

Clutch Me if You Can



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Dedication

To Vinay K. Malviya, MD, hero to countless women
and to John K. Hensler, my own personal hero

Chapter One

Blast it! Did this town really need a traffic light on every corner?

Sarah eased off the gas and brought the car to a stop—again, her feet throbbing in protest. Good grief, what had she been thinking when she agreed to wear Hillary Bowman's God-forsaken four-inch heels? She could barely walk in them, let alone drive a clutch. "And I signed up for this torture," she muttered, shaking her head with disgust. "I must have been out of my mind."

She knew the shoes were the least of her worries.

Sarah twisted the rearview mirror towards her and adjusted the wig she wore, all the while glaring at the face staring back at her, a stranger's face buried under layers of makeup.

For the umpteenth time that day, she wondered what a God-fearing, church-going, Miss Goody-Two Shoes 'preferably flat-heels' was doing out in public dressed like a character from the movie *Pretty Woman*. Playing Vivian Ward might have made Julia Roberts a star, but Sarah Lyons knew she wasn't cut out for the role.

If it was Halloween, she might not have minded the blonde Barbie-doll wig, the black leather mini-skirt or the tightly laced red silk corset that had cost her a day's pay. But it was the middle of July and she couldn't decide who or what aggravated her more: Hillary for orchestrating this evening's stunt, the sleazy corset limiting her oxygen intake, or these wretched red sling-back stilettos cutting into her feet every time she shifted gears.

This was not the way she enjoyed spending her Saturday nights.

For her own sanity, Sarah decided to kick free of Hillary's horrid footwear and drive barefoot when, without warning, the heel on her right shoe snapped off. In that instant her foot slipped from the brake and the car lurched forward.

She struck something.

"Oh! My! Gosh!" she cried out, realizing she'd just bumped into the back of a motorcycle. She quickly shifted into reverse, then inadvertently released the clutch while stomping on the brake and instantly stalled the car.

"Crap!" she yelled, wrenching the handbrake into position. She grabbed her keys, jumped out of the car and despite the fact that one shoe had no heel and her feet were killing her, she ran towards the guy on the cycle. "I am so sorry..."

She skidded to a dead stop, stifling a gasp.

The biker, having veered his motorcycle to the side of the road, was in the process of removing his helmet. As he did, waves of black hair fell to his collar. Momentarily forgetting the seriousness of the situation Sarah marveled at the man's hair, so thick and healthy and gorgeous, and crazily wondered what brand of conditioner he used.

Focus, Sarah.

The man turned towards her, his facial features grim. *Uh oh.* His expression gave her pause, but she told herself he had every right to be upset. After all, she'd just run her car into the back of his motorcycle. She'd be upset, too. She was about to repeat her apology when she noticed him slowly and deliberately checking her out. Hot blood rushed to her face.

Under normal circumstances, that gesture would have warranted some kind of verbal retort, but with his eyes—beautiful sapphire-colored eyes—practically burning into her soul, she couldn't think of a single caustic thing to say. Forget caustic. She couldn't think of a single

thing to say, period. Words were lost to her. She just prayed her mouth hadn't dropped open with drool oozing down the sides.

"This is original," Biker Blue Eyes said, his tone flat. He swung a brawny leather-clad leg over the side of the motorcycle and carefully placed his helmet on the seat. Without saying another word he cut a wide berth around her and headed towards the rear of his bike.

As Sarah turned to follow she couldn't help but admire the way the man's leather pants molded perfectly to his backside, almost like a second skin. She grinned, deciding she really didn't mind black leather after all. Not on him, anyway. And just that quick her grin faded when she realized she was ogling a perfect stranger's butt. What was the matter with her? She taught Sunday school, for heaven's sake.

It's not a sin to look, is it? Depends. But she already had a boyfriend.

Do you? Okay, she really wasn't sure. She hadn't heard from him lately.

Forget him. Concentrate on the moment.

"It's these shoes," Sarah tried to explain, finally finding her voice. At least she thought it was her voice. Why she suddenly sounded like Minnie Mouse on helium was a mystery to her. She needed to calm down. She cleared her throat as she hobbled after him, trying her best to keep her eyes off his backside, however nice it was. "They're not mine. They belong to my boss. I don't even own shoes like these. The heels are too high and they keep getting caught on the floor mat, which makes it really difficult to work the clutch. And then one of them broke off so now I think I owe her a new pair." She knew she was babbling and had to stop herself. "And then the car lurched forward. Into you."

The biker didn't respond. Instead he stooped down and ran his hands along the rear tire. Sarah watched him as he carefully examined his motorcycle, wondering why she couldn't have run into him at *Starbucks*, or at the library, or in church.

Why, oh why, did she have to run into him with her car?

Mesmerized, she followed his hands, long slender fingers gingerly sliding along the tire. For a moment she envied the tire and wondered what it would feel like to —

Eeeekkk!

Where did *that* come from? "I don't think I hit you very hard," she murmured, desperately trying to keep her mind off his hands and what they might be capable of doing. "I mean, my air bag didn't deploy or anything."

She felt numb all over. Even her feet didn't seem to be hurting as much.

"Doesn't seem to be any damage to either my motorcycle or your car," the biker announced. "Good thing I was starting to move forward when you bumped into me." He stood up, brushing debris from his hands.

Although Sarah hadn't liked it herself, she couldn't resist giving him as good as she got. Discreetly, she looked him over. She judged him to be well over six feet tall and in her humble opinion, every inch of him was perfectly packaged and expertly assembled. In addition to the pants, he had on a leather vest under which he wore a black short-sleeved T-shirt. The muscles in his upper arms flexed the shirt in all the right places. A real hottie, he reminded her of Clive Owen, the Hollywood actor she'd last seen in the movie *King Arthur*. All this guy needed was the English accent, although she liked the deep timbre of his voice just fine.

Manna from heaven.

"Shouldn't we exchange information or something?" she offered when she thought she

could speak without her voice squeaking. She displayed one of her best I'm-so-sorry-please-don't-sue-me, how-about-we-go-for-coffee smiles.

"Not interested," he stated flatly, avoiding eye contact. He grabbed his helmet. "I gotta give you credit, though. I've never been approached in this manner before."

Not interested?

"Wha...what?" she stammered. Dressed as she was, she suspected she knew exactly what he was not interested in. Darn Hillary and her stupid ideas anyway. "I meant exchange license and insurance information."

"Hmm." At least this time he looked at her. Well, not at her, exactly. His eyes focused somewhere below her chin. "My mistake," he said, a sly grin growing on his face.

She followed his gaze. *Well, I ogled his butt. An eye for an eye, I guess. Or is it a butt for a boob?* But did he have to be so darn obvious about it? Once again she felt hot blood rush to her cheeks and if it hadn't happened already, she knew her face would soon be burning red. Bright, blotchy red. The most unattractive red imaginable, especially on her.

Instead of standing around like an overripe tomato, Sarah decided to take action. "Hello!" she called, using her hands to conceal her cleavage. When he met her glare with a cocked eyebrow and a devilish grin, she knew he didn't feel the least bit guilty being caught visually devouring her breasts. "I thought you weren't interested," she snapped.

He smirked. A nice smirk, but a smirk all the same.

"For your information, I'm only wearing this ridiculous outfit because my idiot boss thought it would be a hoot to celebrate our general manager's birthday—he's turning fifty—dressed as...well, as working girls. That's why I'm wearing her stupid shoes, which caused this whole mess. Turning down her pathetic attempt at generosity might very well have cost me my job."

"You work for Heidi Fleiss?"

She gasped, plopping her hands on her hips. "Noooo," she said, matching his sarcasm. "I work for a small company with an absentee owner and a self-serving general manager who allows my emotionally challenged boss free reign of the place. None of us can figure out why. This getup," she added, running her hands up and down her outfit, "is typical of her raunchy sense of humor. We all have to go along with whatever she wants, or find other employment. And believe me, if we could find jobs without having to relocate, we would." *Gosh, I sound like a shrew. I need to calm down.*

"Birthday, huh?" he asked in a tone that implied he didn't believe her for one minute. Again he ran his eyes over her. "Whoever he is, I hope he likes his present."

And then he smiled. A real smile. A dazzling display of white that lit up his face like a Fourth of July celebration, enhancing the blue in his eyes.

Sarah tried to respond, but she couldn't force anything from her mouth except short sputters of air. Embarrassed, she snapped her lips closed. Later, she would swear that at that moment her heart actually skipped a beat, but for now all she could do was stare at him.

Dimples, she thought once her brain cells started firing again. On top of everything else, he had to have dimples. No doubt standing before her was the prototype God had followed when He created man.

The spell was broken when the biker pulled on his helmet, covering up that beautiful head of hair. Not trusting herself to speak, Sarah stood silently by while he jump-started his

motorcycle. After revving the engine a few times, he met her gaze, raised his hand to his forehead and saluted. Before she could react, he sped away from the curb, leaving her standing slack-jawed by the side of the road.

The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.

Chapter Two

"Aarrgghhh!" Sarah grumbled, stomping back to her car as best she could in one good shoe. "I don't know what's worse. Meet a great looking guy who thinks I'm for sale, or meet a great looking guy who thinks I'm for sale and turns me down flat."

Not interested. Now, that hurt.

She reached her car just as a trio of young men in a yellow Ford pickup truck slowed alongside her.

Keep your head down and don't make eye contact.

Sarah felt her shoulder muscles tighten. She braced herself against the verbal assault she knew was coming and sure enough, the guys didn't disappoint her. They immediately started wolf whistling and catcalling.

"Screw you!" she yelled, the worst thing she dared, only to realize too late what a foolish remark it was for this situation. All she managed to do was encourage them more.

"How much?" hooted the jerk sitting next to the window. The guy in the middle started waving a fist-full of money at her. The driver just leered.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

Sarah grabbed for the door handle and missed, breaking off a newly polished nail in the process. Not caring that she'd just ruined a twenty-dollar manicure, she yanked open the door and practically dove into her car. As fast as she could, she slammed the door closed behind her. "Don't drop the keys," she prayed, fumbling through her key ring. "Don't drop the keys."

The men continued laughing as the driver alternated between revving the engine and honking the horn. After what seemed like an eternity, but in reality was merely seconds, they sped away, tires squealing and rubber burning.

"Morons!" she yelled after them, once they were a safe distance away. She could still hear the horn blaring even after they'd turned the corner and were no longer in sight.

Despite a shaky hand, Sarah managed to get the proper key into the ignition and started the car. She shifted into gear, but no sooner got rolling than she had to divert into a nearby shopping center. Her knees were trembling so badly she didn't think she could operate the clutch without jerking the car all over the road. She pulled into the first available space and turned off the ignition, fighting back tears of anger and humiliation. She had sold out her values for the sake of a job, and it was a disaster. Her life was a disaster. Everything she touched seemed to turn to crap.

"Crap?" Sarah asked aloud, her tone angry. "Forget crap. It turns to shit, Sarah. *Shit! Shit! Shit!*"

Taking a deep breath and slowly exhaling, she forced herself to relax. She knew cursing wasn't the answer and besides, she only had herself to blame. She'd been warned, but she'd been desperate.

Thanks to an uncertain economy, she'd just been laid off from her second job in three years when her friend, Katie Saunders happened to mention an opening with her company. But Sarah knew Katie regretted saying anything as soon as the words fell from her mouth. Katie didn't think the job a good fit for someone who'd been raised with strong religious values. The woman who ran the office possessed no such values, Katie explained. She was

merely possessed.

Katie did her best to warn Sarah that Hillary Bowman was a mean-spirited egomaniac whose every uttering had some sort of sexual innuendo attached to it. Furthermore, the woman took special delight in blaming others for her mistakes. Katie also made no bones about the fact that Hillary's emotional immaturity wasn't always conducive to a good working environment.

Her friend certainly hadn't painted a rosy picture, but at the time, Sarah hadn't cared. She needed a job or she'd have to move home. And as much as she loved her father, she did not want to be a twenty-six-year-old single woman living at home. She already felt like the world's biggest loser; having to move back into her old bedroom would only add insult to injury.

Sarah's persuasive arguments eventually won Katie over, and she agreed to arrange an interview. Shortly thereafter Sarah found herself back among the ranks of the employed. She became the Human Resources Manager for Just Mark The Spot, otherwise known as JMS, manufacturer and supplier of industrial port-a-potties.

