turned out."

"Travis isn't your ex. He's a good man. He'll take care of you."

Jamie looked out the tinted window, shaking her head as she did so. "The worst troubles of my life I got into because I trusted a man to take care of me. I don't need any more of that."

"Spoken like a true rabid feminist."

Jamie half-smiled, though it didn't last very long. "Here he comes."

At nine months pregnant, getting out of the back of the Cadillac took time. Greta was still working on it when Travis reached the car and held out his hand to help her.

"Thanks," she panted.

"Shall I push from this side?" Jamie offered.

"If you do, you'd better pray you never become pregnant again. I guarantee, for such a slight, there would be vengeance."

"My, we're feisty today," Travis commented mildly.

"Shut up and pull." Greta caught his arm and groaned as he pulled her out of the back seat. She smoothed her blouse down over her round stomach and gave it a fond pat. "Oh yeah, my boy better hope I'm never left alone with any of his future girlfriends. I swear, I'm going to build the biggest collection of naked baby pictures to embarrass him with."

"I believe you are late for work," Travis said, checking his wristwatch.

"Oh, haven't you heard?" she said airily. "I'm in good with the boss's wife. I can pretty much show up whenever I want now."

"Oh, really?" He raised an eyebrow, but before he could correct her, she poked him stiffly in the chest with one finger.

"You treat her nice, Mister Dorsett, or you and I are going to play a lovely little game I like to call Hide the Important Files and Phone Messages."

Travis stared down at her, arching both brows now. "Do, and you may find yourself playing another lovely little game I like to call Unemployment."

"I hear you're already playing that one with Jamie." Greta gave him a knowing look. "I mean it. You be nice."

Resting his arm on the hood of the car, Travis bent down to give the same look to Jamie. The corners of his mouth turned upwards as she

blushed, and he said, "Loose lips sink ships, sweetheart."

Apparently satisfied that her threat would be taken seriously, Greta dissolved into a more secretarial manner. "Will you be in the office at all today?"

"It's my honeymoon, Greta. I like to take at least one day off whenever I get married."

"Shall I reschedule your lunch with Morrison and Sons?"

"Yes. Also send a memo to Carter. I want him to get together with Personnel and hammer out a change in our company benefits. All employees, regardless of their hours, will be entitled to paid maternity leave. I want the first draft on my desk by Friday, and find out what it'll take to turn the first floor conference room into an employee child care center." He looked at Jamie again through the open car door. "I hear having one of those might be helpful."

His efforts won the first real smile he'd seen from Jamie since her spanking.

"What about the fund-raiser?" Greta asked as he climbed into the back of the Cadillac to sit beside his temporary new wife. "Should I send your apologies or try to find that second ticket you said you didn't need?"

"What do you think?" he asked Jamie. "Would you like to test your wings a bit?"

Her shoulders sagged and her smile faded. "I have to start somewhere, I guess."

"This isn't sink or swim," Travis said, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her comfortably closer. "Don't worry. I won't throw you to the sharks."

"At least not the oceanic kind," Greta muttered, winning a half-amused and half-irritated look from her boss.

She smiled sweetly and shut the car door, leaving Travis to shake his head as she waddled

away. "I'm beginning to believe I might have spanked the wrong woman this morning."

"If it'll make you feel better, you can give all my spankings to her from now on," Jamie offered helpfully.

"Nice try." Travis chuckled. "But don't hold your breath."

They spent enough money in one afternoon of shopping, Jamie was certain, to have completely funded a small country. About half of it went into the engagement ring Travis had selected, despite all of Jamie's protests. While not the most expensive piece of jewelry in the store, it was a stunning display of craftsmanship with a rock on it the size of Gibraltar. As far as Jamie could tell, the only thing a diamond that big was good for was getting caught on things. And since she'd wiled away the morning hours trying on clothes, she was not only well aware of that little known truth, but had been forced to add three freshly-snagged sweaters to her newly acquired wardrobe.

In addition to the ring, a small fortune was spent on clothes and necessary things for Megan, with another thirty-eight dollars going to lunch at a little hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant, where Jamie shamelessly indulged her lust for habanera peppers and spicy foods. She also indulged her love for flan. And though determined not to regret it, when the time came to slip into her evening gown--a slinky, sequined, black and backless dress that hugged her every curve all the way down to her ankles--she found herself eye-balling those old and stubborn pregnancy pounds that yummy Mexican custard desserts seemed fond of succoring.

The prospect of having to mingle with a room full of elegant and perfect Traveses was daunting enough on its own, but Jamie turned herself into a nervous wreck as she created a mental list of everything she might accidentally do to set herself

apart from the 'In' crowd. Or to destroy this phony marriage's credibility and Travis's prospects for winning that contract. Oh, just the thought of that made her even more anxious. After that, her makeup refused to go on right, her hair suddenly gained a Medusa's life of its own, and Travis, she discovered, lied like a rug.

"You look beautiful," he said when she came down the stairs.

"Your nose is going to grow if you keep that up." She turned so he could help her into her new coat.

"And if you keep that up, young lady," he murmured near her ear, hot and seductive and threateningly all at once, "then your bottom is going to glow." His hands gently squeezed her shoulders. "Shall we try this again? You look lovely."

Was it the reference to another spanking or his hands on her that made her breath catch in her throat? A warm surge of pleasure helped to calm the nervous butterflies within her. He didn't have to compliment her, but it felt nice that he cared enough to say it and his attention made her smile. "Thank you."

He squeezed her shoulders again. "Let's go."

After dropping Megan off with a babysitter, on the way to the charity party, Travis told her what to expect. "Most people don't like to argue, as much as they wish to sound knowledgeable. So, if you are asked a question or find yourself required to offer an opinion, simply smile and say, 'I'm not sure, what do you think?' We may not always be together, but I'll try not to leave you on your own for too long. Enjoy what they serve you tonight; it's costing me ten thousand a plate."

"Holy cow!"

"No, I believe fish or chicken is more likely, but it's all for a good cause. The money is earmarked to help renovate the Long-Term wing at the Children's Hospital. It needs to be done, I have the money to help, and the publicity is sometimes worth the trouble of attending these highly over-rated and

mostly boring functions. However, it always pays to be on your best behavior, so no fidgeting, don't show your fear and above all else, remember, we love each other madly."

"No fidget, no fear," she parroted. "Madly in love. Got it." Jamie smoothed her hands over her stomach, then abruptly switched to the rear-facing seat to knock on the driver's window. When Ben rolled it down, she said, "Quick, Ben, pull over!"

"Don't you dare get sick in the back of my car," Ben told her, immediately hitting his blinker and pulling off onto the soft gravel shoulder.

Travis reached for her. "Jamie, are you all right?"

"Stuff me in the trunk," she told him desperately. "Now. Before it's too late! I just know if I go, we'll never pull it off."

Ben looked at her in the rearview mirror, then shook his head and pulled back onto the road.

"Come here, sweetheart." Taking her hands, Travis pulled her back onto the seat beside him. "I'm not introducing you to the Spanish Inquisition. It'll be all right."

"I'll embarrass you; I just know it. I'll do or say something..."

"Don't worry," he said soothingly. "If worse comes to worst, I'll simply kiss you insensible before the entire assemblage. They'll all be scandalized, of course, but there are few social faux pas that can outlive a good gossip kiss."

Jamie popped her thumbnail into her mouth.

He removed it before she could start chewing. "I believe that falls under fidgeting, sweetheart."

"They're going to take one look at me and know I'm a fake."

"They'll take one look at you and fall hopelessly in love," Travis assured her. Like I did, was on the tip of his tongue, but he bit it back. She didn't need to hear that anyway. She was already smiling at him.

"Flatterer."

"She walks in beauty, like the night, of cloudless climes and starry skies; and all that's best of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her eyes."

Her smile turned soft. "Who said that?"

"Lord Byron." Those blue eyes of hers were going to be his downfall. So wide and uncertain and fixed so trustingly on him; he tried to put her mind at ease. "Tonight is nothing to be afraid of. It's a lot like school. The men gather in groups and hold 'My Car is Faster Than Your Car,' 'My Lawyer Can Beat Up Your Lawyer,' 'My Manly Attributes Are Larger and Brasser Than Your Manly Attributes' debates. The women discuss whatever it is women talk about when they get together, all the while listening for juicy gossip or tidbits of useful information. Deals are garnered at these functions and contacts can often be made. It's like a very expensive schoolyard game of grab the flag, only the teams aren't always clearly defined. But it does have one useful function: the people we meet tonight will spread the news of our marriage to all the right ears. Life," he said, as the car turned into the long and secluded driveway to a white-pillared mansion, "is all about advertising."

Parking attendants opened the car door for them and directed Ben on where to park. They followed a velvet carpet past a crash of reporters and flashing camera lights, and up a short flight of steps, where they paused at the door while Travis handed his invitation to a security man.

"Travis, darling! You came!" The woman who came sweeping through the door at them, arms held open in greeting to clutch Travis's shoulders, was one of the most stunningly beautiful women Jamie had ever seen. It was in her manner and her bearing almost more than her appearance, for she was also sixty if she was a day. Her blue-grey hair was neatly coiffed atop her head, and the dazzling red dress fit her body in a way that made Jamie positively green with envy.

"How wonderful that you came," she said, turning her face to one side in invitation. "Usually you only send a check."

"I had no choice," Travis said as he bent to kiss her cheek. "Your beauty is too intoxicating, Rachael. I found myself in withdrawal."

"Flattery will get you absolutely everything, darling. But of course you know that, don't you?"

As Travis let go of Rachel, he wrapped an arm around Jamie's waist, tucking her into a warm and comfortable half-embrace. "Rachael, may I introduce my wife, Jamie."

The matronly woman's smile faltered slightly. "Jamie, dear, it's wonderful to see you, too, but, darling, Max and Marsha are already here. You never RSVP, you know. Had I but an inkling that you'd actually come, I would never have invited them..."

"It's all right," Travis soothed. "I have no intention of allowing Jamie to be shredded in the claws of either viper."

"Shredded?" Jamie looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Neither will I, darling. I'll not tolerate such a display of bad manners, not at one of my parties." She then smacked him in the chest with the back of her hand. "And that, dear boy, is for daring to marry without so much as sending me an invitation." Looping an arm through Jamie's and leaving a smiling Travis to trail behind them, Rachael walked her into the well-lit ballroom, where a good hundred people had already assembled. "Stick with me, my dear. I'll introduce you to absolutely everybody."

Though he wasn't always able to stay right by her side, Travis did his best to keep an eye on Jamie. And as the evening progressed, he saw proof again and again of how right he'd been to make her his wife. Her open, honest face was refreshing and disarming when compared to the cloud of insincerity and cynicism that hung over many of the attendees.

Even her lingering air of nervousness had a certain charm. And he was not alone in noticing.

As Rachael passed by him at one point, she said, "Enchanting girl, Travis. You have rekindled my faith in your taste in women."

Despite Jamie's earlier nervousness, there were moments when she actually seemed to enjoy herself. He happened to be with her when they met Bill Cosby, the event's entertainment.

Afterwards, Jamie'd grabbed his arm, squealing into his shoulder as she did an incredibly unsophisticated little dance. "I just met Bill Cosby!"

Travis couldn't help but laugh. "Tom Cruise is over by the bar. Would you like me to introduce you?"

She squealed again, but before they could make their way over, Travis was waylaid by a business associate and Rachael arrived to whisk Jamie off for a second round of introductions to a few late-comers.

It was while Travis was still engaged in a polite but somewhat less than interesting debate on the possible ramifications of a merger between two lumber rivals, Marquis Mills and Cole, Barker, and Hemmingway, that Travis looked up to see Marsha and Jamie standing together. The strained look on Jamie's face put an abrupt end to his conversation.

"Excuse me." Travis disengaged himself from his two associates and quickly made his way over to his wife and ex.

He skirted the dance floor and dodged Max, who tried to plant himself in Travis's path, in time to hear Marsha say, "...regular Cinderella, aren't you? I guess after a lifetime of poverty, one look at his money would be enough to tempt anyone, despite his little eccentricities. Or hasn't he beaten you yet?"

"Congratulations, sweetheart," Travis announced as he stepped between them. "You've just met Marsha, the only snake in North America more venomous than the Western Coral."

There was absolutely no expression on Jamie's face as she stared at Marsha, then turned to look at Travis. "Okay. I see why you slept with it. But why did you marry it?"

"I plead insanity," Travis said. "Those baby blue eyes did me in. They said she was sweet, kind and faithful. And, of course, they lied."

"Perverted fuck," Marsha said with false sweetness and walked back to join her husband.

"It's a filthy mouth," Travis said as he led Jamie to a less hostile area. "But it was very good at some things."

"Seriously? You married her because she had blue eyes and gave good head?"

At Jamie's dry look, he said, "I was young and stupid, and I'm only human. You asked my reasons, I'm being honest."

"That's sad. At least I married Dale because I thought I was in love with the son of a--"

Travis kissed her. Suddenly. Thoroughly. "I've had my fill of foul-mouthed wives," he said huskily, his tone both seductive and menacing. "Either you mind your tongue, my love, or I'll mind it for you. And I don't think you'll like my preferred method."

"All right, darling, break it up." Rachael swept up to them, regally. "We already have a show planned for dinner. And since the bedrooms upstairs are off-limits, I insist you both behave yourselves until you get home." She heaved a dramatic sigh. "Newlyweds."

Linking an arm through each of theirs, she stirred them towards the dining hall and winked at Jamie as she said, "Your husband is notorious for his generosity, though only when the mood strikes him. What are our chances, do you think, dear, of putting him in a mood to significantly lighten his bank book?"

"Maybe if we put Marsha under his section of the table?" Jamie said sweetly, pointedly ignoring the warning look Travis gave her.

The dinner was delicious, Bill Cosby was wonderfully funny, Rachael--as she spoke about the needs of the ill-children--tearfully moving, and Jamie spent five thousand dollars of her own money (or what would be her own money just as soon as Travis gave it to her) to renovate the Children's Hospital on Sand Point Way. In company such as this, five thousand was probably pocket change, but she'd never spent that much on anything before in her life and it felt very liberating to do so.

She didn't know how much Travis gave Rachael, but the smile she graced him with afterward and the wink she tossed at Jamie, suggested it must have been a handsome sum. As Travis was putting his wallet back in his coat pocket, Jamie made a discrete show of lifting the table cloth.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Just checking."

"Are you jealous of my ex?"

Jamie shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't made up my mind yet."

"Don't be. You are by far the better woman." As the orchestra began to play, Travis asked, "What are my chances of enticing you to dance?"

"Actually, I need to, um..." Jamie made powder-puff dabbing motions at her nose.

"Bathroom?"

"Please."