And here she was, dressed like a hooker, simply to please her boss so she could remain in the portable poop business.

Who said God doesn't have a sense of humor? Sarah chuckled morosely, shaking her head at the irony of the situation.

Hillary had proposed the *Pretty Woman* idea during her regular Monday morning staff meeting (*staff meeting? Ha!*). Sarah was quick to note that as Hillary unfolded her plan, she focused her attention solely on her, almost as if she dared her to object to the idea. But Sarah wasn't one to create conflict, especially when she was *this close* to completing her ninety-day probationary period. She knew that some time during the next few weeks, Hillary would decide whether to keep her on as a permanent employee, and she didn't want to give her any reason not to hire her.

Two more weeks and Lord willing, she'd be a full-time, benefit receiving working girl—the office kind, not the street version. And if that meant she had to go along with Hillary's hair-brained birthday party scheme, Sarah'd decided then and there that she'd go for it. With gusto.

If only she'd seen the movie, she'd have known what she was getting herself into.

Sarah had blindly forged ahead, eagerly expressing her willingness to participate in Hillary's stunt, only to be caught off guard by her unexpected offer to lend her a pair of shoes. Designer shoes. Hillary's very own personal pair of Jimmy Choo originals. "Jimmy who?" Sarah remembered asking at the time, much to the snickering delight of her boss.

Sarah glared at the shoes in question. It was painfully obvious to her that Jimmy had a penchant for torturing women by designing shoes that were too ugly, too tight and way too uncomfortable. They didn't flex when she moved, and felt like she was walking around with jagged plastic milk jugs stuck to her feet. If this was what women paid for in a designer shoe, Sarah resolved to stick with *Payless* shoes. At least her ordinary, run-of-the-mill, no-name shoes didn't cause serious damage to her feet.

She kicked off the medieval torture devices and with unnecessary force pitched the wretched things into the backseat of her car. "Good-bye Jimmy Choo," she said, sighing with relief. "Can't say it's been nice wearing you." She wiggled her newly liberated toes, bringing

the blood flow back to her feet. They felt better already.

Sarah pulled down the sun visor and flipped open a lighted mirror. True to her word, she had outdone herself. But now, staring at her reflection, she felt a bit ashamed. "So long Vivian Ward," she said, tugging off the blonde wig. "You can join Jimmy in the backseat." The wig followed the same path as the shoes. "Now you two behave back there," she quipped. "The last thing the world needs is an original Jimmy Ward."

She chuckled, her mood already improving. Then she went to work getting the rest of herself back to normal.

Running her fingers through her shoulder-length auburn hair, Sarah fussed with it until it looked semi-decent. She then peeled off eyelashes that had taken nearly forty minutes out of her life to apply without gluing her eyes shut. Finally, she popped out blue contact lenses and tossed them in the trash bag hanging from the radio knob. She shook her head at the thought of more wasted money, buying contacts simply to change the color of her eyes from green to blue. "Really, Sarah," she chastised her mirror image. "What were you thinking?" She couldn't do anything about the black eyeliner just yet, but she did blot off the ruby red lipstick and rub the rouge from her cheeks. "Much better," she declared, closing the mirror and returning the sun visor to its upright position.

Sarah looked down at her overflowing cleavage. No wonder that guy had ogled, she reasoned, since she was displaying more boobs than she actually owned. *Talk about false advertising!* She grinned at the thought of his discovering she only looked this voluptuous because of the too-tight corset she had on. Not that he'd ever find out, she knew, her grin slowly fading. Guys like him usually ignored the Sarah Sunday School type.

Sarah Sunday School.

Here she was, eight years out of high school, and the memory of how some of her classmates had taunted her because she was a minister's daughter still stung.

I don't want to think about that now.

She decided to think about more pleasant things, like the guy on the motorcycle. Until today, she'd never run into—*ha! ha!*—anyone like him before, someone who made her pulse race simply by standing next to her. Someone who actually rendered her speechless. And he obviously liked women, judging by the way that his eyes had lingered on her pumped-up breasts. She felt herself grow warm. Gosh, just thinking about him was causing a pleasant tingling sensation in the depths of her tummy.

Gently rubbing her midsection, it dawned on her that she was acting like the heroine in one of those romance novels she secretly loved to read. "If only they were true," she sighed wistfully. "Then by summer's end he'll realize I'm the only woman for him. He'll sweep me off my feet and together we'll ride into the sunset on his motorcycle."

Ppffft. As if.

She shook her head at her silliness. What in the world was wrong with her today? She'd never had this kind of reaction to a guy before. Especially someone she'd just met. She didn't even know his name, for crying out loud. Not that it mattered, she knew. That guy would never be interested in someone like her. Either she was more upset than she thought about wasting a perfectly good Saturday night in Hillary's company, or she needed to seriously cut down on her caffeine intake.

Besides, there was still the issue of Damon. Sarah didn't want to think about other guys

until she knew where she stood with her current (*was he?*) boyfriend.

A honking horn distracted her.

For a split second, Sarah feared the idiots in the yellow pickup had somehow followed her into the parking lot. Warily, she turned towards the sound, prepared to high tail it out of there if necessary. Instead, she spied a 1998 Lincoln Continental idling in the space next to hers. Inside, an elderly blue-haired woman barely able to see over the steering wheel sat waving at her.

It was Mrs. Greta Cooper, a parishioner from church.

Sarah felt her stomach drop. "Oh, no!" she groaned through gritted teeth, while forcing a smile to her lips. Of all people she could have run into dressed the way she was, why did it have to be Greta Cooper? Sarah slunk down into her seat, wondering how on earth she could have missed that big black boat docking right next to her.

She'd rather deal with the morons in the truck.

Sarah acknowledged Mrs. Cooper with a half-hearted wave. *Please, please, please do not come over here and see me half-naked.* From past experience, she knew gossipy Greta would make it her mission to tell everyone who'd listen, in graphic detail, how she'd witnessed the minister's daughter out in public dressed like a floozy.

She thanked heaven she'd already removed the blonde wig and makeup.

Mrs. Cooper lowered her window. "Sarah, honey, I thought that was your car. How are you, dear?"

"Hot. It's really hot today, Mrs. Cooper," Sarah stammered, fanning herself with her hands. *Do not leave your car. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200. Do not get me into serious trouble with my dad.*

"Yes, it's dreadfully hot," Greta agreed. "I can see that your face is all flushed. Don't you have air conditioning in your car?"

Greta Cooper might be older than Moses, but those piercing gray eyes of hers missed nothing. "Yes, I do," Sarah assured her. "But I've been in and out of the heat all day."

"You need to be more careful," the elderly woman advised. "You don't want to get heat stroke, now do you?"

I don't want to give my father a stroke, either. "I'll be careful, Mrs. Cooper." *Please go away now.*

"See you at church tomorrow?"

"Of course, Mrs. Cooper."

"Will your young man be joining us again?"

Thanks for the reminder. Can you twist the knife in a little deeper? "I don't think so, Mrs. Cooper," Sarah replied. "I haven't spoken with him in a while."

Not since Hillary scared him away.

Sarah flashed back to two weeks prior. She and Damon had been dating about six weeks when he happened by the office one night to take her to dinner. She'd been running late, so Damon had amused himself by wandering through the office. When Sarah finished what she was doing, she went searching for him and much to her surprise, she'd found him with Hillary. The two of them were huddled over Hillary's computer, thick as thieves. She'd heard Hillary ask, "Do you think that's possible?"

"What's possible?" Sarah interrupted, startling them both.

In a flash Hillary moved to shut down the screen, but not before Sarah had seen the Web site.

She hadn't heard from Damon since. He probably thought she was cut from the same soiled cloth as her boss, and couldn't run away from her fast enough.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear," Mrs. Cooper said, bringing Sarah back to her present predicament.

Sarah studied the woman. Greta didn't look sorry. And was that a gleam in her eye? "It's no big deal, Mrs. Cooper," she said, casually shrugging her shoulders. "Really." She prayed she sounded convincing. She had no intention of becoming fodder for Greta's after-church gab session.

"Men are like buses, Sarah," Mrs. Cooper said, leaning out her window as she dispensed her advice. "You miss one, sooner or later another comes along."

"I think I'd rather hail a motorcycle," Sarah whispered.

"What's that, dear?" Mrs. Cooper asked.

"Oh, nothing," she replied, casually disregarding Greta's question. "Like I said, it's no big deal. I don't want to hold you up, so I'll see you tomorrow, Mrs. Cooper."

Thankfully, Greta took the hint. "Have a good day, dear," the woman said as she rolled up her window. With one last wave to Sarah, Greta was on her way.

Sarah sagged back in her seat. While she waited for her heart to stop pounding, she watched Mrs. Cooper cautiously maneuver her car through the parking lot, wondering why the petite old lady would want to drive such a mammoth vehicle. "That was too close," Sarah muttered. "What was I thinking, coming out in public dressed like this?"

In a town the size of Westville, a picturesque community some twenty miles south of Cleveland, Ohio (Population: 8,574; although any day now Mrs. Ferrari would deliver her twins and up the census tally by two), Sarah should have realized she might run into someone she knew. Why hadn't she thought of that before it actually happened? And what about the restaurant? What if someone from her church was there? "What if my *dad* is there?" she cried out loud.

Sarah shuddered at the thought. No way did she want to run into the Reverend Paul Lyons tonight. The disappointment in his eyes would give her nightmares for years to come. Gosh darn it! Enough was enough already. She pushed the trunk release, and after checking to make sure no one was around, she ran to the back of her car and removed a small tote bag from the trunk.

Thank goodness she'd had the good sense to pack a spare change of clothes, just in case. "Good-bye job, hello unemployment line," she sang as she unzipped the tote and removed a pink short-sleeved blouse and a pair of black flat-heeled sandals. Donning the blouse, she buttoned it so that not even a hint of color from the corset could be seen. She dropped the tote into the trunk and slammed down the hood, grabbed her shoes and headed back into the car. Squirming in her seat, she peeled off the fishnet stockings she wore with little trouble and stuffed them into the trash bag as well.

Sarah slipped on her comfortable shoes. She knew Hillary wasn't going to be happy with her, but that was just too darn bad. No matter what her boss said or did to her tonight, this was as ho-ish as she was going to get.

She started the car and flicked on her favorite country music station in time to hear Tim

McGraw singing his latest hit song. Bopping her head along with the melody, Sarah joined Tim in a duet as she drove out of the parking lot. She knew she didn't have the voice of Faith Hill, but singing made her happy and she desperately needed a large dose of happiness to get through the next few hours.

Chapter Three

Jake Reynolds bit into a juicy chicken wing, savoring its tangy flavor—not too sweet, not too spicy—just the way he liked them. He hadn't had good wings in so long, and knew he'd probably order another dozen or so before the night was over. He was impressed. *BLEACHERS*, Westville's trendy new restaurant, was turning out to be quite a find.

Following the motorcycle incident, Jake had pulled into the parking lot of what had once been an abandoned warehouse. He found a secluded spot away from the other vehicles and stowed his bike. He entered the restaurant, a unique place that gave him the feeling he'd stepped into a baseball stadium. High ceilings and bleacher-style seating helped create the ballpark atmosphere. He signed the Batting Order, happy to see only a handful of patrons ahead of him. After the hostess handed him a pager, he wandered over to the Bullpen, where he ordered a cold beer to enjoy while he waited. Before he could finish it though, his pager vibrated.

Jake returned to the hostess podium. A young woman, dressed in a uniform similar in style to those worn by female ball players of yesteryear, stood waiting to escort him to his table. Although authentic in concept, he knew her short skirt and skin-tight top was much more revealing than anything those courageous athletes had ever worn.

He followed her to his table.

Three-tiered bleacher-style seating ran along two walls of the building. Tables attached to the bleachers allowed patrons to eat while enjoying various special events telecast from flat screens strategically placed around the room. In front of the bleacher section were several round tables arranged like bases on a ball field. Obviously this area was reserved for those patrons unable or unwilling to sit on the bleachers.

Jake bit into another wing. Mmm, the food was delicious. Good thing, too. It helped take his mind off his growing frustration with Banger, the man he was supposed to be meeting tonight. The man who ran his grandfather's business. Banger was notorious for running late and it irked Jake, who prided himself on his punctuality. Jake believed people who consistently made others wait were rude, and in a work environment, unprofessional. True to form, Banger was twenty minutes behind schedule.

And the clock was ticking.

From his perch in the third row at the back of the building, Jake had an unobstructed view of the entire place, particularly the front door. Oversized spotlights illuminating the lobby made it easy to identify patrons as they entered the restaurant. At first, he kept his eyes peeled on the entrance, willing Banger to walk through the door so he could conclude his business with the man and go home. Soon though, Jake found his attention diverted to a trio of women gathered around a large round table located in the area representing second base, right in front of his bleacher section. Actually, he noticed that pretty much everyone in the restaurant was following the action coming from that table.

Jake assumed the leader of the group was the loud-mouthed, older woman dressed entirely in black: mini-skirt, low-cut top, and a too-tight waist-length leather jacket. He wondered if the stringy long black hair was her own or a wig. He sincerely hoped it was a wig. Otherwise, that woman was in serious need of a good hair stylist. Knee-high black boots with thick high heels completed her outfit. Jake decided all she was missing a whip. Then he

noticed her necklace, a thick silver chain from which dangled two large silver letters, H and B.
H and B, he pondered.

Hot Body? Only if someone turned off the air conditioning in the place.

Hardly Breathing? In that tight outfit, could be.

Huge Butt? He grinned into his beer.

He never would have been so aware of the woman had she not kept turning in his direction. Once or twice would have gone unnoticed, but she did it with such frequency it soon became apparent to anyone with half a brain she was actively seeking someone's attention.

Please don't let it be me.

There! She did it again, staring right up at him. Only this time she winked and gave him a discreet little wave. Jake swallowed hard. He had truly hoped he wasn't the target she had locked her sights on. Before he could decide how to best handle the situation though, he noticed the gentleman sitting in the tier directly below his casually nod his head. Apparently satisfied, the woman turned back toward her group. Jake whistled with relief.

Go for it pal.

He wondered again what the initials H and B stood for. *Hooker Babe?* Hooker maybe, but babe? Nah he decided, taking another swig of beer. From this distance, he couldn't tell if she was in her late thirties or early forties, but even in that provocative outfit she was nothing to write home about. Actually, Jake felt slightly embarrassed for the woman. Obviously she didn't know how ridiculous she looked or she never would have ventured out in public dressed the way she was. Didn't she have access to a full-length mirror? Now, the young lady who had bumped into his motorcycle was a different matter altogether.

Wait a minute. Two hookers in a span of one hour? In Westville? Not possible, was it?

Reflecting back on the accident, Jake realized that living in Las Vegas these past five years had made him a cautious man. When that woman had bumped into him, he would have bet money she was trying to solicit him. Hell, it happened often enough for him to recognize the ploy. But now, thinking back, he should have suspected something was wrong. When had he ever run into a prostitute embarrassed by someone admiring the merchandise?

And clearly, that girl had been embarrassed.

Jake chuckled, enjoying the vision replaying in his mind. There they were in all their glorious wonder. Of course he had ogled. A guy could only resist so much temptation. But man, when she had blushed from the top of her corset to the roots of her hair, and when those blue eyes of hers had snapped with fire, he should have known something was wrong.

Didn't she mention something about a birthday party?

He directed his attention back to HB, as he decided to call her. Two other women stood with her, a brunette dressed almost identical to HB, and a blond, more somberly attired in a sleeveless low-cut black dress, but nothing too revealing. Then Jake noticed the half-dozen birthday balloons sitting in the center of the table. Several were black, with the number fifty splashed across them.

"I'll be damned," he muttered. Since it would defy the odds that two birthday parties were held on the same night, having the same outrageous theme for someone turning the same age, the lady must have been telling him the truth. But where was she? And where was the birthday boy?

Jake scanned the table. It didn't appear that there was a man associated with the group, and the woman who had bumped into his motorcycle was also absent. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe it wasn't the same party.

Somehow, in the back of his mind, Jake didn't think so.

From its case on his belt, his cell phone started vibrating. He pulled it free. "Yeah," he said, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"Sorry for the late notice, buddy," said the caller. "But I can't meet you tonight."

Jake pulled the phone away and sighed, loudly. This was so typical. "Banger!" he said none too gently. "You know I'm only in town tonight. What's the deal?"

"Sorry man, but the wife and kids planned a birthday dinner for me tonight."

"It's your birthday?" he asked, eyeing the black balloons. "Lot of that going around today."

"Huh?"

"Nothing," Jake said. "Happy birthday. But why didn't you say something when we scheduled this meeting?"

"It was a surprise," Banger explained. "My birthday was actually yesterday, but my family sprung the party on me just as I was getting ready to walk out the door. Can we reschedule?"

"I fly back to Vegas tomorrow afternoon, dude."

"Hmm. How about breakfast tomorrow?"

"No can do. Tonight was the only time I had free." *As you well know.* "I came in town specifically to meet with you. Tonight."

"Are you staying with Mary?" Banger asked. "Maybe I can swing by the house in a couple of hours."

Jake checked the time. It was almost seven o'clock. In Banger's world, a couple of hours meant he wouldn't arrive until ten, ten-thirty—if he showed up at all. No way would Jake allow himself to be held hostage like that. Besides, he wasn't about to abuse his mother's hospitality by inviting late-night visitors into her home, not even for Banger. "Listen, there's really no need for us to meet," he said gruffly. "I don't know why I didn't think of this before, but you can just e-mail me your current financials and operating plan. I'll review them and then tell Sam my recommendations."

"Great!" Banger exclaimed, sounding relieved. "I'll take care of it first thing Monday morning."

"Make sure that you do," Jake said, none too gently. "I don't want Sam to think I'm blowing him off."

"Sure thing," Banger assured him. "And again, I'm sorry about tonight."

"Yep," Jake said. He snapped his phone closed. "What an ass." He'd warned Banger of the limited time he'd had this weekend. It crossed his mind that he was deliberately trying to avoid him.

Banger. Although Jake knew the man had been christened with the moniker in college, he still found it applicable some thirty years later. The few times Jake had to deal with him, he felt like banging his own head against the wall. It had to hurt less. Judging from the nickname, others must have shared his frustrations.

Lucky for Banker, he was an old friend of the family, having gone through college with

both Jake's mother and father. Jake had to admit that from what he could tell, Banger was a hell of a salesman—the man could sell bullshit to a bull—but that didn't make him a good business manager. Far from it. Time and again, Banger proved himself to be the epitome of scatterbrained and disorganized, running in several different directions without ever getting anything accomplished. He drove Jake crazy.

Truthfully, Jake couldn't understand how his grandfather tolerated the man. Yet Samuel P. Marks not only spoke highly of Banger, he now relied on him for the day-to-day-operations of the business Sam had single-handedly created over thirty-five years ago. Jake shook his head. His grandfather was old school, from a generation where a handshake was as good as a written contract. Sometimes Jake thought Gramps too trusting for his own good.

"What a colossal waste of time," Jake muttered into his beer, regretting he'd ever agreed to make this trip.

Two weeks back, his mother had telephoned with the news that Sam was contemplating selling his company. Before Sam proceeded though, he'd asked if Jake would be willing to review the financials with him. Out of respect for his mother, he had agreed, although he suspected this was Sam's way of involving him in the business in the hopes that he'd take it over altogether. But he had no more interest in owning Sam's business today than he had wanted to run it five years ago, when Sam had first asked, prior to he and his brother heading west to start their own company.

Jake was about to call it a night when he noticed the demurely dressed blonde from the birthday party leave the table and walk briskly to the front door. She stood beneath the lights of home plate, cell phone pressed to her ear, gazing out the window. Obviously she was waiting for someone, maybe even the birthday boy himself.

With this evening's plans now shot to hell, Jake decided to stick around for a time. He had to admit that he was more than a little curious about the guy whose office staff went to such lengths to celebrate his birthday. If this is the same group, he reminded himself. He motioned to his server. He might as well order another batch of wings, sit back and enjoy the half-time entertainment playing out in center field.

Chapter Four

"Where the hell are you?" Katie's voice screeched from Sarah's cell phone. "It's almost seven o'clock."

Sarah cradled the phone against her shoulder while she shifted gears, waiting for the apology that usually followed one of Katie's curse words. When none was forthcoming, she knew Katie had to be stressing as badly as she'd been earlier. The thought gave her a small measure of comfort. "I'll be there in five minutes. I ran into a little problem." She snorted at her private joke.

"You'd better hurry," Katie warned her. "HB's having a meltdown because not only are you late, so is Amy Hoggen. I think she's afraid Doug will arrive before we all do."

Sarah shook her head with disgust and sighed loudly. Hillary's having a meltdown? So what else was new? The anger she'd been trying to suppress all day suddenly erupted out of her. "First of all, I hate the fact that we have to call that woman HB. I mean really, does she think she's some big-time Hollywood director? We sell port-a-potties, for crying out loud. Second, I'll bet you a week's pay Amy doesn't even show up tonight. Her husband is way too conservative to ever let his wife traipse around in public dressed like a whore. And third, there's not a chance in heaven Doug will arrive before the rest of us. He'll be late for his own funeral."

"Wow. I don't think I've ever heard you this angry before," Katie said. "You sound just how I feel – totally pissed off."

"I am," Sarah readily admitted. "It's bad enough we have to put up with Hillary's ridiculous antics all week long, but when she starts intruding on our weekends and forces us to play dress up with her, well, that's flat-out wrong."

"Just get here as soon as you can," Katie urged.

Katie caught Sarah by the arm as soon as she came through the door. "Finally," she muttered, pulling Sarah to one side.

"I told you, I ran into a –."

"Never mind that," Katie cut her off. "I need to give you a heads up. Damon's here."

"What?" Sarah cried out, a little louder than she meant to.

"Don't look now," Katie advised, "but I spied him sitting in the second row towards the back of the room. He's alone."

"He's alone?" she echoed, whispering now. She dared a peek over Katie's shoulder, but the spotlights shining down from the ceiling made visual surveillance into the restaurant impossible.

"Yeah," Katie replied. "For now."

"What do you mean 'for now?' Maybe he's just getting something to eat."

"Twenty miles out of his way?" Katie asked in a cutting tone. "In the small town where you live? On a Saturday night? Sounds too coincidental for me."

"Well, this place just opened," Sarah reasoned. She didn't like what Katie was implying. She didn't like it at all. "And everybody's been raving about it."

"Or maybe he's waiting for someone."

Bingo.

Once again Sarah felt the tenuous hold on her emotions snap. "Thanks, Katie," she cracked, angrily plopping her hands on her hips. "That makes you the second person today to remind me that Damon Thompson has apparently dumped me without having the decency to tell me."

"I'm sorry," Katie immediately apologized. "I just get so angry about the whole damn mess. Oops. Sorry. The whole darn mess. And besides, I don't like seeing you hurt."

Sarah relented. "I'm sorry, too," she said. Jeez-oh-Pete. She knew the night had catastrophe written all over it, but she shouldn't take her frustrations out on Katie. "You're right, as usual," she conceded. "Since Damon's unfortunate encounter with Hillary, he's been avoiding me like the plague, so why would he risk being in a place where the odds are in his favor that he'll run into me? Hey! Maybe that's it. Maybe he's too embarrassed to call me and is hoping to run into me."

"Maybe," Katie said, not sounding convinced. "If you want to go home, I'll think of something to tell HB."

"You don't need to," Sarah said with determination. "I'm going over there and find out what's up with us."

Surprise showed on Katie's face. "You're going to confront Damon?"

"I'm not going to make a scene, if that's what you mean. But I saw the guy twice a week for nearly two months. I think I deserve some sort of explanation as to why all of a sudden he stops calling me. Besides, I wasn't the one caught in an embarrassing situation."

"Good for you," Katie said, patting Sarah on the arm. "I figured you'd either pretend he wasn't here, or you'd leave."

"No way am I leaving," Sarah declared. "But please do me a favor and don't tell Hillary I'm here yet. You know how she gets and I don't think I can deal with one of her outbursts right now. I'll be back in a few minutes, with or without Damon in my life."

"Don't worry about HB," Katie advised. "You just march over there and find out what bug Damon has up his butt. Because if he's blaming you for her shenanigans, he's going to have to deal with me."