He pointed back to one of the ballroom entrance's. "Back out that way, turn left and it's just beyond the stairs."

"Thanks. Be back in a few."

Dancing. It had been forever since she'd last been dancing with a man. Jamie hurried off to find the ladies' room so she could get back as quickly as possible.

The bathroom was lovely, decorated in off creams and gold fixtures and was obviously meant to accommodate large gatherings for it had four sinks and six stalls, much as a restaurant or movie

theater might. Though Jamie was alone when she first walked in, as she made herself comfortable in one of the stalls, she heard the bathroom door open and two other women joined her.

"Bought and paid for," Jamie heard Marsha saying. "That's what he told Max."

And another woman tsked, "God, he must be getting desperate."

Jamie felt her insides run cold. Were they talking about her?

"If I had hair like that, I'd dye it."

The second woman snorted as she stepped into the stall next to Jamie's. "If I had a butt that wide, I wouldn't be displaying it in that dress. Black is slimming, but it's not a miracle worker."

"Guess they thought flashy clothes might help convince everyone she's something other than a fraud."

A second bathroom stall door closed, the lock turned, and Jamie left the bathroom before either woman emerged again. Her cheeks were burning and her chest felt tight. She almost couldn't catch her breath.

Fraud.

Bought and paid for.

Could Travis have said that? He must have, nobody else knew.

Jamie felt the burning sting of tears. So much for discretion. She shielded her eyes with one hand as she hurried past the ballroom and the security guards and hastened outside.

"Ma'am?" one of the valets asked. "Would you like your car brought around?"

"No." Jamie blinked rapidly, trying her best not to cry in front of him. "Can I, um, get a cab, please?"

"Darling," Rachael stated, unexpectedly appearing beside Travis at the bar. She looked up at him unsmiling. "Your new bride just hustled past me

with watery eyes. She was headed for the driveway. Damage control might be in order." The last few words she had to call after him, because Travis was already heading for the door.

He passed the security guards in time to see Jamie duck into the back seat of a cab. He didn't get down the steps in time and he only just resisted the urge to call after her. There were enough people looking at him curiously as it was.

"Get my car," he told another valet. When he turned around, it was to see Marsha standing in the doorway.

She smirked. "Lose something?"

His jaw clenched; his hand fisted. He glared at her, but couldn't trust himself to say anything without losing his temper and making the situation worse.

When Ben drove the limo up to the curb, Travis didn't wait for anyone to get the door for him. "Home. Hurry."

Ben ducked his head, looking up the steps for Jamie. "Oh dear," he said.

They got two speeding tickets on the way home. While they were waiting for the policeman to finish writing out the second, Jamie's cab passed them on the road. She'd stopped to get Megan, Travis realized. Then covered his eyes with his hand as he also realized that he hadn't given her a door key.

Sure enough, there was Jamie sitting on the top front porch step, shivering in her backless fifteen hundred dollar dress, having apparently forgotten her coat at the party, holding a sound asleep Megan wrapped in a blanket on her lap, and with an irate taxi driver idling in the driveway.

Travis went up the cabby's window and bent down. "Did she pay you?"

"What do you think I'm still waiting here for?" the man snapped back. "My shift ended ten minutes ago."

Travis pulled out his wallet and paid the fare plus some. "The extra's for you. I apologize for the inconvenience; that was my fault."

"Yeah well..." the driver looked at his tip, his irritation fading as he studied the bills. "Hey, thanks. Now I'm sorry I yelled at her."

"Quite all right." Travis patted the door of the cab and put his wallet away. He took his coat off as he headed for the porch, and without a word, draped it around her shoulders. Then he fished his house keys out of his pocket.

"I didn't have any money to pay the driver," she said softly.

"I know." He opened the door and motioned her inside. "We'll fix that first thing tomorrow. For right now, why don't you go put Megan to bed and we'll do our talking upstairs. All right?"

"I'm very tired," Jamie said woodenly. "I'm going to bed."

As she started up the stairs, Travis closed the door, locked it and said, "If you go to bed before we talk, I will drag you out of it."

"Fine. Whatever you say. I'm bought and paid for anyway, I guess you can pretty much do whatever you want with me."

"I beg your pardon?" Travis followed her up the stairs. "What did you say?"

"You heard me." She turned down the hall, carrying Megan to the lavender room. The brand new crib they had bought that morning had already been assembled and was waiting with freshly made up sheets, Sesame Street blankets and a passel of plush, stuffed animals.

"Says who?" Travis asked, stopping in the doorway.

"You, apparently."

"I beg your pardon?" Travis repeated, arching both eyebrows in surprise. "I never said that."

"Then how did she know?" Jamie asked. "She's telling everyone I'm a fraud, and that you told Max I'm bought and paid for."

Her voice cracked, but she didn't look at him. Instead, she covered Megan with the blankets and tried to leave the room.

"I never said that. Not only would I not tell Max the time of day, but I have more respect for you than that."

"If she was making it up, she knew exactly what to say." Jamie turned the light off and squeezed between the doorway and him, the sequins on her dress scraping the threshold as she did her best not to touch him.

"Hold it right there." Travis caught her arm, halting her in the hallway. "Look at me."

She stared straight ahead at her bedroom door.

"Look at me, Jamie." When she finally obeyed, there were stubbornly withheld tears glistening in her eyes.

"I'm very tired," she whispered shakily. "I want to go to bed."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly. "I'm sorry you were hurt."

She started to cry. Though her hands hung limp at her sides and she didn't hold him back, she didn't pull away from him, either. Travis found that an encouraging sign.

"Come here." He started to pull her towards his end of the hall.

Jamie suddenly dug in her heels. "No! I may be feeling fragile, but I'm not so fragile that you can sweet talk me into your bed!"

"Make no mistake, woman. When I finally do take you to my bed, I doubt I'll have enough self-restraint left for sweet talking. It's much more likely that I'll simply throw you down upon the pillows and ravish you like a warmonger. Now come on."

She sniffed, but when he lightly tugged her arm, she meekly followed him. "Why are we going to your room then?"

"Because if I spank you in your room, your kicking and fussing might wake Megan."

Not only did she dig her heels into the carpet, but Jamie grabbed one-handed for the banister that overlooked the stairs. She wailed, "I don't want another spanking!"

"I know." Travis stopped pulling and gave her a knowing look. "But you've earned one, you need one, and you're going to get one."

"But your spankings hurt!"

"You left Rachael's party without a word to anyone. If she hadn't seen you go, I'd probably be going room to room right now looking for you. Yes, this is going to hurt."

"Nooo!" Jamie grabbed the banister with both hands.

"Sweetheart, if I have to throw you over my shoulder like a sack of flour, your backside will be blistered long before you leave my room."

Instead of winning her obedience, she surprised him with instant petulance. "You should think twice before committing yourself to a job that huge. Hell, it'll be a challenge just to get my wide-load butt through the damn door!"

His jaw dropped. He caught hold of her and, before it even registered what he was doing, Jamie let out a shriek as he abruptly bent her over the banister. His palm beat a rapid tattoo all over the upthrust curve of her heart-shaped bottom so beautifully revealed by the form-fitting dress. The sequins hurt his hand, but he took comfort in knowing they probably weren't doing her backside a lot of good, either.

He lay two dozen hearty slaps to his vulnerable target, then yanked Jamie back up, spun her around to face him and, bracing a hand on the banister to either side of her, gave her his best quelling stare.

"Do not," he growled, "take the words of that viper to heart."

"Oh!" Jamie grabbed her bottom with both hands and the sequins of her gown rasped as she frantically tried to rub out the fire he'd built without hardly trying.

"Mine is the only opinion that should matter to you, and I find you very beautiful. Is that understood?"

She nodded, wide-eyed.

"Say it."

In a show of ill-thought-out and childish rebellion, she muttered, "I find you very beautiful."

The very small smile he indulged her with somehow made him look even more cross. "My spanking collection does include a medium-sized paddle. The wood has a natural, dark cherry-red stain to it, much the same color your bottom will be when I get through with it."

"You find me very beautiful," Jamie said contritely.

"You are seductive. Say it."

"I'm seductive."

"Appealing."

"I'm appealing," she repeated.

"I can barely keep my hands off you under the best of circumstances." When Jamie opened her mouth, he said, "You don't have to repeat that, but you do need to know it. I am very attracted to you, Jamie. If by some miracle we do make it through the next two years without consummating our marriage, it won't be from a lack of desire. Do you believe that?"

Jamie nodded, and he leaned towards her, bringing his stern face even closer. Her eyes widened and she held her breath uncertainly.

"If I ever hear you refer to yourself as a 'wide-load' again," he said darkly. "You will not sit down again--ever--for the rest of your life. Now," his head tipped slightly to the right, "do you believe that?"

The tone of his voice froze her hands mid-rub. "Yes," she squeaked.

"Good." He released the banister and straightened. "Go into my room, find yourself a nice little corner, and put yourself in it. Dress up. Bottom bare. I will be there in exactly two minutes to engage you in a very thorough, very one-sided

discussion on how you could better have dealt with tonight's situation."

Jamie looked dismayed. "But you've already spanked me."

"That was for your self-degrading comment." With the utmost solicitation, he asked, "Would you like an additional spanking for disobedience? Bear in mind, you still have one coming for having left the party without me. For how many days do you want to be sitting on pillows?"

Once more wide-eyed, Jamie stared up at him. "I don't."

"Then what should you be doing right now?"

Her shoulders drooped. Head down, rubbing her bottom the whole way, Jamie shuffled reluctantly into his bedroom.

She paused briefly in the open doorway, looked around, then sighed and trudged into the vacant corner between the dual walk-in closets and the master bath.

He watched as she fumbled under her gown to lower her panties to half-mast. Then, realizing that retaining her modesty would be impossible; she gathered the glittering folds of her dress and raised them to the tops of her thighs.

"Higher," he called from the hallway.

She slowly bared the lower portion of her bottom, letting the rosy curves peek enticingly out at him from beneath the folds of her evening dress.

"Higher, Jamie," he said again, and with a sigh, she hung her head and raised the back of her gown all the way to her waist.

"Now, all the way into the corner."

Slowly, she bent forward and daintily pressed her nose to the crease where the two walls met. She heaved another forlorn sigh, then sniffled sadly, his red-headed siren, penitent in her pose, waiting for the heavy hand of fate to finally have done with her.

Half-sitting on the banister, Travis checked his watch to mark the time, then looked at his tender

hand. His palm was flushed and tender, and would likely be sore tomorrow. But as far as he was concerned, the sight of her well-warmed bottom was more than worth a little discomfort.

When he stood up, her bottom clenched nervously and she tipped her head as she listened to him. Smiling and shaking his head, Travis unbuttoned his shirt cuff to roll his sleeve up over his muscular forearm and past his elbow.

After exactly two minutes, he walked into his bedroom to attend to his darling wife, waiting apprehensively in her chosen corner.

CHAPTER SIX

Travis sat on the foot of his bed, a bare-bottomed Jamie straddling his lap. Her head was cushioned on his shoulder. He could feel her soft breath against his neck, and her underwear still dangled from her right ankle. She had one hand tucked beneath her chin in the most charming of fashions, having cried herself to sleep in his arms some time ago. Her eyes were red rimmed. So was her nose. There were tears drying on her face. She was beautiful.

And he was decided. He was keeping her.

She fit in his arms like she was made for him. Her legs were draped over his with her toes barely touching the carpet, and he could feel the hot little core of her burning through his pants and into his leg.

"You're mine," he said softly, stroking the gentle slop of her back, his fingers trailing all the way down to the curve of her hot bottom.

She made a soft whimpering sound when he cupped her there, but he knew she was still sound asleep and hadn't heard him. The noise wasn't an objection to his comment, but just leftover sobs and hiccups that hadn't yet faded away.

He angled his head to kiss her forehead, then picked her up and carried her down the hall to her bedroom. It would have been so easy to keep her in his bed for the night. He would have loved the chance to hold her while he slept. To see her first thing in the morning, her hair mussed, her eyes and smile both sleepy as she looked at him. But even a knight in tarnished armor knew how to be chivalrous once in a while.

His tarnished armor was abruptly down-graded to rusty as he lay her in her bed and found himself engaged in a short but heated mental debate over what to do next. Leaving her to sleep in that sequined evening gown probably wasn't the most comfortable thing he could do, but the very thought

of undressing her made his mouth run dry, his pulse race, and his hands shake.

She was exhausted, he told himself sternly. She was also asleep. Only a man without morals would take advantage of a sleeping woman.

But it was a fifteen hundred dollar dress.

It looked stiff.

It was probably scratchy.

Maybe pokey even. And uncomfortable.

And it was also backless, so there would be no bra.

And did he mention it was a fifteen hundred dollar dress?

Oh for heaven's sake, here he was, a once married and now divorced man, acting like an adolescent boy trying to peek down his first blouse! How childish, he scolded himself.

Though hardly a playboy lover by any stretch of the imagination, neither had he spent his younger years as a monk. Admittedly, it had been a while, but he was pretty sure he could still provide an accurate description of the female anatomy. And thanks to Megan's demanding feeding schedule, as well as Jamie's own charming style of misbehavior, he could even give a fairly good description of what Jamie looked like.

Not to mention what she felt like, bent across his lap, kicking and wailing under the application of his strong palm.

Mm, what she tasted like. Passionate kisses exchanged in the car under the guise of practice.

"That's it," he muttered and did an abrupt about face. He headed out the door while he could still walk in relative comfort, but he got not more than two steps down the hall before he spun back around and returned to Jamie's bedside.

He was being silly.

He gently stripped the evening gown from her uncooperative limbs and lay it across the back of a cushioned chair, tucked up to her mirrored dressing table. That was as far as his chivalrous side went.

One look at those breasts with their pert, round tips stiffening in the open air, at the neatly trimmed proof of her natural red-headedness further on down her shapely torso, and at those black garters and the stockings that hadn't needed to be removed to bare her for her spanking, and the black knight in him sprang right to the forefront.

He'd heard it said, if you've seen one, you've seen them all. What a load of twaddle. Whoever said that had obviously never seen Jamie, or he'd have kept his mouth shut. She was a sensual feast just waiting to be devoured. Travis smiled; she was also snoring softly. Well, with everything else that he liked about her, he could even live with that.

He tucked the blanket in around her shoulders, and Jamie woke up enough to roll onto her stomach, hug her pillow closer, and sigh. Cold shower number two, coming right up. He clicked the light off and left the room.

As long as I'm here, he thought and ventured into Megan's room as well. Like mother, like daughter, she was also sleeping on her stomach. And on her knees, he noticed, with her diapered bottom sticking up in the air and her thumb in her mouth, though she wasn't sucking at the moment. Her red hair on the white sheets was a startling contrast. And Travis stroked the baby fine locks, lightly so as not to wake her, before tucking her kicked-off blanket back around her.