"Thanks for being such a good friend," Sarah said, giving Katie a quick hug. And then she laughed. "And thanks for not pummeling Damon to within an inch of his life."

Katie smirked. "The only thing that saved him was my not wanting HB to know he's here, especially after her office prank. Go on," she said, shooing Sarah away. "I'll cover for you."

Sarah skirted around the tables, making her way over to Damon. Her heart was beating so hard she felt sure everyone could see it pounding in her chest. She had to admit Katie was right about her. Normally, she went out of her way to avoid conflict. She just didn't like dealing with it. But this time was different. This time she wanted answers.

Correction: I deserve answers.

The main one was, were she and Damon still a couple, or weren't they? And if they weren't, then she needed to understand what had gone wrong and why he hadn't felt it necessary to clue her in. She had thought things were going so well, especially after he had offered to attend church services with her, the Sunday before what she came to think of as The Hillary Incident occurred. Always careful not to force her beliefs on anyone, Sarah had been

tremendously touched by Damon's apparent willingness to accept and support her religious convictions.

Her father had even joined them for brunch following church services on that particular Sunday. As this was the first meeting between the two men in her life, Sarah'd naturally been nervous. In the past, the few guys she'd brought home tended to shy away from her dad. She supposed the idea of socializing with a minister could be intimidating for some, as if they feared her sweet father would rain fire and brimstone down upon them if he discovered their sins. It hadn't been that way with Damon. They'd instantly hit it off, finding a common bond in their love of sports. She'd been on cloud nine, certain she'd found the perfect guy.

And then, two days later, The Hillary Incident changed everything.

As Sarah drew closer to Damon, she noticed him intently staring at one particular table; so totally focused he didn't even see her walking his way. She followed his gaze and sure enough, he was watching the JMS party.

There's Hillary, playing the role of Dominatrix, Sarah thought. How apropos. She then noticed Hillary's personal assistant, Jamie Boyer. Jamie was dressed in similar fashion to Hillary, and as usual she was glued to Hillary's side. Only Katie, wearing a straight-lined black dress that perfectly showcased her size eight figure, was recognizable to anyone who knew her. Sarah deemed Katie's outfit better suited for a wedding reception than a *Pretty Woman* birthday party, but then Katie always looked sharp, no matter what she wore. Wait a minute, Sarah mused. Damon knew Katie. Could she be right in thinking he'd somehow recognized Sarah's work group and was simply waiting for her to show up?

The thought gave her courage.

Sarah put a smile on her face. "Damon, hi!" she called out, sliding into the bench next to him.

Damon glanced her way, then quickly looked down at his plate. "Sarah, what's up?" he said, sounding annoyed. He picked up a French fry and shoved it into his mouth.

"Nothing much," Sarah automatically replied. His response caused her smile to falter and her stomach to quiver. And not the pleasant tingling sensation Biker Blue Eyes had inspired earlier, but a queasy trip to the gynecologist for the annual pap exam feeling. Obviously, Damon wasn't waiting for her. He'd barely acknowledged her. So much for that theory, she thought with apprehension.

Silence reigned. After several excruciating seconds Sarah hesitantly asked, "What brings you here?"

"Just came in for a bite to eat," Damon said, squirming in his seat. "The food's great." He stuffed several more fries into his mouth, then jerked his head toward her work group. "Aren't those the people from your office?"

"Yeah," she replied, looking past Damon and his bulging mouth to where Katie and the others congregated. Gross! How come she never noticed he talked with his mouth full? "That's my boss's idea of a good time. I left you a couple of messages when I hadn't heard from you." There. She'd given him an opening. Hopefully he'd walk through it so they could have an honest conversation about what was going on.

Damon wasn't walking through anything. "Everything's cool," he said, swiping his fingers across his mouth. He wiped them along his pant leg before grasping his mug and draining the last of the beer. "Looks like they're having a great time down there."

What's wrong with him? Sarah glanced at her work group; typical HB, braying like a donkey. Typical Jamie, imitating HB's every move. And typical Katie, looking like she wanted to be anywhere but with those two. Yep. A great time. What was Damon thinking? She turned back to him. He seemed to have a bad case of the jitters. Was he still upset about Hillary?

"Damon," she tried again. "I'm sorry about what happened to you at the office. You know...the incident with my boss. I didn't know she was going to do that to you." She reached out and laid her hand on his arm. "I'm also sorry that I didn't say anything then, but I knew you were upset because you were so quiet afterwards. And when I hadn't heard from you, well, as you can see, she clearly likes the provocative."

"No problem, Sarah," Damon said. He casually brushed away her hand and finally looked her in the eye, grinning slyly. It gave her an uncomfortable feeling, reminding her of the cat who not only ate the canary, but several goldfish and a pet mouse as well. "I wasn't bothered at all," he added. "Your boss has a wicked sense of humor."

Sarah shook her head, not sure she had heard him correctly. *Hillary has a wicked sense of humor?* And what did Damon mean, he wasn't bothered? Wasn't that why she hadn't heard from him in over two weeks?

She thought back to The Incident, when she had walked in on Hillary proudly showing Damon a pornographic Web site. After Sarah had interrupted them, Hillary spewed one of her crude jokes in an attempt at levity. But Damon stood frozen to the floor, so embarrassed he couldn't say anything.

At least, at the time Sarah thought he'd been embarrassed. Now, sitting here next to him, she wasn't so sure.

Gosh, just thinking about that Web site made her skin crawl. Unexpectedly chilled, she wrapped her arms about herself, rubbing her upper arms for warmth. She knew something was wrong. Damon used to be so easy to talk to, but right now it was like pulling teeth trying to get him to say anything. What was the matter with him? Was he confused about what she was talking about? She was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, but for her own peace of mind she had to ask him about that Web site. "Naked women shooting Ping-Pong balls from their vaginas is funny?"

"What?"

"Naked women? Ping-Pong balls? Ring a bell?"

Damon smirked. "HB merely wanted a man's perspective on whether or not that act was possible, Sarah," he said with disdain. "That's all. No big deal."

No big deal? Since when was porn no big deal? This conversation was getting worse by the minute. "You're on a first-name basis with my boss?"

"That's what she likes to be called, isn't it?" he retorted, his tone now as degrading as that Web site. He wiped his mouth again, only this time he used a napkin. He balled up the soiled paper and shoved it into his empty beer mug. "What would you suggest I call her?"

Don't tempt me. Sarah glared at Damon.

"Well?" he demanded.

She refused to be baited by him. Instead she asked, "Why would HB ask you about that Web site, Damon? You came into the office to pick me up. She knows about my religious background so why would she ask you, someone I'm seeing, about a gross sexual act?"

"I'm a man, aren't I?" Damon shot back. "At least I was until I started dating you."

"What?" she cried, stunned. *Who is this guy?* "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're too uptight, Sarah," Damon told her. "Part of your problem is that you don't know how to lighten up and have a good time."

Am I actually hearing this? "That's only part of my problem?" she sarcastically asked. "What's the rest of my problem? I brake for animals?"

"Speaking of animals," Damon said with a leer. "You should have seen the horse video."

"Spare me." *You are such a pig.* "You really disappoint me, Damon." She felt tears sting her eyes and rapidly blinked them away. All of a sudden, she desperately wanted a shower. She had hugged this guy. Kissed this guy. Thought she could build a future with this guy. And he turned out to be a big—

"We only dated six weeks, babe," he said, interrupting her thoughts. He pulled his wallet from his pocket. "Six long, celibate weeks." He stood up, dropping several bills on the table. "Don't read anything more into it than that."

Sarah felt pain. She looked down at her hands, not realizing she'd been clutching them so tightly her nails had dug into her palms. She released her fingers. "If you felt this way, Damon, why leave me in limbo?" she asked, her voice low. "Why not just tell me?"

"No muss, no fuss," Damon said, snickering.

She gasped, dumbfounded by the way he was treating her. And why was he looking at her as though she was something he'd just scrapped off the bottom of his shoe? Gosh, she really wanted to wipe that smirk from his face. *Where's a horde of locust when a girl really needs one?* "You have ketchup on your shirt, you jerk," she suddenly blurted out, giving in to an uncharacteristic need to lash out at him. As Damon glanced down at his shirt, she inwardly groaned. *That a girl, Sarah. That's telling him.* Why couldn't she ever come up with a biting comment when she needed one?

It's not my nature. That's why.

Damon grabbed a clean napkin and attempted to wipe away the ketchup. He smeared it, leaving a stain. She hoped it was permanent. Dropping the soiled napkin on his plate, Damon met her gaze and shrugged his shoulders. Then, with a supercilious grin plastered on his face, he brought his hand to his forehead and saluted.

She gasped again. Hadn't the biker done that very thing to her before he left her standing by the curb? Was saluting the new finger gesture?

Sarah could understand the biker's reaction to her, but Damon? All along, she'd assumed he'd been angry over The Hillary Incident, but now it appeared as though—well, she'd learned her lesson. Assuming definitely made an A.S.S. out of her.

Sadly, Sarah shook her head. She never in a million years expected this kind of behavior from Damon. Especially directed at her. But he had fooled her. Or was she just a fool?

With tears misting in her eyes, she watched him pound down the bleachers, willing herself not to cry as he headed for the door without a backward glance. She saw him pull his cell phone from his pocket. She didn't know what made her do it, but she glanced over to where Hillary was standing and sure enough, her boss picked up her cell phone.

Making a call, or taking one?

Sarah turned back toward Damon, but he'd already left the restaurant. A growing suspicion crept into her mind. "I don't believe it," she said out loud, glancing back at her boss. Hillary snapped her phone closed. Sarah didn't move. If her assumption proved correct, Hillary's natural curiosity should cause her to turn around and look in her direction.

Hillary didn't turn around, nor did she look for Damon leaving the restaurant.

But then again, Hillary is anything but natural, Sarah bitterly thought.

Regardless, she couldn't shake the vibe that something wasn't right. If what she was thinking were true—no, it's not possible. Hillary was her boss, for heaven's sake. And she was twelve years old than Damon.

Demi Moore is how much older than Ashton what's-his-name?

Why would Hillary do such a thing? *Because she can,* Sarah answered herself. Ethics and morals be D.A.M.N.E.D.

Sarah knew she had to regain control of her emotions or she'd completely lose it. She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

Give me strength.

She glanced around the restaurant, noting that a little less than half the patrons were using their cell phones. Maybe it was merely a coincidence that Hillary's phone rang at the same time Damon dialed his. Damon. Henceforth known as The Big Jerk. She knew she was well rid of him, but it still deeply hurt that she'd misread him so badly.

Sarah wearily shook her head. She supposed having been blown off by two guys in the span of one hour would set anybody's teeth on edge, but to be dumped for polar opposite reasons? She let loose with a half-hearted chuckle. One guy thought her a hooker and wanted nothing to do with her. The other accused her of being a prude and wanted nothing more to do with her.

Go figure.

Minister's daughter or not, Sarah decided she needed a drink. And something more substantial than the wine she typically consumed. She stood up, squared her shoulders and trekked down the bleachers, ready to join her coworkers.

Chapter Five

Jake now knew what HB stood for. Hurtful Bitch.

He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but the tiered seating placed him in such a position he'd have to be deaf, dumb and blind not to overhear the heated conversation between the couple sitting directly below him. He just couldn't believe it.

He had watched as the blonde stood by the door, cell phone in hand. She waited all of five minutes before an attractive dark-haired woman wearing a pink blouse and black mini-skirt entered the building. The blonde grasped the petite woman by the arm and their heads came together in conversation. Jake stared at the newcomer. She looked vaguely familiar. Did he know this lady? Under the bright lights, her hair proved more auburn than brown and was stylishly cut to her shoulders. When she began walking towards him, his memory raced to recall her.

The woman climbed the bleachers in his section. As she closed the gap between them, Jake felt his heart quicken. With her oval face and creamy complexion, and a smattering of freckles crossing the bridge of her nose, she was even more striking than he'd first thought. And those lips. Definitely kissable lips. Jake couldn't make out the color of her eyes, but he'd bet anything they proved to be green. Most redheads he knew had the most beautiful green eyes. Damn, but he couldn't shake the feeling he knew her from somewhere. He smiled and slid over to make room for her on his bleacher. Two seconds later his smile drained away as she turned into the row right below his and sat down next to the guy HB'd been flirting with.