Yes, he was decided all right. He was keeping them both.

The next day, Travis joined the ranks of fatherdom everywhere. During his lunch break, he took Jamie and Megan to a photo gallery. Megan sat on Jamie's lap, Jamie perched on his knee, and with him holding them both, when the photographer snapped the picture, they looked just like any other happy family smiling out of the gallery of frames that decorated the walls.

By the end of lunch, he had six photos in his wallet: four of Megan, one of mother and daughter, grinning cheek-to-cheek, and crowning the stack, the photo of the three of them together. It was the first time in his life that he'd ever carried a picture of anyone in his wallet. Well, other than his driver's license, of course. He pulled it out from behind the plastic cover and studied the picture. Stiff posture. Formal smile. Expired renewal date.

Oh, bother.

On the way back to his office, on a whim he stopped at Greta's desk. He stuck his hand out, "Hello, my name is Travis Dorsett."

Greta looked up from her computer, blinked at him once, then handed him his phone messages. "Your three o'clock pushed his meeting to three-thirty."

"Fine, fine. Here, pretend you don't know me for a minute." He shifted the messages to his other hand and extended his arm again. "Hello, my name is Travis Dorsett. And you are?"

She gave him an odd look, then swiveled her office chair around and went back to her typing.

"You aren't cooperating very well."

"I don't talk to strange men," she said without turning around.

"Greta," he warned.

"All right, all right. Geez, I hate it when you use that tone." She shook his hand. "Hi ya, Travis. I'm Greta. Gosh, you're a hunky-lookin' stud of a man. Why don't you buy me a drink, I'll play footsie with you under the table, and we'll see where this ends up?" She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

His hand flopped to his side as he glared. "You're a married woman."

"Old What's-His-Name never has to know."

"You're also nine months pregnant."

"More like twelve," she muttered dryly.

"I refuse to be a contributor to fetal alcohol syndrome, however I might consider buying you flowers, when and if you ever decide to having this

child before it's time for him to graduate high school."

"Maybe if I knew what you wanted me to say," Greta suggested, "this would go faster."

"Ask me if I have children."

Bracing her elbow on the desk, cupping her chin in her palm, she dutifully asked, "Do you have children, Mister Travis Dorset, whom I've never met before in my life?"

"Why, yes I do." He flipped open his wallet to show her the new photos. "A beautiful little girl, in fact."

Greta looked obligingly, then cast a smile up at him. "You are utterly besotted, aren't you?"

"Don't be silly." He snapped his wallet shut. "She's barely six months. That truly would be robbing the cradle, and men have been known to go to jail for that."

"Wrong red head, and you know it."

"No one uses words like 'besotted' any more."

"You still hear 'head over heels' from time to time. Or how about 'useless in love'?"

"How about unemployed?" Travis countered. "Don't bait me, woman. I eat people like you for breakfast."

"You can talk as ogish as you like, but you're a pastry and we all know it."

He frowned. "I am not a pastry."

"A crusty exterior with a warm, gooey, cream puff hiding inside."

"You're one word away from cream-puffing yourself out of a Christmas bonus."

"So sayeth the éclair."

There was just no talking to some people. Travis went back into his office and spent the rest of the afternoon dictating memos in revenge.

And still, for about two days his life was as good as the photos in his wallet suggested. It was both strange and fascinating to go home from work, not to an empty house and the re-heatable dinner left by his rarely seen housekeeper, Lucy, but to Jamie

and Megan, his instant Shake-N-Bake family, even if only still a 'Let's Pretend' one. Having them in his life made Travis about the happiest man--if not in the world--well then certainly in all of the Greater Seattle area.

The Seattle Times posted an announcement of their marriage in the Social pages. He received calls and cards from a number of well-wishing business associates, and an enormous fruit basket from Rachael. Unfortunately, it was also about then that he lost his status as the only man in the world to suddenly decide he couldn't live without Jamie.

Travis came home from work on Monday, day six of their marriage, to find a strange car parked in the driveway and leaking oil on his asphalt.

Ben took one look and said, "Whoever it is, they're going to clean that up before they leave."

Travis's smile lasted only halfway up the porch, which was when he heard Megan crying. Although perhaps screaming might have been a more accurate description. At the top of her lungs, no less. He opened the door to hear Jamie, in the living room, saying, "I told you, she doesn't like strangers. Here, let me have her back--"

"I'm not a stranger," claimed the blonde man before her. He held Megan to his shoulder, twisting his torso away from Jamie's outstretched hands as he said, "I'm her father. She can get used to me."

Travis shut the door, perhaps a little harder than he meant to, and they both turned around to look at him. Megan was the only one who didn't fall immediately silent, though she did stretch out her arms for him as he slowly crossed into the living room.

'Help' was all over Jamie's face when he looked at her, but then she lowered her eyes and flopped down to sit on the end of the sofa with her hands in her lap.

"This him?" the blonde man asked her.

Jamie didn't answer him, but instead looked up at Travis apologetically and said, "This is Dale."

"Hi," Dale said and stuck out his hand in greeting.

The Business Man's Code was every bit as rigid and uncompromising as the Schoolboy's Code. Although entirely acceptable to wage fearsome battle with a man, to the death if need be, rules of the Boardroom dictated manners first.

Travis firmly clasped Dale's hand in his. His amber eyes locked on the blonde man's blue ones and never left them, even as Travis neatly stole Megan from his one-armed grasp and handed her back to her unhappy mother. Megan quieted down almost immediately. "Jamie, darling, why don't you bring Mister..."

"Evans," Dale said, pulling his hand from Travis's and flexing his fingers once

"Mister Evans and I a beer."

Jamie stood up, turned toward the kitchen, but paused. She looked back at him a little confused. "I don't think there is any beer. We have wine..."

"Use the car, sweetheart, and take Megan along. Ben will drive you."

Sticking his thumbs in his jeans' pockets, Dale looked down at his feet and chuckled, though there was very little amusement in the sound.

Jamie looked from him to Travis, then back again uncertainly. "What are you going to do?"

"Get the beer, Jamie," Travis said firmly, his steady gaze still locked on Dale.

Jamie shifted Megan to her hip, collected her purse from the closet and slowly walked to the door.

"Something light, please," he called after her. "I don't want to ruin my appetite for supper."

Despite one worried backwards glance, Jamie left without further argument, and Travis waited without speaking until he heard the sound of car doors closing. He walked to the living room window, parting the white drapes with the backs of two fingers to watch as his limo crept out of the driveway and headed back towards Seattle. Letting

the curtain fall, Travis took off his coat and began to loosen his tie.

Scoffing, Dale held up his hands and took a cautionary step back. "What are you doing? You want to take a swing at me?"

"I want to get comfortable," Travis said, draping his coat and tie over the back of the white leather easy chair. "I just got off work."

"Oh. Right."

Gesturing to the matching couch, Travis said, "Sit down. We'll talk."

Dale looked at the white leather sofa, then arched a brow and half shook his head. As he sat, he said, "I wasn't expecting a friendly chat."

"This must be your lucky night. As circumstances would have it, we aren't about to have one." Travis took the chair across from the couch. He crossed his legs, braced his elbows on the cushioned armrests and folded his hands before him. Then he glared at Dale. "For the man who hurt my wife, for the thief who stole every last thing that might provide her some measure of comfort or security, for the coward who abandoned her to the bleak fate he engineered... I feel many things towards that man. Friendship is not among them. I am, however, prepared to be civil. At least until I find out what you want."

Dale offered a half shrug. "I'm just here to see my little girl."

"You had six months to visit Megan," Travis said. "Strange how your fatherly interest waited to blossom until after the Seattle Times announced our marriage."

"Maybe my timing's a bit off."

"Or maybe you think it's just right. Stop treating me like an idiot. Come out and say it: How much?"

Jamie's ex rolled his head back on his shoulders, casting his strange twist of a smile towards the ceiling. Then he looked at Travis again. "Twenty grand."

Travis didn't blink. "Fine. I will have the papers drawn up tonight. Be available tomorrow to sign them."

"What papers?"

"I am not a lending bank, Mister Evans," Travis said stonily. "This is a one time payment. In exchange for my check--"

"I don't do checks," the blonde man interrupted.

"Cash, then. The fiduciary means are not the issue. If you want money from me, you will relinquish your paternal rights and never attempt to contact Megan or Jamie again."

Drawing a deep breath, Dale leaned back on the couch and put his feet up on the glass table, crossing them at the ankles. "I don't think you--"

"Get your feet off my coffee table," Travis said coldly.

In the heavy silence that followed, both men studied the other. Finally, Dale lowered his feet to the floor. "I don't have to sign anything."

"And I don't have to give you twenty cents, much less twenty thousand dollars."

"Fine." Dale shrugged. "All I have to do is call my lawyer--"

"By all means. Here." Travis reached into his pocket for his cell phone and set it on the coffee table between them. "Use mine. You call your lawyer, I'll call my firm, and I guarantee you'll never set one foot in front of a judge. I will smother you in appeals and delays, and sink you so far into debt that you'll have to win the lottery to dig your way out. I understand the odds to be a two-hundred-and-fifty-billion-to-one. Good luck."

"You can't do that," Dale said, no longer smiling. "She's my kid. I've got rights."

"And I've got money. So don't think for one second that I will allow you to hurt Megan the way you've hurt her mother. It's not going to happen."

They glared at each other, and neither man moved.

"Fine," Dale growled. "Let's play hardball. I'll sign those papers, but not for twenty grand. If you want Megan, you'll pay fifty."

Again Travis didn't flinch. Coldly, calmly, he said, "I repeat, Mister Evans, this is a one time arrangement. After tomorrow, were I you, I'd take very good care never to let me see you again."

Far from smiling now, Dale said, "Suits me."

Travis called his law firm, the appointment was made for two o'clock the following afternoon, and he handed Dale the address. He then escorted Jamie's ex to the door and stood on the porch until the oil-leaking car pulled out of the driveway. It wasn't until his jaw began to ache that he realized he was clenching his teeth. When he stalked back inside to call his lawyers again, he slammed the front door behind him.

He had a good half hour to calm down before Jamie came home. Still sitting in the living room, he looked up when she opened the door. As though sensing the remnants of his sour mood, with Megan in arm and a grocery bag in the other, she crept into the house like a puppy under the threat of a rolled up newspaper.

"Are you mad at me?" she asked from the doorway.

"For what?" Travis replied. "You've done nothing to deserve my anger."

"I let him into your house." Jamie bit her bottom lip. "I didn't tell him to hit the road before you got home. I married him in the first place."

"Should I tar and feather you right away, or can it wait until after dinner? Tar takes at least forty-five minutes to heat thoroughly, and I am rather hungry."

Her mouth twitched into an uncertain half-smile. "After dinner will be fine... I guess." As if suddenly remembering the beer, she looked down at the plastic grocery bag she held. "Oh, I didn't know what you wanted to drink, so I got you something French and hard to pronounce. And a lime."

"Ah." He stood up and came to take the bag from her. As he lifted the perspiring bottle from its individually wrapped paper sack, he did his best to keep a neutral tone. "I didn't know the French brewed beer."

"Neither did I, but they make good wine, right? So they probably make good beer, too. Right?"

"I'm sure it will be delicious," Travis said. Note to self: for important occasions, don't let Jamie select the champagne. He read the label. "'Brewed in the traditional and authentic Corsican manner, with selective malts, slightly hopped, and chestnuts.'"

Jamie pointed to another spot half covered by his thumb. "No additives and preservatives."

"'The perfect compliment to hearty spicy foods, roasted games, and barbecues.' Barbecue. You know, I had an uncle who tried that once. He bought one of those patio units with which to master the manly art and proceeded to transform an unnaturally raw steak into the medium rare choice cut of meat that I am accustomed to. I watched him fill the bottom with charcoal, squirt it down with fluid, light a match, and the charcoal retaliated to being set on fire by burning his eyebrows off." Travis shook his head once. "Poor man was never quite right after that. Every time someone struck a match, he had flashbacks."

"Are you sure you don't have a sense of humor?"

"Positive. Any comments that might resemble your idea of humor are purely accidental, I assure you." He rotated the bottle in his hand to look at the back side of the label.

Jamie switched Megan from one hip to the other and watched him quietly for a moment. "Did I get the wrong kind? Should I take it back?"

He instantly hugged the bottle to his chest. "Interfere not between a man and his beer. I am simply savoring the moment and preparing my taste buds to--" he looked down at the label again,

"--enjoy this delectable and, I'm sure, flavorful import."

"Oh."

She looked only marginally convinced, and Travis took a deep breath. He supposed he was as prepared as he'd ever be. Oh Lord. It had a twist top.

He smiled at Jamie as he removed the cap, then held the bottle up in a kind of toast. "Here's to French beer."

He took a long, deep pull. Straight from the bottle, no less. Two to one, his parents were spinning in their graves.

"Is it good?" Jamie asked hopefully.

"Mm." He made himself swallow. "Just as I expected. Very hoppy." He patted her shoulder. "Thank you, sweetheart."

Addendum to previous note: Get Tums.

But it was worth it when she smiled, even though it didn't last very long. Jamie was as easy to read as a poem by Shel Silverstein. Travis knew the exact moment when Dale crossed her mind.

"How much does he want?" she asked.

"What makes you think he wants money?" Travis countered, forcing himself to take another swig from the bottle.

"Four months married to the son of a--"

His hard look stopped her mid-sentence. "Use that language in front of me, and I'll spank you. Use that language in front of Megan, and I will paddle your backside until even the thought of sitting down brings you to tears."

Though she dropped her eyes to the floor, he was beginning to recognize her mutinous expressions for what they were.

"Jamie," he warned.

"I won't say it," she said, and even managed to slip a note of repentance into her voice. Until she added, "But I'm thinking it real hard."

Travis struggled to maintain his stern look, though a smile lurked precariously beneath the

stony surface. "You know, I did make reservations for us at the Canlis tonight, but if you'd rather have rump roast, we could stay home."

She didn't mistake the reference. "No, thank you."

"Are you sure?" he asked, extremely solicitous. "It does require a bit of extra effort on my part, but I find the end result very appealing and well worth the trouble. Although for the same rump to suffer roasting three times in four days, instead of pink and tender, tonight it's likely to become extremely well done."

Jamie bowed her head and, with a bit more contrition, said, "I don't want any more rump roast. I'd much rather have carrots or potatoes or--I have no idea what I'm saying. I just don't want to spend the night sitting on pillows."

He kissed her forehead. "Good girl."

"Is it okay if I don't want to go out, either? I'm just not in the mood."

"We can stay home," Travis conceded.

"You don't mind?"

"Of course not, but you are not to worry any more about it. Trust me, everything will work out fine."

"Nothing involving Dale is ever fine." She shook her head. "Too bad I couldn't have figured that out before I married the--" her blue eyes flicked to Travis, who gave her a dark and meaningful stare. She cleared her throat. "--man."

"Do me a favor." Travis set the beer down on the nearest table. "I want you to go through your things and bring me every bill you have from the beginning of your pregnancy until the moment your ex-husband walked through our front door this evening."

Her face went strangely blank of emotion. "Are we going to sue him?"

"Nothing so crass, darling. We're simply going to help him fulfill his fatherly obligations."

"I don't want him back in my life," she said.

"He won't be," Travis assured her. "Trust me." He lifted Megan from her arms, turned her towards the stairs and gave her a pat to get her going. "Go get your bills."

He watched her climb to the second floor, waiting at the bottom of the staircase until she disappeared around the corner towards her bedroom. Grabbing the beer, he ducked into the kitchen with both it and Megan.

"No tattling," he told the bright-eyed baby as he poured the liquor down the sink.

Megan grinned as she covered her eyes with her hands for peek-a-boo.

By nine o'clock, Megan was tucked into bed, Travis was savoring sips of a nineteen-forty-six vintage cognac from a French beer bottle, and the frightening poverty of Jamie's old life was spread out across every inch of the kitchen table. It must have been a very grim experience.

Jamie had lost two of her five prenatal care bills, but the hospital invoice for Megan's delivery told a very sad story all its own. Thirty-four hours of induced labor had ended with a cesarean section, a two-day hospital stay for Jamie, four days for Megan, and expenses that had exceeded fourteen thousand dollars. When matched to her personnel records so he could tally missed wages, Travis discovered Jamie had stubbornly gone back to work three days after her surgery.

Or had it been desperation?

Just when he thought it wasn't possible for his opinion of Dale to sink any lower, Travis thought, shaking his head. He'd done more than abandon his wife and child, he'd callously walked away with Jamie's entire personal savings--three thousand dollars--and cashed out a five thousand dollar Visa limit and a two thousand dollar MasterCard.

A case of croup had caused a three hundred dollar midnight emergency room visit for Megan at

three weeks old. Thrush and dehydration sent her back for an overnight stay four months later, costing another fourteen hundred. There were orange repossession warnings, yellow eviction threats, overdue slips, collection attempts and a frightening mountain of overdraft notices from her bank; the stark realities of a young mother suddenly facing life very much alone and ill-prepared.

As Travis sorted each of the bills into stacks, Jamie sat across the table from him and said, "I don't want to look at this anymore."

He could hardly blame her. "After tonight, you won't have to."

"Why? Are you going to have him killed? Damn, you're good to me."

"Language, my blood thirsty little minx," Travis said, and gave her a knowing look. "Besides, I get my thrills evicting single mothers from their homes. I draw the line at murder. At the very least, I don't discuss it in front of witnesses."

"Some loving, doting husband you turned out to be."

He smiled and separated a thirty-days-late electric bill from two bank overdraft slips.

"Travis?" When he glanced up, she said, "Would it make you uncomfortable if I asked you to hold me?"

He discarded the bills and scooted his chair back from the table. Without hesitation, he beckoned to her. "Come here, sweetheart."

She was gnawing at her bottom lip as she came around the end of the table. "You don't mind?"

"Why would I?" He held out his hand and she took it, hers seeming very small in comparison. When he pulled her down, she curled up in his lap and lay her head on his shoulder.

She sighed softly when his arms enveloped her, mumbling against his lapel, "Why is it always the worst mistakes of your life that seem to haunt you forever and never go away?"

"I promise," Travis murmured close to her ear. "This is one mistake that will go away."

"Maybe for a year or two. Then he'll show up again."

"I seriously doubt he'll ever come here again," he assured her.

"No, he'll wait until I have a place of my own. Just as I'm getting my feet back under me, he'll suddenly show up and, like a vampire, suck me dry."

"If he tries, he'll wind up with a face full of garlic and holy water. Trust me to catch you, Jamie. I won't ever let you fall."

Jamie stared into space. "Travis?"

He stroked her long hair. "What?"

"I want to sleep in your bed tonight."

His hand froze at the small of her back.

"Make me forget he ever touched me," she said softly.

Which was how, on day six, their marriage of convenience became consummated. The difference between making love and having sex was indescribable. Perhaps Jamie only used him to help banish bad memories, but her touch set his soul on fire and her ardent responses as their bodies came together left him completely shaken. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so much in a woman's arms.

"Stay with me," he heard himself tell her. And though he meant forever, she probably thought he only meant the night, because afterwards she spooned up against him and fell right to sleep without a word.

He got out of bed, needing to leave before he woke her up and said something stupid, like 'I love you,' or 'I can't bear the thought of existing without you' or 'Marry me for real and stay with me for the rest of our lives.'

What would he do if she said 'no'?

It was entirely too possible. They barely knew one another. Theirs was a marriage based on

convenience, and other than turning to him for comfort, Jamie hadn't given any indication that she felt anything close to what he was feeling for her.

He pulled the sheet and blankets up to her shoulders so she wouldn't get cold. Wrapping himself in a bathrobe, Travis went back downstairs to finish sorting and tallying the mountain of debts that, until recently, Jamie had been forced to face alone. Maybe he wouldn't get to keep her, but neither would a man like Dale.

He had a vampire-repelling, wooden stake to build.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Travis arrived at the entrance to the Law Offices of Gregor, Montgomery, and Papachriston bright and early the next morning. He was five minutes earlier, in fact, than his lawyer, Dan Gregor, who pulled up in a yellow taxi cab. He sighed when he saw Travis and reached into his coat pocket for his keys.

"Latte?" Travis asked, extending one of the two cups he held.

"You called me at six, you called me at eleven, and then you called me at two. I know for a fact you didn't get as much sleep as I did, and yet you look," Dan glared at him over the top of his glasses and in a dead pan tone said, "perky."

"Really?" Travis bounced up and down twice on the balls of his heels. "You know, I actually feel rather good as well. Not bad for only three and a half hours sleep."

Dan took the proffered latte. "Vampire," he said, and opened the office door.

"Well, that and I had three cups of coffee in the car on the way over here."

It took most of the morning to get the proper paperwork completed. Jamie arrived at half past noon to sign some of them, although Travis could tell she wasn't fully comfortable with the idea. Her smile seemed weak, her attitude subdued. If he never saw her like this again, he decided, it would suit him just fine.

"I just don't see what good a restraining order is going to do," she told him. "I couldn't find him to serve him divorce papers. Who knows where he is now, or when I'll see him again."

"Oh I think I know where he's going to be," Travis said as Dan showed her where to sign. "Don't worry. He is going to get his copy of these in record time."

When it came time for her to leave, Travis escorted her back downstairs to the lobby. He really

must be besotted, he mused. When a man couldn't walk beside a woman without wanting to be closer, without holding her hand as they went--he shook his head at himself. 'Useless in love' was right.

"Thank you for the plant, by the way," Jamie said.

His eyebrows arched. "You've received it already?"

"The florist arrived just as I was getting ready to leave the house. No one's ever given me purple Hydrangeas before. They're very beautiful."

"Not half as beautiful as the sight I awoke to this morning," he told her.

"Aw." She playfully bumped shoulders with him as they walked through the lobby. "So much for 'no touching,' huh?"

"Do you want to go back to that?" he asked. He was surprised at how neutral he sounded. Especially when his instinct was to grab her, bend her under his arm and apply a volley of stern smacks, each punctuated by a sharp 'No', to the well-worn seat of her jeans.

After a moment, she looked up at him and smiled softly. "No. I don't."

He relaxed slightly.

"I know it's not forever," she said. "But I like the way it feels when you hold me in your arms."

It was right there on the tip of his tongue: 'I love you,' 'You're mine,' 'As of now, consider it for forever.' God only knows what he might have said, lost in those intoxicating baby blues, if she hadn't chosen that moment to lower her eyes and continue walking across the lobby.

"I'm sorry," she said when he caught up with her. "I probably shouldn't have said that. I'll make you uncomfortable."

"Why don't you let me worry about my own comfort level." He held the door for her. It was time to get back onto safer conversational grounds. "You've got enough to do worrying about your own."

"What does that mean?"

"I mean, I sent you flowers and you're not sneezing. You haven't broken out in hives. In fact, I'm beginning to suspect you might not be as allergic as you previously stated."

"No," she admitted sheepishly. "I'm not."

"And chocolates? You can imbibe freely of those as well, I suppose."

"Well," she winced slightly. "I do sometimes think about dieting. But I was telling the truth about the ocean. I really don't like oceans." She wrinkled her nose. "They smell like kelp."

"You told the truth about oceans; you lied about the rest."

"It sounds so wrong when you say it like that." Jamie peeked up at him through her lashes, but there was a twinkling hint of teasing in his eyes that belied the seriousness of his words. She held up her finger and thumb a scant inch apart. "Maybe I only lied this much."

"Naughty, naughty girl." He was careful to keep his tone solemn--if only mockingly so--enjoying her visual unease as she lowered her eyes again. "Whatever am I going to do with you?"

Twin spots of color pinkened her cheeks. Jamie cleared her throat, her gaze darting from him to Ben, who had gotten out of the driver's seat and was already coming around the car to open the door for her. "I, um..." she lowered her voice and for his ears alone said, "I can think of one or two things you could do. If you wanted to."

"Does it involve turning you face-down across my lap and paddling your little bare bottom until you're dancing over my knee?"

Her look turned a little worried. "Is it--I mean, are you going to do it very hard?"

"Jamie, my love." Travis stopped at the curb, turning as he did so and pulling her into his arms. "You are going to receive my total, undivided attention tonight, but I was thinking less about discipline and more about that slow, hot, erotic kind

you read so often about. The kind you wanted the first time, but which your behavior didn't warrant."

Jamie cleared her throat, picked an imaginary speck of fluff from off his lapel, and then brushed the area smooth with her hand. "Well, if that's what you think is necessary..."

"I do," he said. "In fact, I'm wondering if we ought not get a baby sitter for Megan. I wouldn't want your screams to frighten her."

That startled her, and she looked up at him with wide eyes.

"But you just said it wasn't going to be--" she broke off, her eyes darting just behind him to Ben, who stood on the sidewalk, holding the car door open and doing his best to be both invisible as well as oblivious to the entire conversation. She lowered her voice again. "--to be rump roast."

Travis leaned down. With his mouth just inches from hers, softly, silkily, he said, "It isn't going to be that kind of screaming." Then he kissed her, a brief but intimate taste of her that had Jamie's face matching the color of her hair by the time he was through.

"Oh," she said.

"My, what a becoming shade," Travis said. "I'll have to see if I can't get another aspect of your anatomy to match."

He kissed her once more, before Jamie climbed into the back of the car and Ben closed the door.

She must have been trying to figure out if he was serious or not, because as the car pulled away from the curb, Travis saw her turn in her seat to look back at him through the rear-view window. For her benefit alone, he made a show of slowly rubbing his hands together just to see her snap face-forward again and squirm in her seat. Travis chuckled all the way back to Gregor's third floor office.

In blatant contrast to Travis's early-bird preparedness and Dan Gregor's punctuality, Dale arrived twenty-three minutes late.

"Where's my money?" he asked as he came through the conference room door.

Travis sat at the table with his back to the window and facing the door. Dan Gregor was at the head of the table to his right, pouring an extra glass of water, which he set before the empty chair closest to Dale. A fourth man was unobtrusively two chairs down on Travis's left side. At a look from Travis, he picked up a briefcase and handed it across the table to him.

"We never actually discussed how you wished to receive payment," Travis said as he lay the briefcase flat on the table. He popped the latches and opened the lid. "I have your disbursement in hundred dollar bills." He lay a sizeable brick of them in the center of the table. "Or in fifties." He lay two more bricks of equal size a short distance from the first. "Or, if you'll forgive the presumption, an assortment of small, unmarked bills, which I believe better suits your mercenary purposes."

Travis turned the open briefcase around, displaying an assortment of tens and twenties, then leaned back, elbows on the armrests of his chair and hands folded before him. His expression one of stony indifference, he looked up at Dale and waited.

Dale closed the office door. For several long seconds, he stood staring at the money, then he sniffed loudly. Nodding, he pulled out the vacant chair and sat down. He gestured across the table at the smaller bills. "Do I get to keep the briefcase?"

"Sure," Travis said flatly. "Why not."

Dale kind of half laughed, shook his head once and then glared at Travis. "It must really suck being you."

"At some times certainly more than others," Travis said dryly. He gestured to the head of the table. "Allow me to introduce my chief council, Mister Dan Gregor."

The lawyer raised his head from his papers long enough to nod briskly, and Travis made the same gesture for the man at his left. "And this is Mister Todd Wilson..."

"I don't need to meet your lawyers," Dale said.

"Mister Wilson is my personal accountant, actually."

"Whatever." Dale rubbed his hands together. "Let's get this over with."

Dan slid a three-page contract across the table. Removing a pen from the inner pocket of his business suit jacket, he set it down on top of the stack. "Would you like me to explain the legalese?"

"I can read," Dale said shortly. Picking up the pen, he slid his finger down the page, skimming for the important words. "Me... Jamie and Megan... No more Daddy Dale. Like I ever wanted to be in the first place." He scoffed and turned the page. "You... Fifty thousand dollars." He stopped. "Less obligations and expenses. What does that mean? Who said anything about obligations and expenses?"

"You have an existing obligation to Megan as her sire--" Travis began, but Dale quickly cut him off.

"Sperm donor," he said tersely. "Let's call it what it was. And anyway, there's no telling if it was even my sperm that produced that rug rat. Any number of guys could be that kid's father. You've seen Jamie. Men look at her all the time. Girls like that don't know the meaning of 'faithful.' I was just idiot enough to stick a ring on her hand." He looked at Travis. "Must be something in the water."

Travis snapped to his feet so quickly that Dale shoved warily back from the table and Dan held up one hand. "Okay, let's calm down now..."

As much as he would have liked to reach across the table, grab Dale by his smarmy neck and squeeze, Travis grabbed the money instead. He began placing the stacks back in his briefcase.

"Hey!"

Dale made the mistake of reaching across the table to snatch at the last stack of fifties before it, too, disappeared, and Travis caught his wrist. He slammed Dale's hand down on the table. "She's not yours; you said so yourself. Why should I give you anything?"

"She's mine," Dale said quickly. "Jesus, all you have to do is look at her to tell. She's got my eyes."

"Then be a man," Travis growled. "Don't blame Jamie because you're too spineless to stand by your responsibilities."

He released Dale's captured wrist, and Dale fell back in his chair.

He immediately jumped up again, as though the seat had burned him, "I don't need this Dead-Beat Dad lecture! Are you going to pay me or not?"