She hadn't even glanced his way.

Jake felt...deflated. Like someone had let the air out of his tires. Popped his balloon. Burst his bubble.

"Damn," he muttered as he picked up his beer. What was so special about that guy, he wondered, that two women were vying for his attention? From his seat, Jake didn't have a clear view of the man, but from what he could see there was nothing special about him. He wore the same style wire-rimmed glasses that Jake's bookkeeper wore, and by the looks of his scrawny shoulders and skinny arms, he couldn't possibly work out. His hair was a dirty-brown color, and in Jake's opinion, cropped too close to his head. Even his clothes were no big deal, just a beige shirt and faded blue jeans.

Nope. Nothing special there, as far as Jake was concerned. Just the average Joe.

Just the average dirt bag, Jake amended a few minutes later, after overhearing their conversation.

And poor Sarah.

Jake now knew their names and more things about them than he cared to admit. Granted, Dirt Bag Damon was a first class bastard, but Jake reserved the bulk of his anger for that woman, HB. What a lying, immoral, conniving bitch. To think she was Sarah's boss. To think she was anybody's boss. Jake considered speaking to Sarah, but then she suddenly got up, squared her shoulders, and with a determined look on her face, she walked down the bleachers and joined the birthday party.

No way was Jake leaving now. He settled back for extra innings.

Chapter Six

"You certainly took your own sweet time getting here," Hillary blasted Sarah once she joined the party.

"Sorry HB," Sarah apologized, even though she felt like throttling the woman. "I just saw Damon sitting over there and I stopped to say hello." Still suspicious, she closely watched Hillary, trying to gage her reaction.

"You should do that on your own time."

Not even a flinch at the mention of Damon's name. *I'm overreacting.* Perhaps Hillary was innocent after all. Even so, Sarah couldn't help but snip, "Well, it *is* Saturday night."

"But we're on company business, Sarah," Hillary hotly retorted. "You know Doug and I have a policy of only employing and promoting those people willing to go the extra mile. I hope I'm not detecting attitude here. I'm stressed out enough right now, and I don't need any sarcastic comments coming from you."

Sarah backed off. She really didn't want to provoke the woman. "Speaking of Doug, where is he?"

"This is a surprise party, Sarah," Hillary snapped. "I can't very well call him and ask him where he is, now can I?" She gave Sarah the once over. "You consider *this* an appropriate outfit? And where are my shoes?"

Dang it!

In her anger over the Damon debacle Sarah had completely forgotten she wasn't wearing Hillary's stupid shoes. All of a sudden she felt like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, standing innocently by while the ruby slippers zapped the Wicked Witch of the West. Only in her version of the movie, the ruby slippers were red sling-back stilettos and she was the one being zapped.

Sarah knew the only way out of this dilemma was to use Hillary's vanity against her. "I'm sorry, HB, but my feet must be bigger than yours," —*please God, let that be true*— "because your shoes were killing my feet. I couldn't even drive in them."

"You told me you wore a size eight."

"I am a size eight." Sarah kicked off her right sandal, spreading her toes wide to make her foot appear larger. Luckily several red marks were still visible, albeit considerably faded now.

"You're right," Hillary agreed, staring down at Sarah's feet. "Your feet are bigger than mine. Hmm. Even though I'd have thought you'd be thrilled to wear them, you were wise not to stuff your big feet into my designer shoes. Those are six hundred-dollar shoes, Sarah. I don't want them ruined."

"Six...hundred...dollars?" Sarah sputtered. She swallowed hard as she shoved her foot back into her shoe. Her fourteen dollar and ninety-nine cent shoe.

"You could have stretched them out of shape. Or worse."

"Six hundred dollars?" Sarah asked again, trying not to gag. Who in their right mind paid six hundred-dollars for a pair of shoes? And ugly shoes at that.

"Sarah, designer shoes don't come cheap," Hillary snapped. "Although I guess I can't expect you to know that. But what I can expect is to find my shoes on my desk first thing Monday morning. And in the same condition as I lent them to you."

"Of course, HB," Sarah said. She forced a smile. "No problem." Her boss turned away from her.

Sarah frantically summoned the waitress and ordered a Captains and Coke.

"Hey," Katie said, joining her. "You never drink the hard stuff. What gives? Damon?"

"That's the tip of the iceberg," Sarah muttered. "Did you know Hillary's shoes cost six hundred dollars?"

"Those ugly things?" Katie asked in disbelief. "No way."

"That's not the half of it." Sarah leaned over and whispered into Katie's ear. "One of the heels snapped off while I was driving here. I think I owe that B.I.T.C.H. six hundred dollars."

"You know, Sarah, spelling a profanity doesn't make it any less a sin," Katie advised, grinning broadly. "If you're going to curse, you might as well go for the full Monty."

"I've been doing that too much as it is," Sarah admitted, remembering how she'd lost her cool in the parking lot earlier that evening. "But what am I gonna do? I don't have six hundred dollars to spend on shoes, designer or otherwise. And even if I did, it's not as if they were brand spanking new shoes. I mean, I know that doesn't justify ruining one of them, but come on! Why should I have to fork over six hundred dollars for shoes with scuffmarks all over them? Gosh darn it, I knew those shoes were a huge mistake the second she plopped them on my desk. Why did I let myself get sucked into doing this?"

"Don't panic. Just get the heel fixed," Katie suggested. "She'll never know the difference."

"There's no time," Sarah lamented. "She said she wants them back first thing Monday morning. And in the same condition as she lent them to me. Her words, not mine."

"There's a shop in town," Katie said. "Westville Repairs is located on Center Street, right next to the dry cleaners. The guy's amazing. He's a nice old man, and if you explain the situation to him, I'm sure he'll fix the heel while you wait. Take it in first thing Monday morning. I'll cover for you."

"He repairs shoes?" Sarah asked, feeling hopeful.

"He repairs anything," Katie assured her. "I'm telling you, the guy's a regular Mr. Fix-it. See? Problem solved."

The waitress returned and handed Sarah her drink. She took a sip. "Yuck!" she sputtered, making a face. "This tastes stronger than I thought it would."

Katie took the glass. "You shouldn't be drinking it anyway." She motioned for the waitress. "Please bring her a Cabernet Sauvignon, Reynolds if you have it." Then she turned back to Sarah. "Don't let Hillary lower your standards," she advised. "Besides, if she catches you drinking anything other than 'what would Jesus drink?' she'll crucify you."

"I know," Sarah reluctantly agreed. "But I'm so stressed right now and Captains and Coke is your favorite drink. It always seems to calm you and I thought—but you're right, as usual. Thanks, friend," Sarah said, giving Katie a quick hug. "You won't believe what's happened to me today and—good Lord!"

The last people she expected to see tonight—indeed if ever again—were the three stooges from the yellow pickup truck, the ones who'd been harassing her earlier that evening.

Sarah started gagging.

"Sarah," Katie said, pounding her back. "You okay?"

"This night just keeps getting better and better," Sarah muttered through gritted teeth. She grabbed the rum and coke from Katie and took a big gulp, not caring that the liquid burned her throat.

"What are you doing?" Katie shrieked.

Struggling to catch her breath, Sarah stood helplessly by as Moe, Larry and Curly surrounded Hillary Bowman. And true to form, Hillary embraced their attention.

"Hey, HB," yelled Moe, pointing to Hillary's necklace. Earlier that evening, he'd been shaking dollar bills at Sarah. "I think we ran into one of your women about an hour ago."

"Really," Hillary replied, amused. "And where was that?"

"Down on Main and Guilford," answered Larry, the guy who had been sitting nearest the window. "It looked like she was working the corner. Lucky for her she wasn't picked up by the cops." He threw his head back and laughed, displaying an immediate need for extensive dental work.

Feeling numb with dread, Sarah again lifted the drink to her lips, but Katie made a play for the glass. In the skirmish the remaining liquid sloshed over the rim and down the front of Katie's dress. "Shit!" Katie swore. "Thanks a lot." She thrust the empty glass back at Sarah.

"Why'd you grab the glass for?" Sarah countered.

"Because you shouldn't be chugging like that," Katie snapped. She reached for several napkins. "Keep it up and you'll be flat on the floor. And believe me, Hillary will never let you hear the end of it." She turned away from Sarah.

Sarah grabbed Katie's arm. "Don't leave me!" she urgently whispered.

"Chill," Katie ordered, shaking loose from Sarah's grasp. "What's the matter with you tonight? I have to go dry off." She blotted the front of her dress with the napkins. "I'll be right back."

As Katie walked away, Sarah heard Hillary ask, "Main and Guilford? That's the way you come, isn't it, Sarah?"

Ignoring her boss, Sarah turned to follow Katie. No way did she want to be stuck here without Katie's support. She wasn't quick enough though, because Hillary caught her by the arm and pulled her forward.

"HB, what are you doing?" Sarah objected, horrified at Hillary's intentions. She tried to shrug out of her boss's grasp. Good grief! The woman must have talons for fingernails. Unable to break free, Sarah hung her head, eyes downcast. She didn't dare look at these bozos. The last thing she needed was for them to recognize her. Hillary would never forgive her if she discovered Sarah had changed out of her original outfit.

"Play along," Hillary urged. "They look like fun. Who knows? You might even enjoy yourself. You can always go to confession later."

"We don't do confession," Sarah hissed, seething. "And they don't look like fun, either." She turned from Hillary and inadvertently found herself staring into the leering faces of the three stooges. Sarah felt her stomach drop. What was the matter with Hillary that she encouraged this kind of behavior? Didn't she ever watch the news? People ended up dead doing this sort of thing. Those creeps were assessing her like she was up for bid on an auction block. Or worse.

Please floor. Open up and swallow me whole.

"Nah," the guys responded in unison.

"This ain't her," said Curly, the driver. "She was blonde and stacked." He looked around. "I don't see her here."

Thank you, God.

Sarah released a loud puff of air. The floor was still intact and she was still here, but at least she hadn't been recognized.

"Maybe you met Katie," Hillary suggested. "She's blond. And she's stacked." She searched for Katie. "Sarah, where did Katie disappear to? I'm getting tired of you girls vanishing all the time. Or not showing up at all."

"Katie went to the ladies room, HB," Sarah replied flatly. "She'll be right back." *And she won't be happy to hear you've been discussing her body with these losers, either.*

"If it's not Katie," Hillary advised the men, "then you've got the wrong group." She laughed. Jamie took her cue from Hillary and did the same.

Monkey see, monkey do, Sarah bitterly thought. Would this night never end? And where was Doug? Sarah looked at her watch. Almost seven twenty. Big surprise, Doug running late. He needed to get his butt here so they could get this stupid party over with and go home.

The waitress returned with Sarah's wine. Sarah handed over the empty rum glass and took the goblet. Taking a small sip, she savored the rich flavor of the wine, much preferring it to the burning sensation of the rum.

Katie returned. "Did you order me another drink?"

"No," Sarah admitted with a groan. "I'm sorry. I didn't even think to do it. I'm so flustered right now, I'm afraid I'm losing my mind. Is your dress ruined?"

"Nope, it's just wet. Don't worry about it," Katie told her. "Besides, it's old and black, and you really can't see anything."

"Your dress. Hillary's shoes," Sarah groaned. "I'm a one-woman wrecking crew. What a night."

"Stop worrying about it," Katie insisted. "Spilling that drink was as much my fault as yours. I shouldn't have grabbed the glass from your hand. End of discussion. Let's not talk about it anymore." She motioned to Hillary. "I see our illustrious boss is picking up stray men again."

"You don't know the half of it, my friend."

"That's not her, either," shouted Larry, gesturing toward Katie.

"What's he babbling about?" Katie asked. "And he better not be pointing that grubby finger at me."

"He is and believe me, you don't want to know," Sarah replied, nursing her wine.

"Boys," Hillary said in a loud voice. "I think you may have confused my little party with someone else's. True, we are working girls, but we're not for sale. Simply put, I'm the boss and these are my bitches."

"Shame," said Moe. His cohorts nodded in agreement.

"She is disgusting," Katie whispered to Sarah. "Remind me to tell you about the time she picked up strays from a turnpike rest stop. Those guys made these jerks look like royalty."