"Are you going to sign?" Travis countered, throwing the last stack of fifties into his briefcase.

Staring first at him, then after the disappearing money, Dale picked up the lawyer's pen and turned back to the beginning of the contract. He initialed each section, then scribbled his signature at the bottom of the final page.

"You must have a serious Jones for redheads," he said, passing papers and pen back to Dan Gregor. "But fifty grand, hey. I can afford to be generous, right?"

"Minus obligations and expenses," Travis reminded. "You are going to pay back every penny you stole from Jamie's bank account and credit cards."

"We were married. Half of everything she had was mine to take."

"You didn't take half. You took all."

"And actually," Dan interrupted, "that's only true when you divorce, and if it's so determined by the judge presiding over your case. That wouldn't have included Jamie's savings account, since it was in existence prior to your marriage and you never had authority to access it. Technically, what you did was bank fraud."

"Banks frown on that," Travis said.

"The credit card companies aren't that happy with you, either," Dan continued. "The cards were also never in your name, and you don't get half the available balance upon divorce anyway."

"Felony," Travis drawled, as he sat back down again. "That's the legal term, I believe."

"Two counts on the credit cards, and one felony-one count of fraud with the bank."

"All right," Dale threw his hands up. "What the hell. I'll pay her back. Then we'll be square, okay?"

"Absolutely." Travis stood up. As he snapped the briefcase of money closed, the accountant slid a thin, white envelope across the table to Dale.

"What is this?" he asked. He looked up quickly as Travis lifted the briefcase off the table and starting towards the door. "Hey, where are you going?"

"To work. I've wasted enough of my day on you."

"That's my money!" Dale stood up, grabbing the envelope and shaking it at him. "I told you, I don't take checks!"

"Good for you," Travis said and opened the conference room door.

"That's a bill, Mister Evans," the accountant piped up cheerfully. "Once we deducted half of all Megan's medical and living expenses, Jamie's living expenses throughout her pregnancy, back-owed child support, the money you stole, plus the initial bounced check and banking fees caused when you emptied her bank accounts, that is. Now we could have turned the whole thing over to the courts at this point, but that route is more or less guaranteed to drag all parties through the system for at least six months and Mister Dorsett was concerned about missing his standing vacation appointments in the Bahamas, in which case he'd be so irritated that we'd be forced to have you audited."

Dale blinked.

"So we agreed to absorb the costs as a kind of long-term loan, which I'm sure you'll find quite reasonable, under the circumstances. This figure," he explained, taking the receipt from Dale's envelope and circling one of the items with his pen, "represents one year's worth of accrued interest charges--twelve percent," he added with a modest shrug. "Which I found ludicrous, considering your credit report, but Mister Dorsett insisted we keep these proceedings friendly. And that simply leaves some sundry legal expenses--my services, Mister Gregor's involvement, notaries, that sort of thing--and so!" He clapped his hands briskly together and leaned back in his chair. "You owe the Dorsetts one dollar and thirty-eight cents."

"What!"

"And, ah, considering the current state of your financial affairs," the accountant said diplomatically. "I'm sure you'll understand our position when I say that we don't take checks either."

"I expect you to settle your account in full before you leave here today," Travis said and walked out of the conference room.

"You God-damn cheat!" Dale shouted after him. He chased Travis through the open doorway and would grabbed his arm, but a man waiting in the lobby stepped between them and slapped a manila envelope into Dale's hand.

"Consider yourself served," the man said, while Dale stared at both him, Travis and then the envelope in turn.

"That would be the restraining order," Travis smiled faintly. "Wonderful timing."

"You son of a bitch."

"Be careful who you play hardball with." Travis poked the elevator's down button. "Some of us actually like the game. By the way, have you met Detectives Warst and Callahan?"

Dale froze. His face became an expressionless mask as he followed Travis's gesture. In the waiting area beyond the secretary's desk two plainclothes

officers were putting down their coffee cups and getting up from their chairs.

"They'd like to talk to you. Not just about Jamie, surprise, surprise. But about your other wives as well."

"Nancy, April, Rebecca," one of the detectives named off. "Jenny just filed a police report on you yesterday morning."

"She wasn't a happy young lady," the other added.

"She wants her Mercedes back, too."

"It was a hard decision," Travis said, "whether to do this or to introduce you to my ex wife. But in the end, I decided I really didn't hate her as much as I wanted to see you go to jail." He smiled again, although there wasn't much amusement in it. "Isn't hardball fun?"

"I'm not going to forget this," Dale told him.

"When you get out of prison, by all means, look me up. We'll play again."

As Travis stepped onto the elevator, he heard the second detective reading Dale his Miranda rights. Briefcase in hand, he pressed the down button.

It was shaping into a really good day.

"What is it," Greta asked as Travis stepped off the elevator, "about getting married that has caused your whole work ethic to go straight down the toilet in one big, old, blue-swirly flush?"

He took the phone messages she handed him. "Haven't you had that child yet?"

"I'm holding out for the extra maternity leave and the new kiddie center you're building to be finished first. Half of these messages are from Max Bicos, by the way. The next time he calls, I'm switching him straight to you and you can tell him you're not here."

"I don't plan to linger that long," Travis told her. "I am merely here to grab some paperwork before I go home."

As if on cue, the phone rang.

"I'm not here," Travis said, and let himself into his office.

His secretary narrowed her eyes after him and picked up the phone. "Hello, this is Greta. How may I help you?... Why, hello... Mister Bicos, what a surprise..."

"I'm not here, Greta," Travis repeated, using his best warning tone.

"...Why, yes. He just walked in..."

He needed a new best warning tone. Travis stopped just inside his office door and gave her The Look instead. "Someone is going to be working both Thanksgiving and Christmas this year if she's not careful."

"...Please hold and I'll transfer you right over..."

He obviously needed a new Look, too.

The phone on his desk began to ring.

He gave Greta an even sterner Look just to be sure. She smiled at him as she replaced the receiver back in its cradle, and Travis sighed. He needed a new Look, all right. He shut his office door in disgust.

Travis made it back to his desk, answering the phone on the third ring by switching it automatically to the speaker.

"What the hell are you trying to pull?" Max demanded angrily.

"Hello to you, too." Travis set the briefcase of money on the floor by his chair and sat down to go through the rest of his phone messages. He weeded out all of Max's messages and threw them in the garbage.

"I guess I can't blame you for trying," Max barked at him. "But you can kiss whatever plans you were hatching goodbye. The Kuronabe's sent me an invitation to visit their business in Japan."

Despite all your machinations, the better man still won."

Travis glanced up from his messages to look at the sizeable stack of mail Greta had placed on his desk. Crowning the pile was a cream-colored, three-by-five card-sized envelope. He fished a letter opener out of the top drawer of his desk, slit through the sealed flap and, while Max continued to boast, read the card inside.

"Marsha and I will be flying out Friday. While you're sitting in your little emperor's office, you better believe we'll be toasting your failure at thirty-thousand feet."

"Do you still fly TWA?" Travis asked.

"Of course. They've got the best service."

"Wonderful. I prefer United anyway. I received an invitation, also." Travis smiled down at his speaker phone. "Polish your horns and shine your cloven hooves. You'll want to look your best when I stomp you into the dust in Japan next week. Now if you don't mind, I have a fantastic, beautiful, adorable wife to go home to."

"I'm going to crush you," Max seethed from the speaker. "I can do it in Japan as easily as I can here."

"Marsha's sleeping with your gardener."

The speaker phone was silent.

"It's true," Travis said. "He used to be my gardener, but I lost him in the divorce."

"You're full of--"

"She's also sleeping with the pool cleaner, her physical trainer, and the chief dog groomer at Doolittles. I never have been able to figure that one out. She doesn't even like dogs. And her gynecologist, well, let's just say most women don't have monthly exams, and Marsha's are little more in-depth than the conventional methods generally advocate."

"Bullsh--"

"Have a wonderful evening." Travis disconnected the call. Sitting back in his chair, he held the

invitation in his hand and smiled. The marathon wasn't over by any stretch, but he was still in the running.

Leaving everything on his desk for tomorrow and taking only the invitation with him, Travis left his office. Whistling, he headed home.

Jamie flitted from one side of the kitchen to the other, pulling china down from the cabinets, checking the progress of the pan of Swanson's lasagna bubbling in the oven, stopping at the table to adjust her black fishnet garter stockings and tugging futilely at the ridiculously short French maid's skirt that she'd bought on the way home. She turned and for the umpteenth time, checked to see how big her butt looked via her reflection in the sliding glass doors to the backyard deck.

Oh yeah. Very nice.

This dress was eighty dollars very well spent, and she was glad she'd splurged. Although after a year of hoarding pennies, spending so much on a single outfit that she couldn't even wear out of the house felt positively... sinful.

But would Travis like it, she wondered, brushing a hand back to tug ineffectively at the hem of the skirt, bringing it down barely low enough to cover the plump swells of her bottom. When she bent over, even just a little, the black lace of her panties came into view. Just a thin black stretch of fabric, the lacy texture rasped across the sensitive surface of her bottom and made her that much more aware of the rapidly approaching moment when Travis would inevitably arrive home.

She turned to face the window fully, smoothing her hands down over the barest, frilly white bib of an apron, the corseted bodice that cinched her waist and offered up her round breasts until they perched on the verge of overflowing the top of the low, square-cut neckline. She touched the lacy headpiece, wondering if her hair wouldn't look

better up or down, but the opening and closing of the front door told her it was a moot point now, regardless. He was home.

Oh, crap!

A burst of anticipation flavored with near panic threw her into a flurry of last minute activity. She quickly checked her make-up in the shiny surface of a silver pot, slipped her feet into the three-inch high heel shoes that completed her outfit, grabbed a wine glass from the cupboard and tottered as daintily as she could out to the formal dining room. She wasn't very accustomed to high heels, and she prayed the whole way that she wouldn't fall and break her ankle.

There was only one place set, and that was at the head of the table where Travis usually sat. She set the wine glass down, nervously adjusted the burgundy cloth mat beneath his plate so it was even with the edge of the table, then stood back to survey her efforts. It looked better the other way, so she adjusted it back again.

"Hello?" she heard called from the living room. "I'm home."

What if he didn't like her outfit? What if he didn't like to role-play? What if last night had only been a one-time thing, something he'd done because she'd asked and been vulnerable? Jamie clasped her hands over her abdomen, willing her frantic 'what ifs' silent. Since it was too late to change now anyway, she minced to the dining room door, took a deep breath, unclasped her hands, and pushed her way into the living room.

Travis was standing with his back half to her at the front closet. Having just removed his coat, he was in the process of sliding it onto a hanger and replacing the hanger back on the rack when she cleared her throat. He turned his head and froze when he saw her. All except the hanger, which missed the rack by almost four inches and fell to the floor.

Trying her best not to fidget, Jamie said, "Missus Dorsett is visiting a sick friend tonight. She said to tell you she wouldn't be back until tomorrow."

Her voice warbled softly in her nervousness. Did he like the outfit? She couldn't tell. His face was completely devoid of expression, his eyes traveling the length of her down to her feet, then back up again. He closed the closet door.

"Your headpiece is off center," he finally said.

Jamie reached up to touch the offending article. Score one point for the 'what ifs.' He obviously didn't role-play. And for a minute, Jamie felt a surge of hot embarrassment flood through her.

Then Travis said, "If you are going to work in my house, Miss Miracle, I expect perfection, in your uniform and your appearance as well as your performance on the job. I thought I made that clear when I hired you."

She stood frozen at the dining room door, unable to believe he was actually playing along with her. "Yes," she squeaked, then caught herself and hastily cleared her throat again. "I mean, yes, sir. You made it very clear."

"Fix your attire," Travis said solemnly and started upstairs. "You may serve dinner in one half hour. And, Miss Miracle," he stopped a few steps shy of the second floor, leaned one hand on the banister and gave her a stern look. "I am in no mood to tolerate mistakes tonight. I suggest you behave yourself."

Then he winked at her. It happened so quick, at first she thought she might have imagined it.

"Yes, sir. I-I mean, no, sir. No more mistakes," she called back up to him, but he was already continuing on down the hall to his bedroom.

Score: Whatifs, zero; sexy, French maid--oh, that exchange had to be worth at least three points!

Grinning, Jamie hurried into the bathroom to try and fix her headpiece, which if it was off-center was only slightly so. Her hands were shaking, and she laughed a little at herself for being so giddy. They

were married; it was all right if she wanted to lose herself in his strong, safe, comforting touch. It might not be real, but at least she knew Travis wasn't going to steal everything she had, then abandon her.

At least not for two years.

Jamie blinked at her reflection in the mirror, then stubbornly banished that unhappy thought. There was nothing wrong, she told herself firmly, with having a little fun with a sane, warm, and wonderful man who, if he didn't love her, well, at least he liked her somewhat.

She was still in the bathroom when she heard Mister Sane, Warm and Wonderful call down the stairs, "Miss Miracle."

Despite his reassuring wink of only a moment ago, there was a sternness in his voice that made her stomach tighten.

Jamie left the bathroom and came back out into the front room, looking up at the second floor. He was leaning on the banister very close to where he'd spanked her the night of the charity event. He'd removed his tie and the first two buttons of his shirt were undone. He looked good, but he also did not look happy.

"Come here," he told her. "Right now."

He must like Naughty Maid scenarios, too, she thought as she crept up the stairs, her legs so weak and shaky that her knees all but knocked together. He certainly knew how to play his part.

Her fingers fidgeted nervously with the bottom hem of her skirt, and her stomach was alive with the fluttering of anticipatory butterflies. As she approached him, Travis seemed to grow as big as a mountain, as unyielding as a statue. When he folded his arms across his chest and gave her that steely-eyed, disapproving glare, it made the skin of her bottom positively crawl with dread.

He reached out as she drew closer and took firm hold of her arm. "I want you to tell me what's wrong with this picture."

When he led her into his bedroom, it wasn't difficult to see the problem. As neat as his house was, the rumpled bed where she and Megan had taken their afternoon nap--so Jamie could hug his pillow and breathe his scent as she slept--stood out like a sore thumb. The empty plastic bag that she had brought her costume home in lay on the floor next to her discarded clothes, with her sneakers sprawled in the middle of the floor, just waiting to trip the unwary.

"Is picking up the bedroom not on your list of daily chores?" Travis asked.

"Um..." She had actually meant to pick this up before he got home, but in the bustle of cooking dinner--well, okay, in the bustle of opening the box and popping the frozen lasagna into the oven--she had forgotten. "Sorry."

She started towards the bed and bent to gather up the clothes, but Travis stopped her.

"Too late for that, young lady," he said. "I'm already home. And there's still this to discuss."

He took her to the bathroom and opened the door.

A wadded-up and wet green washcloth lay in the bottom of the sink, which hadn't been turned completely off and was dripping. There was a damp towel in a heap on the floor by the Jacuzzi tub, where it must have slipped off the rack after Megan started crying and Jamie'd hurried off to pick her up. A slight scattering of make-up containers peppered the marble countertop.

Sheepishly, she said. "Oops. I forgot I left the make-up out."

She didn't even realize what had slipped from her mouth until Travis said, "Are you helping yourself to my wife's make-up?"

Jamie started and looked at him with very wide eyes. Oh yeah, she was still supposed to be the maid. "Uh, I... uh..."

Travis took hold of her arm, and in the next instant he was seated at the foot of the bed and she

was tumbling down across his strong thighs. Or thigh, rather, with her legs well apart as he scissored one of hers securely between both of his. Her mons pressed intimately upon his knee as he positioned her to straddle it, and for one frantic, panicky moment Jamie forgot that this was supposed to be in fun.

Her mind flashed back to those few times when she'd found herself bent over his lap, kicking and sobbing, with absolutely nothing enjoyable to be found in the spankings he'd delivered. Jamie caught her breath, unable to stifle a whimper as he flipped back her little, frilly nothing of a skirt to bare her lace panties. She thrust a hand back, trying to catch the hem and pull it sharply back down again, but that only got her wrist captured and pinned up behind her.

Jamie's entire body stiffened when he lay his hand on the center of her bottom, her panties only the thinnest of barriers between her and the heat of his touch. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, gritted her teeth and cringed as she waited.

But so did he, waiting patiently, gently caressing her soft bottom, softly squeezing first one round cheek and then the other, until she gradually relaxed again.

"Do you remember what I told you earlier this morning?" he asked.

Oh Lord, but he sounded so silky and seductive. His tone alone took the edge off her nervous fear. Jamie bowed her head, burying her face in the blankets before nodding.

"I'm a man of my word, young lady. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded again. "Yes."

He swatted her, hard enough to make her gasp out loud and grab at the back of his shirt with her free hand. That one spank was enough to ignite the barest sting upon the surface of her skin and a warm, throbbing heat quickly permeated her bottom.

"Yes, what?" he demanded.

"Sir!" she gasped. "Yes, sir!"

"You're in enough trouble without adding disrespect to the list." His hand came back to rest on her bottom. He caressed her, the plump spankable curves, neatly framed by black panties and garters. "And it's already a rather sizeable list now, isn't it?"

Jamie squirmed, unconsciously parting her legs a little wider as he stroked her left buttock down to the back of her thighs, the tips of his fingers lightly brushing the crotch of her panties with each pass.

"Isn't it?" He swatted her twice more, a single crack of his open palm to the lowest part of each buttock. The last stiffened her on his lap again and made her kick an awkward, one-legged expression of sharp discomfort.

"Oh yes! Ouch! Yes, sir! I'm sorry! I'll do better!" Jamie buried her face in the bedding, losing her pent in breath to a barely muffled moan as his hand returned to rubbing her bottom. In all honesty, it was the gentlest spanking he'd ever given her, but the sting was certainly there and the effect of the heat from each swat was building an answering warmth, a low, throbbing, pulsating ache down between her thighs. It was making it very hard to pay attention.

She bit the blankets when his hand shifted, turning to press flat along the crease of her buttocks, all four fingers lying right across her sex. Intimately cupping her and pressing in.

"You'd better believe you'll do better," Travis said. He gave her the gentlest of slaps there, each one punctuating his words as he said, "I have very little patience for disobedient maids."

She grabbed the back of his shirt again. The fingers of her captured hand shot open, then closed up into a tightly clenched fist as he cupped her again, pressing firmly into her.

His voice husky and low, he said, "I'm not getting through to you. These panties need to come down."

Travis made her stand up. Lacing her fingers behind her head, she waited on trembling legs while he slid her underwear down her legs.

His hands caressed her from thighs to ankles, playfully snapping the back of one garter before he touched again between her legs, feeling her arousal. The effect it had on him was easy to feel when he lay her back down across his lap. Once more straddling his knee, he parted her legs wide open to provide himself with the most personal of views as well as easy access to all that he wanted.

"You may not kick," he told her and wrapped his arm around her waist. Jamie started when she felt his hand beneath her parting the lips of her sex. She grabbed the bedding as he found the sensitive nub hidden there. "Do you hear me?"

Jamie nodded rapidly, short jerky motions. Her eyes were closed, her hips flexing involuntarily as he gently massaged her between his fingers. "Oh, yes, sir! Y-es, yes, yes, sir!"

"You may not reach back, either."

She shook her head just as fiercely, grinding down on his touch, panting and moaning softly, trying to muffle the sound in the blankets.

"And you may not come without my permission," he said. "Am I clear?"

Jamie started, hardly able to breathe much less think because of how he touched her.

"If you come before I allow it, I will get a paddle from the closet and put it to harsh use on you." He raised his right hand and brought it cracking down upon her squirming bottom. "Understood?"

"Oh! Yes, sir! Yes!" She threw her head back, clinging to the bed in an effort to keep from flinging a hand back, and he lay a second, then third, then fourth swat sharply down in the same spot. With one leg imprisoned between his and his arm wrapped so firmly around her hips, she could barely

move more than an inch in any direction. That was how he spanked her. Hard. The way lazy maids ought to be spanked for neglecting their duties.

But it was his fingers, moving constantly between her thighs, that made her cry out. The slow, sensual caresses quickly became unbearable, even more so than the fire he was lighting in her rapidly pinkening bottom cheeks. It made the pleasure coil inside her like a tightly wound spring, and had Jamie begging him for release. Her whole body shook from the effort it took to hold her pleasure at bay, and still he didn't stop. He spanked her until his arm ached and he'd turned her bottom a dark, rosy hue. His fingers caressed and stroked and made her mindless to everything but his touch, both the painful and the pleasurable, melding them expertly together.

Jamie arched back against him, shouting, "Please!"

Travis pushed her from his lap and bent her over the foot of the bed instead. Holding her wrists captive in his, he slid into her from behind.

"Come," he growled in her ear, sinking so deep inside her that at first Jamie couldn't breathe. His rhythm was vigorous. His hips pounded hard against her raw and wounded flanks, and his earlier words were suddenly proved very prophetic.

"Come," he commanded, and the spring inside her snapped violently. Jamie screamed her pleasure into the bedding as Travis conquered her body and soul.

Later, in the aftermath and in his arms, she wept.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I don't know why I did that." Jamie snuggled into his arm. She wiped at her tear-streaked face with the back of her hand. "You're going to think you've married a crazy woman."

Eyes closed, chin resting on top of her head, Travis smiled. "I love crazy women. They're very responsive."

They lay spooned together across the foot of the bed, arms and legs still entwined, her hot bottom pressed comfortably right up to his groin. He still cupped her sex in his hand, and every so often as he felt her belly clench under a latent thrill of pleasure--the after effects of so powerful an orgasm shivering through her--he gently squeezed to make her moan, arch and rub back against him.

"It's never been like that before," Jamie said, burrowing into his embrace.

He kissed the side of her neck. "It's all right, sweetheart. So long as you don't burst into sobs every time I take you to bed, I think my ego can handle giving you orgasms hard enough to reduce you to tears."

She giggled, then sighed and wiped her eyes again. "I feel like a wrung-out rag."

He raised his head to look at her. "I know that's the expression, but how about a wrung-out silk handkerchief? I don't like you referring to yourself as a rag."

"Can I say 'rode hard and put away wet'?"

"Mm." He lay back down again. "An expression like that just begs for the crop. I suppose I'll have to get one."

"Ooo! I could be a cowgirl. I'll meet you at the door some day in a hat and a pair of leather chaps. I could get a couple of sheriff's star pasties and put them in strategic places."

"Remind me to call ahead if I plan to bring a client home with me."

"I could learn how to use a lasso. I'll rope you in the living room and tie you to the couch."

"I don't recommend it."

She turned her head to look at him over her shoulder. Her eyes twinkled mischievously. "I could have my wicked way with you."

"And the minute I got loose, you'd be a cowgirl with a very raw and well-hidden tail."

"Guess I'll just have to make sure you never get loose."

"And I guess I'll just have to do some hiding in advance." Jamie giggled when Travis pushed up onto his knees, but her struggles to get out of his reach were half-hearted at best. He caught her under his arm, forcing her head to the mattress as he lifted her hips into the air, her elevated bottom now a very spankable target despite her squeals and attempts to roll over.

"All right! All right!" she laughed. "No ropes, I promise."

"Good to hear." He flipped up the back of her little maid's skirt to get it out of his way. "But just to make sure..."

Her bottom was still lobster red and she gasped when his hand came cracking down across the wobbly summits. He only managed to land three firm swats before she snapped a hand back, palm up to ward him off.

Travis paused with his hand raised in the air. "Did I say you could put your hand back?"

"No. Ooh!" Her hand flipped over and began to rub at the fiery sting. "I was just kidding about the lasso."

"And I was going to give you a 'just kidding' spanking. But unless you move your hand, and I do mean right now, you are going to end up with a very real spanking for disobedience."

Jamie reluctantly moved her hand.

"Instead of five swats, now you're going to receive ten. And because you put your hand back, I'm going to start over again." He lay his hand flat

upon the lowest curve of her bottom, one finger overlapping onto the top of her thigh. "Relax your bottom."

Grabbing fistfuls of blanket in both hands, Jamie buried her face in the bedding. He could feel her body struggling to obey and he waited patiently until his blushing target grew slack and round.

"One," Travis said, and his hand smacked soundly down upon her right cheek.

"Ouch!" Jamie kicked the mattress.

"Settle down," he said mildly.

Her hand started to dart back again, but he saw her catch herself and quickly grab the blankets again.

Travis smiled as he rubbed the place he'd just spanked, feeling the heat and enjoying the sight of her minute wiggles under his touch. Not wanting to give the sting too much time to fade, he raised his hand again. "Two."

Jamie hunched her back, her bottom tensing a bare second before he struck her left side. "Oww-wich!"

She drummed her feet on the mattress, but settled down fairly quickly when he warned, "Jamie..."

She groaned. "I'm sorry."

"Relax your bottom," he told her again.

"Ooh," she whimpered, but grudgingly obeyed.

"Three," he said cheerfully, raising his hand high.

But three never fell. Instead, Travis turned his head towards the bedroom door. He sniffed. "Jamie, darling. Do you smell something burning?"

The lasagna was reduced to a charred lump, the fire alarm was frantically beeping, and the kitchen was full of smoke by the time they got downstairs. But Travis didn't seem to care. He simply turned off the oven and opened all the windows. Arming

himself with two pot holders, he headed for the stove.

"Ready?" he asked.

Jamie took up an unspoken position by the sliding glass door as he dropped the oven door. A billow of black smoke enveloped him as he pulled out the blackened remains of their dinner. He held the pan at arms' length, jogging around the counter, a dark cloud engulfing and trailing behind him the entire way.

Jamie opened the door and screen, coughing and waving the smoke outside as Travis set the pan on the far edge of the deck. She closed the screen after he came back in and, side by side, they watched it continue to burn. It was several minutes before the smoke cleared enough to quiet the beeping alarm.

"Well," Travis said as he removed the pot holders and braced his hands on his lean hips. "That should teach her, don't you think?"

Jamie blinked twice. "Teach who?"

"Lucy." He gestured to their smoking supper. "Serves her right for leaving us to fend for ourselves."

"What are we going to do for dinner?" Jamie said softly. "I only bought one package of lasagna."

Travis shrugged with his eyebrows. "Since you made the first attempt, I suppose it's only right that I undertake the second."

"You're going to cook for me?" Jamie asked with surprise.

"A man cannot survive on restaurants and part-time housekeepers alone. And you needn't look so surprised. I did prepare your eggs for breakfast the other day, didn't I?" He turned and headed for the kitchen.

"What are you going to make?"

"Eggs. I am a one-trick pony, unfortunately. But," he said as he rounded the gourmet island, "if one has to pick a single substance by which to sustain one's self indefinitely upon, one is hard

pressed to do worse than eggs. An admirable food source, really. I love their shape, their simplicity. Their pliant acceptance of fate in the face of scrambling. I don't suppose I could interest you in a slice of hot bread, lightly browned on both sides and smothered in butter?"

"Um, sure." Amused, Jamie followed him as far as the kitchen bar. "I like toast."

Travis delved beneath the cupboard after a black, four-slotted toaster. "I am very proud of myself, actually. For a while there, the machine almost had me beat. But I rallied, and I overcame. Disconnect the smoke-alarm, if you please." At a look from her, he confessed, "Toast is a fickle mistress, and I am a man without culinary talent."

Laughing and shaking her head, Jamie pulled a chair under the alarm and then carefully climbed up to pop the cover and remove the battery.

"Now," Travis said, tying on a cooking apron and hunting for a frying pan. "How do you want your eggs? Scrambled, or broken up in the bottom of the pan?"

"Oh well, if we're going to go gourmet..."

"Naughty young maids who get sarcastic with their employers deserve to get their little bottoms warmed."

Jamie snorted. "That excludes me then, since I've got a huge, mammoth--" She snapped her mouth shut, but it was already too late.

Half in the refrigerator, Travis stood up. He set the package of eggs down on the counter, then closed the door.

"I-I didn't mean that," Jamie stammered.

Selecting a wooden spatula from an assortment in the crockery pot on the counter, Travis turned around. His mouth was a tight, disapproving line in a face that was otherwise resigned.

"No-o-oo!" she wailed when he started towards her. She covered her bottom with both hands, but didn't try to run. "You already spanked me! You spanked me twice!"

He took her arm, sitting down in the chair she'd dragged beneath the smoke-alarm. "I will spank you as many times as it takes to get the message across."

"But I didn't mean it!" she cried as he pulled her over his lap. "I swear! It just slipped out! Please don't! Oh no, Travis, no, no, no!"

He bared her bottom for the third time that evening. Only now he wasn't playing and that made a big difference in her behavior. Her right hand snapped back the instant he raised her skirt.

"It was an accident!" Jamie wailed. "I'm sorry! Please don't spank me, Travis! I'm sorry!"

When he captured her wrist, she tried to roll off his lap and tuck her rosy bottom out of reach, but he put a stop to that as well. Gripping her wrist firmly in hand, he wrapped his arm around her hips to pin her into place. "Sorry you said it, or sorry because you're over my knee for real this time?"

She began to cry.

"That's what I thought."