"Does this mean you're the Head Bitch?" Curly asked, pointing to Hillary's monogram.

"Yes. That's exactly what it means," Hillary confirmed, laughing loudly. "I'm the Head Bitch in charge." Her cell phone rang. "Excuse me, boys." She answered her phone. "Hillary Bowman," she said, her voice imitating Marilyn Monroe.

Sarah shook her head at Hillary's shameful behavior while Katie rolled her eyes. "How much you wanna bet she starts telling everybody her initials stand for Head Bitch?" Katie muttered.

"No bet," Sarah replied. "I don't gamble, but even if I did, I don't like the odds."

"What?" Hillary cried out. The girls turned towards their boss when the voice of Marilyn vanished only to be replaced by the high-pitched agitated tone they were all too familiar with. "Monday? No. Possibly Tuesday. So you're not meeting? Hmm. No. No problem. See you Monday." Hillary snapped her phone closed.

"Boys," she said. "You'll have to excuse me, but I need to huddle with my girls."

The men made no attempt to leave.

"Shoo now," Hillary ordered, motioning them away with her hands. "We'll meet up again later." She spent the next several minutes convincing the men to leave. After extracting a promise that she'd join them later for drinks, they reluctantly returned to the Bullpen.

"Gather round, bitches," Hillary said to the girls. She pulled her black leather coat around herself. As Sarah stared at the coat, she was reminded of how well Biker Blue Eyes looked in his leather pants. They were clearly made from the finest material available and molded perfectly to his body. Hillary's coat, on the other hand, was dull and crinkled and obviously two sizes too small. Why did the woman insist on wearing clothes that didn't fit properly?

"If she calls me a bitch one more time . . ." Katie mumbled in a threatening tone.

"Ladies," Hillary called again, waiting for their attention. "I'm afraid I have bad news. The party is over. The person who was supposed to bring Doug failed to show up."

"What?" they all cried in unison.

Then everybody started talking at once.

"Who was supposed to bring him?"

"Who just called?"

"Didn't you make arrangements with his wife?"

"How could this happen?"

"Ladies, please." Hillary motioned for quiet. "These things happen all the time in business. You'd better get used to it. Unfortunately, we'll have to call it a night. There's no sense hanging around now." She opened her purse and threw a ten-dollar bill down on the table. "This should cover the cost of my drink. I'll see you all on Monday."

She started toward the exit, hesitated, then turned back to the girls. "Oh. By the way, girls. No need to mention this to Doug. We don't want him to feel bad about how much work went into planning tonight. At least by some of us." She stared at Sarah and Katie for a poignant moment, then turned and hurried from the restaurant.

Jaime grabbed her purse, threw some bills on the table and chased Hillary out the door.

Katie discreetly flipped them both the bird.

Sarah saluted.

Chapter Seven

"Can you believe this?" Sarah asked with disgust. "What a waste of a perfectly good Saturday night."

"Yes, I can believe," Katie replied, picking up the money they left on the table. "Been there. Done that." She moved to a recently cleared smaller table and sat down.

Sarah joined her. "Been where? Done what?"

"I'll bet you a week's pay there never was a 'someone' bringing Doug to this so-called surprise party." Katie looked around for their waitress. "My guess is she overheard Doug planning to be here and orchestrated this whole stunt so she could be here, too."

"Why would she do that?"

"Because she's insane. And she's got the hots for Doug."

"What?" Sarah screeched. "Are you kidding me?"

"Oh, come on," Katie said, flagging down their server. "Don't tell me you've never noticed how every time Doug calls her into his office, she checks out her makeup and primps herself."

"So?"

"And that she loves to embarrass him."

"She loves to embarrass everybody."

The waitress appeared at their table. Katie handed her the money. "This should close out the tab for the Dominatrix and her protégé," she said, laughing.

The server laughed right along with her. "Interesting woman," she said.

"Only if you don't have to work for her," Katie replied. "Keep the change."

"Thanks. Can I get you something to drink?" the woman asked.

"I'll have another Captains and Coke, please." Katie responded. "I ended up wearing most of the last one."

"I'm good," Sarah replied, pointing to her glass. She'd only had a few sips of wine and had more than enough to last her through dinner.

"Will you be ordering dinner, as well?"

"Yes, please," they said in unison.

The waitress handed them menus. "I'll be back in a few minutes with your drink and take your orders." She left them alone.

"Now, what were we talking about?" Katie asked. "Oh, yeah. HB. She's always conniving ways to get Doug out of the office. Alone."

"He's married," Sarah pointed out. She began perusing the menu.

"So? You think that's ever stopped her before? Puh-leeze. The woman is a sex-pig. Besides, she gets off stealing men from other women."

"What am I saying?" Sarah asked, smacking herself in the forehead. "You're absolutely right. I think she stole Damon."

"What?" Katie asked, stunned.

Sarah shared her suspicions with Katie. "How could I have been such a fool?"

"It's not you. It's her," Katie replied, reading the menu. "Yummy! The chicken Caesar wrap looks tempting. Anyway, Hillary has that Princess Diana air about her, all sweet and innocent. You have to admit she even has a passing resemblance to the late princess—when

she's not playing Dominatrix, that is. But let's face it, she's no People's Princess. She's more like a man-eating jungle plant, sweetly luring victims in for the kill. She sucks out their soul and then tosses them aside like so much garbage when she's done with them. That's why she has no friends and no life outside of her job. I'd feel sorry for her, except I've been burned by her one time too many."

"Still," Sarah said wistfully, "I can't believe Damon fell under her spell."

Katie closed her menu and placed it on the corner of the table. "Listen, if he has gone over to the dark side, consider yourself lucky to be rid of him. He obviously has issues of his own. But I'll grant you this: if what you suspect is true, Hillary only wants him because she thinks he wanted you."

"Well, he's a major jerk and she's welcome to him."

"Then it's a match made in heaven. But it won't last."

Both girls laughed.

"Do you notice how she has to say my name every other sentence?" Sarah asked. "Sarah this, and Sarah that."

"Hey, just be glad she knows your name," Katie countered. "When she first hired into JMS, she called me Katrina despite my correcting her every time she did it. Then in honor of our product, she thought it would be hilarious to refer to me as Latrina Katrina. After two days of that crap—no pun intended—I went straight to Doug. Needless to say, she was furious with me. She had the nerve to tell me she didn't realize my name was Katie and that I should have come to her without involving Doug. Such bullshit—sorry."

"How did she ever get so much power?"

"Doug. He can't be bothered running the office."

"If he needed someone, why not let you manage it? You know everything there is about that place and besides, you were already there."

"He never offered. He just brought her in one day and announced that she was our new boss. Anyway, I don't think I could deal with Doug's ever-changing mind. Besides, right now I'm thinking of starting my own business. I've been saving like hell, sorry, like crazy and I'm getting pretty close. Hopefully by this time next year, I'll be ready to open my own restaurant. I'm planning to call it *Dinner for Two*."

"Wow. I mean, I know you've always enjoyed cooking, but I didn't realize you were contemplating opening your own place."

"I wonder what happened to our waitress," Katie muttered, looking around the room. "How long does it take to make a drink around here?" Failing to find the woman, she turned back to Sarah. "I've been dreaming about it for some time now, but I don't want to open just any restaurant. I want a romantic place, with lovely food. It'll have a limited number of tables, spaced out for privacy. Couples only. Reservations required. And you can bet I'll have a prompt wait staff," she pointedly added.

"It sounds wonderful," Sarah said, "but selfishly, what'll I do if you leave JMS?"

"I could use a partner," Katie replied, giving Sarah the 'I'm talking about you' look.

Sarah laughed. "Katie, you know I can't cook. How romantic would dinner be if it consisted of pan-scorched salmon, blackened cheese asparagus and char-burnt au gratin potatoes?"

"You're not that bad," Katie argued.

"Not that bad?" Sarah screeched. "Once I actually did burn water, and I have the pot to prove it."

"You bake wonderful desserts," Katie insisted.

"Anybody can bake a cake. Open the box, throw in an egg, and pour the whole mess into the pan. The icing's even easier. Just pop the top on the can. As long as I don't cut myself on the knife, there's no issues."

The waitress finally returned with Katie's drink. "Ready?" she asked, taking out her pad and pencil.

"And your coffee blends rival *Starbucks* for flavor," Katie said, ignoring the waitress, which Sarah knew was her way of protesting the poor service.

"Forget it," Sarah said. "All this food talk has made me hungry. Let's order something to eat."

"Katie Saunders?" the handsome gentleman queried as soon as the waitress stepped away from their table.

Katie turned toward the man. "Ron Martin!" she gasped, instantly recognizing him. "How the heck are you?" She jumped up and gave him a hug.

"Great!" he exclaimed. "I thought that was you. You haven't change a bit since high school. It's good to see you again."

"Right back at you, Ron. This is my good friend, Sarah Lyons," Katie said, bringing Sarah into the conversation.

"Hi, Sarah," he replied, politely shaking her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

"You here for dinner?" Katie asked. She sat back down, moving her chair to make room for him. "We've just ordered, so if you want to join us . . ."

"No can do," Ron stated. "I'm on duty. I work here."

"What?" Katie cried. "Get out."

"No kidding," Ron said, then added, "Actually, I'm part owner."

"A man after my own heart," Katie said. "Hey! Wait a minute. You own a restaurant? That's *my* dream!"

"If I remember correctly," Ron said, laughing, "you're the one who kept horning in on my kitchen creations."

Katie turned to Sarah. "Ron and I lived next door to each other, growing up," she explained. "We used to make the most outrageous foods trying to outdo each other. Some of them were practically inedible. Those were the days."

"Most of them were inedible," Ron corrected. "And remember the trouble we'd get into for dirtying every dish in the house? But I've come a long way since then. Wanna see my kitchen?" he asked Katie, jiggling his eyebrows.

"Smooth talker," Katie said, giggling. "Sarah, you mind?"

"Not at all. Go ahead, you crazy kids," she said, motioning them away. "I'll be fine."

Katie scooted out of her seat and practically ran to the kitchen, dragging Ron by the arm.

You go, Katie!

Sarah grinned as she watched the two of them slip through the kitchen doors. *Hmm,*

she thought, trying her best not to feel envious. *Looks like there's going to be some extra spice added to the sauce tonight.*

Chapter Eight

Sarah sipped her wine, relieved to be alone for a time. The strain of the last few hours was beginning to manifest itself in the form of a headache. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, trying to ease the mounting pressure. As soon as Katie returned from her tryst in the kitchen, Sarah decided she was going home, jumping into bed and pulling the covers over her head. Too bad she had church tomorrow, otherwise she wouldn't leave the sanctuary of her bedroom until Monday morning.

She sensed rather than saw several people gathering round her table. Looking up, she let out a loud, "Oh, no."

The drunken fools had returned.

"Where'd everybody go," Moe slurred.

Jeez, Sarah thought. *Talk about your eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth plagues of Egypt.* "Party's over, boys," she said with as much authority as she could muster. "Move on." With a wave of her hand, she motioned them away.

"You're still here," Curly whined. "HB said we'd all get together later. She promised."

"HB's gone and I'm not interested," Sarah replied. She couldn't believe it when Moe had the audacity to take Katie's seat. "Someone's sitting there," she stated hotly.

"Yeah," Moe replied, parking his butt. "Me," he slurred, jamming his thumb into his chest.

Sarah reviewed her options. She could get up and leave, but Curly and Larry were blocking her exit. She knew she could maneuver around them, but she didn't want to risk one of them making a grab for her. That left yelling for help. Although she was loath to call attention to herself, if she was forced to, she'd scream the house down to get these creeps away from her.

Please, God . . .

"Sarah, honey, I'm sorry I'm late. Traffic was a bear."

Huh?

Sarah blinked, not quite believing what she was seeing. Muscling his way in between Curly and Larry was Biker Blue Eyes. Her very own Knight on Shining Motorcycle was riding into the fray to save her from the Three Stooges.

Talk about answered prayers!

Adrenaline pumping, Sarah's breath caught in her throat, rendering her speechless. Not only was her dream biker rescuing her, he was having the same affect on her that he had had on her earlier. So it wasn't an emotional fluke brought on by the accident. It was him. He really did take her breath away.

Breathe, Sarah. Breathe!