Jamie kicked her feet back, trying to cover her vulnerable backside, and he ended up having to scissor her legs between his to keep them down. A blushing pink hue all over and a shade or two darker across the chubby, cringing base, hers was a bottom already tender to the touch. But discipline wasn't meant to be gentle and Travis spared her absolutely nothing. Every smack of the spatula had Jamie scraping the linoleum with her toes and wailing apologies. She grabbed his pants with her free hand and, though she no longer fought against him, each crack had her arching her back, writhing and twisting her hips in response to the hurt he was inflicting.

Travis stopped at twenty, but that was more than enough to leave Jamie sobbing raggedly. When he let her go, she slid to her knees on the floor, bowing over to press her forehead against his thigh. She caught hold of her sizzling bottom in both

hands, squeezing and rubbing to soothe away the painful fire.

"It's all right." Travis lay his hand on her back, for a moment afraid that he'd done too much. Then Jamie raised her tear-streaked face, and in the next instant, launched herself up into his arms, sobbing as she scrambled to get on his lap. As though she wanted to crawl into his clothes with him. Into his skin. Unable to get close enough.

Travis hugged her tight and hard, all of her, for she'd drawn her knees up to her chest and curled into a ball against his chest. "I will not allow anyone to harm you, Jamie. Not even yourself. Do I make myself clear?"

"I'm sorry," she wept against his neck. "Don't be mad. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Dinner could wait.

Travis popped two buttons off her costume in his haste to get it off her, but they were soon skin to skin and heart to heart. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, holding him as close as he could come even as he slid himself back inside her.

I love you, barked in his throat.

"You're mine," he told her as he loved her. He closed his eyes and hoped that she knew what he really meant to say by the way he'd said it.

"Momma's gonna be a Geisha girl," Jamie told Megan as she packed one of Travis's European leather suitcases for a week long stay in Japan. She had one evening gown, two nice day dresses and an assortment of shirts and pants. No jeans. Under pain of extreme punishment, Travis has told her as he'd cupped her sore bottom in both hands and lifted her up to plant a single kiss upon the tip of her nose. She had melted against him. Funny how he could make her do that so easily.

"What about this?" Travis said, and Jamie turned around as he came out of Megan's closet with an armful of baby clothes. "I personally like the white

one." He held up a tiny, lacy white dress. "Or we could go with the yellow flower-print or the one with the pink bows?"

He lay all three on the changing table while Jamie winced expressively.

"Let's avoid white dresses," she hedged.

"Why?"

"Because putting Megan in white pretty much guarantees that she'll have an upset stomach. Believe me, nothing stains faster than white."

"Hm." Travis contemplated the baby between them. Draping the white dress over his arm, he held up a one-piece jumper instead. "Little yellow duckling suit?"

Jamie grinned as she took it from him. "Okay, that gives her nine outfits, two extra blankets, a jacket and a coat, five sleepers, a package of diapers, a bag of diaper changing accessories, breast pump, binkies and some toys. She now has more luggage than either of us combined."

"No souvenirs for you, young lady," Travis told her sternly, and Megan reacted to his voice with a big grin. When she held out her hands, he scooped her into his arms. He made an animalistic noise and Megan laughed as he nibbled on the bare patch of her tummy below her shirt and above her diaper.

"Oh thank you," Jamie commented mildly. "Thank you very much. She's supposed to be winding down for a nap."

Travis lowered her to a more sedate level in his arms. "Sorry."

"You will be when she cries all the way to Japan."

"A little Dramamine and a bottle ought to--" He stopped mid-sentence when she spun around to look at him. "What? What did I say?"

"We aren't going to drug her, Travis!"

"I meant me. A little Dramamine and a bottle, preferably scotch, and Megan can cry all she wants to. I'll be sound asleep and won't hear a bit of it. It

would be cheaper than buying earplugs for everyone on the plane."

"It would be even cheaper just to let Megan take her nap," she said dryly. "Why don't you quit with the bright ideas. You should be conserving your strength, anyway. You're going to need it to lug all these suitcases to and from the baggage claim." Jamie grinned at Megan, reaching out to take the baby's small hand. "Isn't that right, Megan? Daddy needs his strength, doesn't h--"

Jamie's smile vanished and her mouth snapped shut so fast her teeth clacked together. They looked at each other in stunned silence.

The first to recover, Travis quickly said, "It's all right, Jamie. I don't--Jamie, wait!"

She grabbed Megan out of his arms and fled into the bathroom, shutting and locking the door behind her.

"Jamie!" The door rattled as Travis tried the handle, then knocked.

Covering her mouth with her hand, Jamie backed away from it. How stupid! How could she have made such a slip! And in front of Travis!

It's not real, she told herself. No matter how much she wanted it to be. Travis certainly didn't. What had he said but that he didn't want a woman who would cling onto him when their two years was over. She had to remember that and not make things uncomfortable for either of them.

Her eyes teared, and she sat down hard on the edge of the tub. She hugged Megan closely, while on the other side of the door, Travis's voice changed from concern to irritation.

"Jamie May Miracle Dorsett!" he boomed like thunder. "Nobody locks me out of a room in my own house! Especially not you, and especially not because you are upset! Open. This. Door!"

"I'll be out in a minute," she called, her voice trembling and choked as she struggled to keep from crying. "Please just give me a minute."

"No, you are going to come out right now." Travis rattled the door again.

She wasn't being fair to him, and she knew it. But she also knew neither of them were being very fair to Megan. It was all right, she supposed, for right now. But what about two years from now? How many more 'Daddy' slips would it take before Megan took to thinking of Travis that way?

Jamie turned partway around on the edge of the tub, putting her back to the door. She rocked Megan, who started every time the door rattled in its frame. "God damn it! Go away, Travis! Just leave me alone!"

There was a reverberating 'WHUMP!' that shuddered the entire bathroom when Travis kicked the door once, then twice. The sound startled Megan, who began to wail. Jamie stood up as he kicked a third time and the door crashed open to the accompanying crack of splintering wood. It hit the opposite wall so hard that the brass handle lodged in the plaster.

Glaring and breathing hard, more angry than exerted, Travis filled the broken threshold. In a low growl, he said, "I will break down every door you lock between us."

His amber eyes flashed angrily, smoldering as he lowered his head, his stare seeming to drill her into the bathroom floor until her legs wobbled. Jamie hugged Megan tightly, rubbing the baby's back in an effort to calm her as well as to hide her own badly trembling hands.

"What is it going to take before you stop running away?"

His right hand flexed, and her stomach and bottom both tightened sharply in response.

"I'm not going to let you spank me any more," Jamie blurted in panic, certainly with a good deal more confidence and bravery than she felt. "I-I've changed my mind!"

His expression didn't change. "Nice try, but I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you."

The urge to bolt and run right now was incredibly strong, but trapped in a one-entrance bathroom, Jamie had no place to run to. Except the shower, and fat lot of good that would do her. She shifted her feet, bouncing the wailing baby and wishing she could fall to the floor and start wailing, too.

"I just wanted to be alone."

"You said something that scared you," he corrected. "You ran to avoid having to face it. You do this every time the situation grows uncomfortable, and we've discussed your running away once already, haven't we? In fact, I believe that was the cause for your very first trip across my knee, wasn't it?"

Her eyes teared. "I d-don't want you to-to--"

"That's the funny thing about wants and needs," he interrupted. "They rarely ever match."

"You can't spank me against my will. You're not that kind of man."

"Perhaps you should reevaluate exactly what kind of man you think I am."

She took a small step backwards as he walked into the bathroom, and she bumped up against the louver doors of the towel closet. Though anger still flashed and sparked in his eyes, he didn't shout and yell, or grab and shake her, or anything of the things she remembered from the occasional fights she'd experienced with Dale. In fact, his hand gave every indication of being calm and gentle when he cupped her chin in his palm to keep her eyes on his.

"We have two hours until we need to leave for the airport. In that time, you are going to put Megan down for her nap, we are going to finish packing, and we are going to take care of this. Yes, I am going to spank you," he said, when she tried to shake her head. "And do you know why? Because I know something you haven't yet figured out." His eyes bored into hers, unblinking, as he took his hand from her chin. His fingers unfurled, turning his hand into an ominously familiar, open-palmed

shape. "You need to be spanked. It's a part of who you are.

"If you insist on topping from below, then the spankings that will be eliminated from our relationship will be the erotic ones. No more warm, playful slaps delivered to the bottoms of sexy house maids, or Geisha girls, or anyone else. If you've really changed your mind, then I will abide by your edict in that regard. But don't think for one second that if your behavior calls for a real spanking that I won't take you across my knee and blister you soundly. I assure you, I'll do it in a heartbeat, because it's what you need."

Her bottom lip began to wobble and he blurred before her eyes.

He lay his open hand against the side of her face, cupping her cheek. "I'm going to my room to calm down. I want you to put Megan to bed for her nap, and then we are going to talk about this some more."

When Travis leaned down to kiss her, she turned her face away. But he merely slipped his thumb back under her chin and turned her back to meet his mouth.

"I can't do this," she whispered brokenly when he left the bathroom. She sagged, her breath shuddering out of her as she grabbed onto the edge of the tub and sat on the rim.

It took a long time for her to calm Megan enough to put her to bed. It took even longer to calm herself.

She thought she could do this, but she couldn't. She just couldn't. He was too perfect and he seemed to know her so well. Her body wanted to respond to him, and neither it nor her heart was listening any more when she told herself the relationship wasn't real.

It felt real. That was the problem. To have to leave in two years as though this was not the kind of relationship she'd fantasized about all her life was going to kill her. If she didn't put some distance

between herself and Travis now, this arrangement was going to absolutely devastate her heart.

When Megan finally fell asleep, Jamie steeled herself to confront Travis. Her legs shook as she walked down the hall to his bedroom door. She stopped in front of it, all but feeling how angry he must still be through the pale wood. She took a deep breath and held it. Then knocked.

She expected him to call a terse 'come in', but he opened it for her instead.

"You don't have to knock," he said, mildly enough as he walked back to his bed and the open suitcases laid out only half packed at the foot of his bed.

"Sorry," she said.

"For what?" He stopped at the dresser to select several pairs of socks for the trip. "Generalized 'I'm sorry's' aren't what I want to hear. They lose their meaning if you don't deserve to be or don't know why you are. Unless you have a specific reason to, indeed, be sorry, I don't want to hear those words from your lips."

"I'm sorry I made you mad, then."

A sigh exploded past his lips and he threw the socks into his suitcase. "You didn't make me mad."

"You broke the door down."

"Yes, but not with anger." He gave her a hard look. "Although I will admit to a certain exasperation, a good deal of annoyance, and just a smidgen of mental angst. From now on, I expect you to talk to me, Jamie. No more running away. No more locked doors. And--" he stalked back around the bed to where she still hovered in the doorway. "That little declaration of yours about not allowing me to spank you any more," he shook his head. "It's not going to happen."

"I can't do this," Jamie told him.

He braced his hands on his hips. His jaw clenched. "What can't you do?"

"Any of it." She flapped her arms helpless. "All of it." She thought she'd cried herself out with

Megan in the bathroom, but with him standing there, hands on his hips and frowning, it started all over again. She briefly covered her face with her hands, then shrugged again, whispering, "I'm so sorry. I have to go."

She moved past him and began to gather her makeup from around the bathroom sink.

"So you're running away again." Travis glared up at the ceiling, then shook his head.

"I'll help you get your contract," Jamie said through her tears. "But I have to get some distance. It just feels too real."

The anger dissipated from his face. "How real?"

"I've been trying to pretend like it doesn't matter, but it does." She walked around him to dump her makeup in the suitcase he'd given her for their trip. She could barely see through her tears, and her hands fumbled to close the lid and get the latches fastened. "I'm going to move back into my room down the hall."

"The hell you are," Travis snapped.

"When this is over," she continued, "I promise I won't cling."

"Cling," Travis said. "Let Megan call me daddy. Let me give her brothers and sisters. We'll live happily ever after, like the fairy tales."

"That wasn't the deal."

"We'll make a new deal."

Openly sobbing now, Jamie pulled the suitcase off the bed and tried to walk past him. He grabbed her arm.

"Stay," Travis said.

"For how long?" Jamie wept. "And how much this time? Are you going to give me a bigger house, maybe one with a pool? How many more contracts do you need me to garner for you? I can't do this, Travis. I thought I could, but I just can't pretend. My heart wants to believe it, and it's killing me."

"I love you," Travis said abruptly.

She shook her head, crying harder. "I'm a means to an end."

"I want you to stay with me," Travis said. "As my wife. I want to hold you in my arms every night and wake up to your face every morning. No contracts, no money, or houses, or business associates, and our exes can go to hell for all I care. I want--" he sighed. "I just want you, Jamie. I love you."

"You're just saying that because I put you on the spot." She pulled her arm out of his hand and continued towards the door.

This time Travis let her go. He barked a hard and bitter laugh as he ran both hands through his black hair. "Woman, you are going to drive me to drink!"

She got as far as the door, then Travis turned around and came after her. He caught hold of her arm and spun her around, taking her suitcase away and dropping it there in the hallway.

"Let go of me!" Jamie cried, when he bent down to throw her over his shoulder like a bag of grain.

"Not even if I could." He stood up again and stalked back into his bedroom. He carried her over to his armoire, yanking open both doors.

Craning her head back, Jamie shrieked when she saw the assortment of paddles and brushes hanging neatly from hooks along the back wall. The paddle he finally selected was over a foot in length and had a large, oval head that was wide enough to cover each of her bottom cheeks with only one smack.

"No!" Jamie frantically beat her hands on his back frantically as he carried her over to the bed. "Please don't do this!"

He bent and dumped her from his shoulder, dropping her none-too-gently on the end of the mattress. He then grabbed her hand and put the paddle in it, forcibly folding her fingers firmly upon the handle.

"Now you listen to me," he told her angrily, holding her hand in his so she couldn't immediately fling the paddle away. "I love you. I want to grow old and shriveled with you by my side. Someday,

we're going to be two cranky, elderly people, walking hand-in-hand through the park, whacking the young generations in the knees with our canes. I love you, and don't you dare shake your head again when I say that. I know how I feel, damn it! But I'd sooner let you go and give up the Kuronabe's contract, then hurt you or Megan. So just tell me, Jamie. Do you love me?"

She looked up at him with watery eyes.

Travis knelt down beside the bed. Softening his tone, he asked again, "Do you love me?"

Jamie nodded. "Yes."

"Then why do you keep running away?"

She opened her mouth, but didn't say anything. Eventually, she only shook her head.

"Is the idea to keep running until I quit chasing? That is a manipulative game, and I'm not going to play it with you. Don't shake your head, answer me."

"I don't mean to be."

"Look at me."

Jamie lifted her bowed head to meet his eyes again.