Her hero addressed Moe. "Do you mind?" he said in a tone that clearly said 'get your butt out of my seat, or else.'

"Hey man, no problem," Moe said, stumbling to his feet. "Didn't think she was with anybody."

"I can assure you, she is," her rescuer said, pointing them in the direction of the door. "See you around, boys."

The men beat a hasty exit.

Her dream biker turned to her. "I overheard you telling those jerks to leave you alone and when they didn't, I thought I'd step in to help. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" Sarah croaked. She cleared her throat. "You just saved all these patrons from certain hearing loss, because I was about to scream the house down."

"May I join you?" he asked politely.

"Yes, please," Sarah eagerly replied. She motioned him to take the seat Moe had just vacated. "Thanks again for saving me from those creeps."

"My pleasure." He sat down, never taking his eyes off her.

Sarah raised her wineglass to her lips, amazed to find her hand steady. Her insides, however, had turned to jelly. She wondered what the odds were of his being here. Better yet, she thought, what were the odds of his being here *and* rescuing her from those drunken fools? She sipped some wine, thinking it was a shame she wasn't a wagering gal. If she'd played the lotto today, she bet she'd become Ohio's latest millionaire.

She stole a glimpse at him over the rim of her wineglass. Yep, her hero wasn't hiding the fact that he was studying her, which made her more nervous than she already was. Did he recognize her from earlier that day? Good grief, she hoped not. "Do I have food stuck in my teeth, or something?" she ventured, praying he didn't mention the accident.

"I'm sorry," the man apologized. "I don't mean to stare, but have we met before? I swear I know you from somewhere."

Setting down her wineglass, Sarah laughed. A genuine laugh for the first time that day. It felt good. Her headache was actually starting to abate. Of course he knew her from somewhere. He just didn't know it. Grinning, she decided it wouldn't be a sin to have a little fun. "You're kidding me, right?"

"What?" he asked.

"You follow an Oscar-worthy rescue scene with a cheesy pick-up line?" Sarah started laughing again. "Do you come here often?"

He smiled. And when he did, Sarah felt like melting. No doubt about it, that smile of his was really potent. "First time, baby," he said, lowering his voice an octave. He leaned into the table closer to her, causing goose bumps to form on her arms. She suppressed a shiver as he launched into a classic Lounge Lizard persona. "Are you from Tennessee?" he asked, arching his eyebrows. "'Cuz you're the only ten I see."

A guy with a great sense of humor! How lucky could she be? "Do you know CPR?" she countered. "'Cuz you're taking my breath away." If only he knew how true that statement was, she thought.

"Do you have a map?" he asked, not missing a beat. "'Cuz I'm getting lost in your eyes."

"The only thing your eyes haven't told me is your name."

"Who's your friend?" Katie interrupted, breaking the spell.

Startled, Sarah jumped. "Katie! Hi! You're back."

Rats.

Katie stood in front of the table, holding two plates of food, an amused look gracing her face. There was no doubt in Sarah's mind that Katie had overheard their conversation, but thankfully she refrained from making any sarcastic comments. "Ron let me cook," she said, setting the plates on the table. Grinning, she placed her hands on her hips. "But I can see

while I've been slaving over a hot microwave, someone's taken my seat." She winked at Sarah.

"I'm sorry, Miss. . . ."

"Katie. And you are?"

"Jackson," he said, standing up. "But my friends call me Jake." He motioned for Katie to take his seat.

Jake, thought Sarah. *His friends call him Jake.* A nice strong name for a nice strong guy.

"Nice to meet you," Katie said, reaching out to shake his hand. "You don't have to get up," she added. "I was kidding about the seat. Do you like chicken Caesar wraps?"

"Actually, I've already eaten," Jake replied. He continued standing.

"Katie," Sarah interjected. "Jake just rescued me from the Three Stooges."

"Those jerks showed up again?"

"Yep," Sarah confirmed. She imperceptibly jerked her head to the left while brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, their mutual sign for 'give me a few minutes alone with this guy.' "And believe me, they were no more charming half-sloshed than they were sober. Thank goodness for Jake or I'd have had to scream bloody murder."

"Good for you, Jake," Katie said, patting his arm in approval. "Sarah, Ron said I could play in his kitchen, but I don't want to leave you out here all by your lonesome."

Message received and acted upon. She had the best friend! "I think I'll be okay now," Sarah said with a smile.

"I'll only be about an hour," Katie added, glancing between Sarah and Jake.

"If Sarah doesn't mind, I'll keep her company," Jake offered. "Just to keep the stooges away," he emphasized.

"Perfect!" Katie said, clapping her hands together. "Everybody's happy." She picked up her plate of food and turned to go. She faltered, then looked back over her shoulder. "Remember the Rules of Engagement, Sarah."

"I never forget them," Sarah assured her friend. "Have fun cooking."

"You, too," Katie replied with a grin. She headed for the kitchen, leaving Sarah alone with Jake.

Chapter Nine

"Rules of Engagement?" Jake asked once he had reclaimed his seat. "You girls in the military?"

"Nope," Sarah said, laughing. With her headache gone and her mood buoyant, she marveled at how quickly things had turned around. The evening had definite possibilities now. Who could have imagined that with the way it had started out? "The Rules of Engagement is something Katie and I put together a few years back," she revealed. "Sort of like a Dating Survival Guide. We've learned not to reveal too much personal information about ourselves right away. We work in stages."

"Stages?" he echoed.

"Yep. Actually, there are four stages." Sarah hesitated. "Should I be telling you this?"

"Why not?" Jake asked. "What could it hurt?"

She grinned. "Okay. When we first meet someone we might have an interest in, we'll share our first names, but not our last. We talk about what we do for a living, but we won't tell where we work. We'll only give out cell phone numbers. Katie and I call it phone dating. That's Stage One."

"Interesting," Jake said. "What's Stage Two?"

"We go out, but we meet in public places. And we drive separately. Stage Two can last anywhere from days to weeks to months, depending on how things go." She paused a moment. If only she'd kept Damon lingering in Stage Two for a longer period of time, maybe she wouldn't have ended up hurt. Lesson learned.

"And Stage Three?" Jake prompted.

Sarah shook herself. "Oh. Let's see. Exclusivity. Home addresses are revealed. The families are met. Invitations are extended for holiday gatherings. That sort of thing."

Jake leaned over the table. "What happens at Stage Four?"

Sarah picked up her glass of wine. *Love, marriage, children*. She swirled the remaining liquid in the bottom of the glass before consuming it. "I don't know," she said softly. "I've never reached Stage Four."

"Never?" Jake whispered.

Slow down, Nellie!

Sarah set down her wineglass with a bang and shook herself. Already she was breaking her own rules, revealing way too much about herself way too early. Hadn't she learned anything? Why in the world had she just told a perfect stranger—okay, a practically perfect stranger—that she was a virgin?

I did not say that!

Fine, she silently argued with herself. She hadn't spelled it out, but any idiot could read between the lines. These days, most men scoffed at the notion of saving oneself for marriage. Initially they liked the challenge, but once they discovered she was serious, more often than not they left in a huff, ala Damon.

"You're getting way ahead of yourself, mister," Sarah said, laughing her way out of an uncomfortable conversation. "You've barely stumbled into Stage One. No fair jumping ahead."

"Oh. I'm Stage One, am I?" he asked. "Does that mean you're interested?"

"Maybe," she teased him, but she knew she was beaming. She couldn't help it. She *was* interested. She hadn't been this interested in so long, the sensation was making her giddy. Even with Damon, her feelings had grown gradually rather than being hit by a ... well, by a motorcycle. And it had never been this intense. "The rules aren't foolproof," – *which explains how a jerk like Damon slipped by* – "but they do help weed out those slobbs only interested in one night stands." Sarah thought of something. "By the way, when you chased away the stooges, you called me Sarah. How did you know my name?"

"I overheard it earlier, when your group was together," he explained. "HB mentioned it several times. Loudly. That woman really likes to draw attention to herself."

Sarah felt her blood run cold. "You know HB?" she asked, her voice flat. *Please don't know HB!* If he knew her, it would spoil everything.

"I think the whole restaurant knows her," Jake declared. "And not in a good way. She's not a very nice person, Sarah."

Sarah sighed with relief. Another plus for this guy—he's an excellent judge of character. "You're not telling me anything I don't already know," she informed him. "I work for the woman."

"What do you do?"

"Office work," she said with a smile. It wasn't a lie, but no way was she telling this handsome hunk she was in the port-a-potty business. Talk about embarrassing. In fact, she didn't want to talk about anything work-related, especially tonight's birthday bash. That might lead to his remembering where he knew her. If he asked, Sarah knew she couldn't lie, so she did the next best thing. She changed the subject. "What do you do?" she asked.

"I build motorcycles," he said, proudly.

"You build them?" Great, she thought. She had run her car into the back of his work. *Nice going, ace.*

"You know how Dell builds computers to meet specific customer needs?" he asked. When she nodded, he continued, "I do that with motorcycles. I'm in business with my brother. We opened our doors about five years ago. I'd tell you the name of our shop," he said with a grin, "but I'd have to reveal my last name."

Sarah returned his smile. "I can tell you love what you do." *Tell him you hit his bike.* "You're so animated just talking about it."

Tell him!

"I could bore you senseless with all the little details."

"I doubt that," Sarah said, nervously twisting the ends of her napkin. Even though she knew it was the right thing to do, she couldn't bring herself to reveal it was she who had run into the back of his motorcycle. How would she explain it? *Oh, by the way, I was the hooker who hit your bike?* No way was she confessing that. Not after the way he'd said he wasn't interested. Especially now—when it appeared that he was interested. In her. She pulled the plate of food in front of her. "There's a lot here," she said, neatly changing the subject once again. "Wanna split it with me?"

"Okay, but only because I know you won't eat in front of me."

"What? Are you nuts? Of course I'm going to eat in front of you. I'm starving." To prove her point, Sarah picked up half the chicken wrap and took a large bite. "Mmmm," she said, hoping she hadn't slopped sauce down her chin.

"I like a woman who eats," Jake said, picking up the other half and digging in.

Time passed, but Sarah wasn't aware of the goings on around her. Nothing seemed to matter except Jake. She didn't even notice when the server refilled her glass of wine. Between bites of food and sips of wine she often found herself lost in his eyes. Those incredible sapphire-colored eyes. Jeez, she thought, thinking back to their cheesy pick-up line conversation. She was the one who needed the map. And his voice. The timbre was so soothing, it actually filled her with a warm sense of security.

Sarah was amazed by how relaxed she felt with Jake, as if she'd known him for years instead of hours. *Too much wine?* As soon as the unwanted thought crept into her head, Sarah shoved her annoying subconscious into oblivion. Talk about a mood killer. She'd only had two small glasses of wine during the span of the evening. And she had eaten. It was definitely Jake who was intoxicating. She rested her chin in her hand, captivated as he talked about choppers and sport tourers and fairings. She had no idea motorcyclists (did Jake refer to them as gearheads?) had a language unto themselves. She found it fascinating. She found Jake fascinating, too.

Before she knew it, Katie was back.

"Hi, kids," her friend called in a happy-go-lucky voice. "Ron finally kicked me out of his kitchen."

"Welcome back," Jake said. "Good thing you returned before I bored Sarah to sleep."

"She doesn't look bored to me, Jake," Katie replied, defending her friend. "When she is, her eyes glaze over and she stares into space. And sooner or later, her head hits the table." Katie brushed away Sarah's bangs from her forehead. "Nope," she said. "No bruises."

"Very funny, Katie," Sarah said, smoothing her hair back into place. "Jake, trust me. If I were bored, you'd know it. Do you want to order anything else?"

"Actually," Katie interrupted, "kitchen's closed."

"What?" Sarah cried.

"Already?" Jake chimed in.

"Look around, kids," Katie said, an amused look graced her face. "It's closing time."

"Oh! My! Goodness!" Sarah gasped, stunned to find they were the only patrons left in the place.

Jake checked his watch. "It's only eleven o'clock," he said.

"BLEACHERS closes at nine o'clock during the week, ten on weekends," Katie explained. "You guys were so engrossed with each other, Ron decided to leave you alone while he prepped for tomorrow. But now, he wants to go home. And so do I. It's been a long day and I'm tired."