"Jamie May Dorsett, I will love, honor and cherish you from this day forward until death do us part. I will protect and comfort you. I will provide for you. But I am the head of this household, and this," his hand tightened on the one of hers that held the paddle. "This is what you will accept when you accept me. You will respect me, obey me, and trust me to care for you for so long as I uphold in my commitment to you. You will confide in me, depend on me, and under no circumstances will you ever run--not from me--but from us again."

"I'm so sorry," she whispered thickly.

"I know." Travis stood up, letting go of her hand and the paddle both. "You are going to sit here and think about what I just told you. Take as long as you need; I want your commitment to 'us' to be an honest one. If you can't repeat this vow back to me, then we have a problem that will need to be

addressed. But if you do want to proceed with our marriage as a real marriage, then you will bring me the paddle. And, Jamie, be prepared to have it used. This is the third time you've been told, and the second time that you'll have to be spanked for running away. I intend to make sure it's the last time on both counts."

He cupped the side of her face, then left her alone in the room to think.

CHAPTER NINE

When the time came to leave the house, Jamie was still sitting at the foot of his bed, holding the unused paddle in her hand. She looked up when Travis opened the door. Coming into the room, he squatted down in front of her.

"We have a problem," he said heavily, "don't we?"

"You didn't have to say you loved me," Jamie told him.

His eyes flashed, but his tone was calm and even. "Do you think I'm lying?"

"I think this contract is very important to you, you've made no secret of that. If you don't win it, then your ex and her new husband will, and that makes it even more important." His mouth stretched into a hard, thin, and narrow line as Jamie said, "I understand why you said it, but you didn't have to. I'll still go with you to Japan. I'll be the perfect loving and doting wife. I--" She gave him a strained smile. "I guess I've had lots of practice by now."

He stood up slowly, his face as dark as a thundercloud.

"But when we get back, I think we need to go back to a business-only relationship until 'us' is over. For both our sakes, as well as Megan's."

"Put that paddle down," Travis growled, "before I use it on you."

Jamie jumped when he slammed out of the bedroom, and a few minutes later, she heard another door slam somewhere downstairs. When she ventured out into the hall, she felt only a partial relief to find that Travis hadn't stormed out the front door, leaving her here while he went to Japan alone. Instead, he'd shut himself in his study.

Her shoulders sagged. In the end, she went to get Megan ready and then helped Ben carry their suitcases out to the car.

Ben checked his wristwatch. "The check-in process takes twice as long these days. We need to get going if you want to make your flight on time."

"All right." Jamie buckled Megan into her car seat, then jogged back into the house. She knocked very hesitantly on the closed study door. When no answering hail came, she cracked it open. "Travis?"

Sitting at his desk, the phone's receiver pressed to his ear, Travis glanced up at her, then quickly held up one silencing hand. "Yes," he said grimly into the phone, then checked his watch. "No, it's a four o'clock flight... I need the papers before then... Why don't you bring them to the airport... Well, if you'd quit talking on the phone to me then you'd have plenty of time, wouldn't you?"

He hung up the phone.

Fidgeting with her fingers, knowing she was responsible for his irritation, Jamie said, "Ben says it's time to go."

"I love you," Travis countered. "We don't have to go. I'll call the Kuronabes, confess my sins and retract my bid if that's what it will take for you to believe me."

"And resent me for it for the rest of your life." Jamie shook her head. "It's okay, Travis. Really, it is. You don't have to say any of that. I promise I won't embarrass you or let you down."

He stood up, grabbed his business coat off the back of his chair and stalked past her, muttering, "You really are going to make me work at this, aren't you?"

"Why are you angry?" Jamie protested, following him to the front door. "I'm giving you what you want. No strings attached. No clinging! Furthering your career with no ties after two years!"

He held the front door open for her. "Get in the damn car."

He sat on one side and she sat on the other, with the only sounds coming from Megan, who responded to the agitation she sensed by fussing non-stop the whole way.

Two blocks from the freeway on-ramp into Seattle, Travis said, "I want a divorce."

Jamie turned her head to the window. "Okay."

"Okay." He took out his wallet and wrote her a check for the agreed upon sum of two million dollars. "There. Business concluded. We no longer have money between us and the contract is now null and void, agreed?"

After only a glance, Jamie handed the check back to him. "You forgot to take out my share of the expenses."

His jaw clenched. "You are certainly stubborn, I'll give you that." He tore the check in half and opened his wallet again. "So what were the expenses? There was the shopping trip for the clothes."

"I'll pay for half the ring."

"The hell you will. I bought that ring for you and I'll pay for it."

She started to work the ring off her finger, but Travis stopped her quite effectively with a dark look and an even darker threat. "If that ring leaves your hand, I will have Ben pull this car over long enough for you to cut a switch and for me to break it across your naked backside."

"You don't want it back?" she squeaked.

"No."

"Oh."

"What else?"

She clenched her hands tightly in her lap. "I-I spent five thousand at the charity function."

"Fine." He started writing again.

"And I made a long-distance phone call."

"How long?"

"All the way to Florida. My cousin. She couldn't believe I'd--"

"No," Travis said with exaggerated patience. "How long were you on the phone?"

"Forty, maybe forty-five minutes."

"Is there anything else?" he asked, pen held at the ready while she thought. Finally, when she

shook her head, he wrote out the adjusted amount on a new check. He tore it from the book and handed it to her. "There. Now, is the contract between us null and void?"

"Yes," she said, her voice brittle and quiet.

"Good." Travis pressed a button on the door. "Pull the car over, Ben."

He was going to leave her at the side of the road, Jamie realized. And as the limo parked in front of a line of sidewalk venders and street-facing kiosks, without a word to her, Travis opened the door and got out. He disappeared among the crowd of shoppers, and with shaking hands, Jamie folded the check he'd given her and put it in her pocket. Trying not to cry, not sure at all where she was supposed to go from here, she reached across to unfasten Megan from her safety chair. Cradling the baby to her shoulder, she scooted across the seat to exit through the open door and almost cracked skulls with a grinning and rosy-cheeked woman who had ducked down to poke her head inside.

"Hello," the woman said and dropped an armful of red, pink and yellow roses on an empty space in the seat next to Megan's chair.

Jamie sat back, stunned as the woman disappeared and her equally grinning companion bent down to deposit another armful on the floor at her feet.

"Gosh, he's a keeper, isn't he?" the companion gushed. "Is it a special day?"

Stunned, Jamie could only say, "We're getting divorced."

The woman gave her an odd look, but both she and her friend returned to their curbside flower kiosk and each gathered up a second armful. It took another four trips apiece to transfer every blossom they had into the back of the Travis's limo. Roses, daisies, carnations and tulips overflowed every available spot, leaving barely enough room on the seats for them to sit. And as load after armload was deposit around her, Jamie looked out the window in

stunned silence at Travis, who walked slowly up and down in front of the limo, head down, talking on his phone.

When the women were done and Travis had paid them, he came back to the car and bent down to climb inside. He took one look at Jamie, with Megan in her arms and said, "Absolutely not! If Megan is in this car, then she is buckled in her seat. Accidents can happen at any time. Jamie, you are a better mother than that!"

"I thought you were going to leave us here," Jamie confessed. She looked down at the piles of flowers, feeling foolish now for having bothered to entertain such a thought. And when she finally raised her eyes back to his, the expression on his face almost reduced her to tears.

"What in God's name makes you think I would abandon you on the side of the road?" he asked her. He shook his head and, not waiting for an answer, climbed in to sit beside her and closed the door. "Put Megan in her car seat. We have to go."

Feeling even worse now than when they'd left the house, Jamie fastened the baby back into her seatbelt. They rode the rest of the way to the SeaTac Airport smothered by an even heavier silence.

As Ben drove them to the check-in terminal, a line of people standing along the curb caught Jamie's eyes. As the limo drew closer, they held up a series of large white signs, each with a hastily scribbled word in large black, felt-tip-marker letters.

"I," she said as she read down the line of signs, "Can't. Live. Without. You. Marry. Me." Her mouth quirked up and she laughed, even as twin tears spilled down her face while she read the final sign. "James?"

Travis bent to look out the window. He frowned. "That's what I get for attempting romance while in a hurry."

"Love. Travis." Jamie covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes shining brightly through her tears.

"They would get my name right."

Turning in her seat, Jamie said, "You mean it, don't you? You're not just saying it? You really do love me."

Travis looked at her. "Yes. I really love you."

"Then why do you want a divorce?"

"So I can marry you again. A real marriage, made for the right reasons and without time restrictions."

"You love me." Jamie had to shove two dozen carnations out of the way to reach him. She straddled his lap, cupping his face as she kissed him eagerly. Hungrily. "You love me," she whispered.

His arms wrapped tight around her, holding her as close as she could come before he drew back a hand and swatted her hard. "You are in more trouble than you know what to do with, little girl."

She nodded, tears coursing down her cheeks to her chin. "Okay."

He caught her face in his hands. "Come here."

The door swung open and Travis's lawyer, Dan Gregor, stuck his head inside. "Oh, sure. Get me out of a family picnic, put me to work on a Saturday, 'rush, rush' you said, and here you are, locking lips, about to miss your flight."

Travis broke his kiss to check his watch. His eyes widened. "Oh, damn! Come on, darling." He patted her bottom twice. "Grab the baby. We've got to run." To Dan, as he ducked out of the back of the limo, he said, "James? You did that on purpose."

Affronted, Dan protested, "It was a bad connection. By the time I noticed, you had turned the corner and there wasn't time to change the sign. Here." He shoved a clipboard into Travis's hand and tapped the bottom of the paper that was attached to it. "Do you want to stay married?"

"I don't."

"Then sign and stop being so grumpy. You've won the girl, you saved the day, it's a Hollywood moment here." Dan took back the clipboard and pen, and as Jamie emerged with Megan in her arms, said, "After what I've been through these last couple of weeks, I don't blame you for wanting to give this big lunk the boot. My condolences for having to live with him full time. Must be hell."

"I'll put up with that kind of lippy-ness from my secretary," Travis warned as he strolled back to the trunk to help Ben with the suitcases. "But only because she's pregnant."

Dan blinked twice. "I've got a pregnant sister in Miami. Does that count?"

"No."

"Hm." Dan held out the clipboard for Jamie. "All that and discrimination, too." In the act of setting the largest suitcase on the sidewalk, Travis cast the lawyer a dark look, which he pointedly ignored. "Here, sign at the 'x'."

"Grab a suitcase," Travis told him, and the four of them ran all the way to the check-in counter.

"You had to stop and get flowers," Ben panted, laboring alongside them under the weight of most of the baggage.

"It was worth it." A suitcase in each hand, Travis ushered Jamie, who carried only Megan, into line ahead of him.

"Wait up!"

When Jamie turned around it was to see the judge that had originally married them, red-faced and panting as he jogged down the length of the terminal to catch up to them.

"See," Dan said, nudging Ben with his elbow. "It's not just me."

Travis set his suitcases down to throw an arm around Jamie's waist and draw her into his side.

"This," the judge panted heavily as he reached them, "is not supposed to be a weekly event!"

"I appreciate your coming," Travis told him.

"My youngest granddaughter is, at this very minute, taking her very first swimming lesson. I'm supposed to be manning the camcorder. You'd better appreciate it." The elderly judge swiped a handkerchief across his flushed forehead, then glared at Travis. "Let's get this show on the road. Do you?"

"I do," Travis said.

"Do you?" the judge asked Jamie.

She looked up at Travis, smiling. "I do."

"Not to ruin the moment," a checker at the counter called out, "but you folks are next. Are you flying today or what?"

"We are," Travis and Jamie said together.

"Amen," the judge announced. He threw up one hand in a half-hearted wave good-bye. "I'll have the paperwork in the mail on Monday. Enjoy your trip."

"Is that it?" Jamie asked, as they shuffled up to the counter.

"I hope you enjoyed your five second return to single status. Unfortunately, now you are once again Missus Dorsett," Dan told her as he passed his bags through to the counter attendant. "God help you."

"Thank you," Travis told him.

"You'll get my bill on Monday, too." Dan clapped him on the shoulder. "Try not to alienate her any more than you absolutely have to."

"With friends like these," Travis said as he took the tickets.

"Your flight's already made their final boarding call," the counter clerk told them. "I'll call ahead that you're on your way, but you'd better hoof it."

Once again they had to run, barely reaching the gate in time. It was a full flight, even in first class, and they endured a few annoyed glances from the other passengers as they made their way to their seats. While Travis and a stewardess stowed their luggage, Jamie slid into the chair next to the window.

"Seatbelts," the stewardess reminded as the plane began to move, drawing slowly away from the terminal gate.

Stashing Megan's diaper bag in the space beneath Jamie's seat, Travis sat down next to her. Above them, the speaker clicked on.

"Welcome and thank you for flying United Airlines, this is your captain speaking. The skies are sunny and beautiful, and we're anticipating a smooth flight all the way. Please direct your eyes to the front of the cabin where the airline attendants will go over the safety procedures as we taxi out to the runway. Also, I'd like to extend a special welcome aboard to newlyweds, James and Travis Dorsett. Welcome aboard, fellas."

Jamie covered her mouth with one hand while Travis bowed his head, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "I knew it," he said to no one in particular. "He did it on purpose. I'm going to kill him."

"Here's to wishing you a happy honeymoon, wherever your destination may be," the captain cheerfully continued. "And remember, no joining that mile-high club."

"I thought our first wedding was unromantic," Jamie giggled, but caught her breath when he turned his head to look at her. "I liked the flowers, though. Thank you."

His mouth turned up in a warm, slow smile, and he reached out to take her hand. "They sin who tell us Love can die," Travis told her softly. "With life all other passions fly, all others are but vanity."

Jamie laced her fingers with his, the man she'd thought she'd lost, and she shifted closer to him, wanting to lay her head against his shoulder while he spoke.

"In Heaven Ambition cannot dwell, nor Avarice in the vaults of Hell; earthly these passions of the Earth, they perish where they have their birth; but Love--" his hand squeezed hers warmly, "--is indestructible. Its holy flame for ever burneth, from

Heaven it came, to Heaven returneth; too oft on Earth a troubled guest, at times deceived, at times oppressed, it here is tried and purified, then hath in Heaven its perfect rest; it soweth here with toil and care, but the harvest time of Love is there."

She smiled, and her eyes sparkled. In a voice for his ears alone, she said, "You are the head of my household. I will respect, obey and trust in you to care for me. I will confide in you, depend on you, and under no circumstances will I ever run away from you, or from us, again."

He cupped the side of her cheek as he leaned down to kiss her seductive lips.

The Mountain got his contract, and Jamie got to be a Geisha girl for an evening. She also got the paddling of her life on the very same day they arrived home from their trip. Megan got both a mother and a father, as well as two dark-haired and blue-eyed brothers, who grew up to follow in their father's footsteps and in more ways than one. And you can bet, they all of them lived happily ever after.