"He closes at ten o'clock on a Saturday night?" Jake asked. "That's awfully early, isn't it?"

"Obviously you don't live in Westville," Katie said with a laugh. "Small town living, you know. Everything closes up tight after dark. If you want something more to eat, you'll have to drive to Richfield, next town over."

"No need," Jake replied. "Unless you want something more, Sarah?" he offered.

"I'm good," Sarah said. She did want something more, though. She wanted more time with Jake. She just didn't have the guts to say it out loud.

"Then let's not hold the good man up any more tonight," Jake said. "Can I have the check?"

"No check, Jake," Katie informed him. "Compliments of the house."

"What?" Sarah asked.

"That's awfully nice," Jake said. "But why?"

"Instead of paying me for my exceptional food preparation skills, Ron gave us free food." Katie turned and walked toward the front door.

"It doesn't seem fair that we've reaped the benefit of her hard work," Jake said to Sarah as he helped her to her feet.

"Trust me," Sarah replied with a grin. "She doesn't mind at all."

Sarah suppressed a shiver when Jake rested his hand on the small of her back, guiding her along as they followed Katie to where Ron stood waiting to flick off the lights. Once they reached the front entrance, Jake released his hold on her—much to her dismay—and began rummaging around the Hostess podium.

The spot on her back where his hand had rested still tingled.

As much as Sarah wished otherwise, she knew she was going to have to leave Jake's side. Mother Nature was calling. And she wasn't about to be put on hold. She hadn't realized how long they'd been sitting until they stood up to leave, and there was no way she could wait until she got home. "Ron, if you don't mind, I need to scoot to the ladies room before we leave."

"No problem, Sarah," Ron replied. "I'll wait."

"Sarah. Hold up," Jake called. She stopped and spun around, facing him. He was holding a scrap of paper. "Here's my cell phone number," he said, placing the paper in her hand. "Call me when you get the chance." He leaned down and placed a tender kiss on her cheek. "I'm looking forward to moving out of Stage One," he whispered. He turned to Ron. "Thanks for dinner, man," he said, shaking Ron's hand. "That was mighty kind of you."

"My pleasure," Ron assured him. "It was nice meeting you."

"Same here." He turned to the girls. "Good night, all," he said. With a wave of his hand, he was gone.

"Good night, Jake," Sarah whispered as she watched him walk out the door. Tentatively she raised a hand to her cheek, her fingers lightly caressing the site where his lips had brushed her skin. She tried to mask her disappointment that he hadn't waited for her, hadn't walked her to her car—.

Eeeekkk!

Her hand moved from her cheek to her mouth as she stifled a gasp.

Thank goodness Jake hadn't hung around. After spending several hours with him, she marveled that he hadn't recognized her, although from time to time she was sure he'd given her the 'I know you from somewhere' look. But she didn't think for one minute that a guy like Jake wouldn't have instantly recognized her car. She shuddered to think what his reaction would have been then. She doubted he'd have given her his cell phone number, that was for sure. More than likely, he would have accused her of playing him for a fool.

And then she would have missed out on the best thing that might be happening to her.

Sarah was jarred from her thoughts when Katie dramatically cried out, "She'll never wash her face again!"

“Very funny.” Sarah headed for the ladies room. Halfway across the floor, she picked up her pace and practically skipped the rest of the way. She chuckled to herself. She knew she’d have to wash her face. She just wasn’t going to do it tonight.

Chapter Ten

Jake pulled his motorcycle to the curb and removed his helmet. Running toward him was Sarah, the beautiful young woman he had just spent the better part of the evening with. Her movements were slow and deliberate, almost like watching a rescue scene from an old *Baywatch* episode. She called out to him, her voice honey-sweet. Jake smiled and waved to her. He dropped the helmet to the ground as he hurried to meet her, intending to snatch her up in a giant bear hug when from out of nowhere a blonde bombshell stepped in between them.

He stumbled into her.

"Jake," the blonde cooed in a sultry voice. "You left so suddenly before." She wrapped her arms around him, her blue eyes bright with anticipation, her ruby red lips slightly open and inviting. "We didn't have the chance to get to know each other."

Sarah reached his side. "Jake?" she asked. "What's going on?"

"I ran into him first," the blonde informed Sarah. Blondie wouldn't release Jake; instead, she pulled him closer. "He's mine."

Jake vainly struggled to free himself from the blond's firm grasp.

"She's right," Sarah sadly confirmed. Jake could see tears pooling in her green eyes. "You saw her first." With shoulders slumped in defeat, she turned and walked away.

"Sarah!" Jake cried out to her. Why couldn't he lift his arms? Everything felt like dead weight. "Sarah!"

"Mr. Reynolds," a new voice intruded. It was a woman's voice—soft and soothing. The newcomer began shaking his shoulder. Hopefully she'd help him pry free from the hold the blonde vixen had on him. He had to get away from her. He had to get to Sarah. "Mr. Reynolds," the voice called again, louder.

Jake came awake with a start. He looked around, trying to get his bearings. It took him a few moments to remember he was seated in the first class section of a commercial airplane, flying home.

"We're starting our descent into Las Vegas, Mr. Reynolds," the voice from his dream said. "You'll have to return your seat to its upright position."

"Okay," Jake murmured. "Fine." Shaking himself fully awake, he complied with the flight attendant's request.

What a crazy dream!

As the plane taxied toward the arrival gate, Jake thought of Sarah. She was funny, lively and not afraid to be herself. To top it all off, she was drop-dead gorgeous, except she didn't have any idea how truly beautiful she really was. It was refreshing to be with a woman who didn't run to the ladies room every ten minutes to check her appearance. Jake was thrilled to have met her. He couldn't remember a time when a woman had captivated his thoughts as much as she had.

And she didn't even know it.

When it looked to him like the weird birthday party at *BLEACHERS* had ended, Jake decided he might as well call it a night. He consumed the rest of his wings and drained the last of his beer, then motioned for the server to bring his check. He settled the bill and made

his way down the bleachers. By then he'd noticed that Sarah had moved to a smaller table and was sitting alone. He gave serious thought to introducing himself when he saw three men approaching her. Sarah's tense shoulders and determined glare told him she did not want to be bothered. He stopped and waited. When it became apparent those guys weren't taking no for an answer, Jake saw his opening and decided to take advantage of it.

And was he glad he opted to play the hero!

He marveled how quickly time passed when he was with Sarah. She was...she had a quality about her that...words failed him now, but when he was with her, communication flowed. They had talked and laughed for hours, about what, he could not remember. Silly stuff people bantered about when they first meet someone they're attracted to, he supposed. And he was definitely attracted to Sarah. No doubt about that. Although he didn't believe in love at first sight, he did believe he and Sarah had the makings of something special.

Despite living two thousand miles apart, Jake realized he wanted Sarah in his life.

The dream was odd.

He recognized the blonde as the woman who had bumped into the back of his motorcycle. For some strange reason, she was trying to steal him away from Sarah. Blue eyes snapping with fire versus green eyes pooling with despair. He shook his head. Funny how his subconscious had concocted a passing resemblance between the two women. Same chin line. Same cute dimple in the right cheek. Same brilliant smile.

Crazy what a dream could do.

Jake powered on his cell phone, disappointed to find no new messages. He'd hoped Sarah would take him up on his offer to call. Usually he requested the phone number of those women he was interested in seeing again. It gave him control of the situation. But after listening to her Rules of Engagement, he decided to leave his fate in her hands.

She said she'd never been to Stage Four. He wondered about Stage Four. Had Sarah meant she'd never been in love, or had she never made love? Jake shook his head. Never made love? In this day and age? Not possible, was it?

She really didn't know how cute she was.

Jake snapped his phone closed and stood to remove his carry-on from the overhead luggage rack. If all went according to his new agenda, he'd soon be racking up the frequent flyer miles.

Chapter Eleven

Thank goodness Westville Repairs opened early, Sarah thought as she pushed open the door and hurried into the shop. Bells jingling from the top of the doorframe announced her presence. Moving swiftly towards the counter, she was reminded of an old-fashioned store, similar to the kind the Olsen's owned in that old television show, *Little House on the Prairie*. She didn't think such places existed anymore. There wasn't a computer in sight. Just a counter that had seen better days and a cash register that had to be older than she was.

No one was standing behind the counter. "Hello?" she called out.

"Be right with you," a muffled voice called from the back room.

Sarah patiently waited until a slightly stooped, gray-haired old man wearing gold wire-rimmed glasses and a buttoned-down green cardigan shuffled through the curtain separating the storefront from his work area. "Good morning to you—why, Miss Sarah," he said with surprise. "What brings you in today?"

"Mr. Petrie!" Sarah cried out, equally surprised to find that she knew the kindly repair shop owner. She usually found him sitting in the third pew on the left side of the church, next to the stained glass windows. He was a regular, attending every Sunday unless he was ill or out of town visiting family. He had a heck of a singing voice, too. "You're Mr. Fix-it?"

"I sure am," he said with a chuckle. "If I can't fix it, no one can. Been here almost forty years now. How can I help you, Sarah?"

"I'm wondering if you could do a rush job for me," she said, placing the bag containing the shoes on the counter.

"Depends on what it is," Mr. Petrie informed her. "When do you need it?"

"Now?" she asked, her voice pleading. She dug into the bag and handed over the damaged shoe. "This belongs to my boss and she wants it back *first thing Monday morning*," Sarah said in a voice imitating the Wicked Witch of the West. "Oh my," she added, embarrassed by her antics. "I'm sorry. That wasn't very nice of me."

"We all have our moments, Sarah," Mr. Petrie murmured while he inspected the shoe. "I'll be happy to help you. Your dad was very kind to me after my Ella passed. It's about time I can return the favor. Do you have the heel?"

Sarah dropped the heel into Mr. Petrie's outstretched hand. "It snapped off while I was driving a stick shift. Trying to drive it, anyway. Dad gave me his old Chevy Cavalier. I'm not used to shifting gears and these shoes weren't helping."

"You'd be amazed how often that happens," Mr. Petrie said, chuckling. He finished examining the shoe. "I'm surprised you'd be wearing shoes like this, though. They're really not your style."

"Yeah, I know. Work stuff." No way was she explaining the whole *Pretty Woman* thing to Mr. Petrie. "Thank you for repairing it for me on such short notice. You've just saved me several hundred bucks and quite possibly my job."

"Come again?" He leaned closer, as if he hadn't heard her correctly.

"If I don't get this blasted designer shoe repaired, I'll have to replace them or I'm sure my boss will replace me."

"Designer?"

"Yeah. You're holding in your hands an original Jimmy Choo."

Mr. Petrie examined the shoe again. "Now, my Ella was a shoe fanatic. Never knew a woman more attached to such things," he said, chuckling at the fond memory. "She would spend an entire afternoon searching out that one perfect shoe. And nine times outta ten, I'd be sitting right there beside her. She sure had nice feet. Her legs weren't bad, either."

Mr. Petrie! You old romantic, you!

"Well, I wouldn't know the difference between a Jimmy Choo and a chimichanga," she admitted, laughing at herself.

"Sarah, this is not a Jimmy Choo."

"Sure it is," Sarah insisted. "My boss said she paid six hundred dollars for these shoes."

"I don't know what's in the air your boss is breathing," Mr. Petrie stated firmly, shaking the shoe in her direction, "but this is definitely not a Jimmy Choo. Original or otherwise."

Sarah was silent a moment. "Are you serious?"

"Serious as a heart attack," he assured her. "Jimmy Choos are classy, stylish, and comfortable." He dropped the shoe on the counter. "Now Mrs. Petrie, God rest her sweet soul, was never willing to pay the price for a pair of her own. Frankly, I wouldn't have minded seeing her in 'em, no matter the price. Jimmy Choos are sexy and sensual..." his voice tapered off as he glanced at her. "Oh. Sorry, Sarah."

"Mr. Petrie, please. I can hear those words," she said, assuring the kindly old man. "Believe it or not, sometimes I even say those words out loud. You say they have class, style and comfort?"

He nodded.

She picked up the shoe from the counter. "This shoe is ugly as sin and hurts like Hades."

"There's your first clue," Mr. Petrie said. "Second clue is that until he went mainstream, Jimmy Choo handmade all his shoes." He shook a gnarled index finger at the shoe. "That is not a handmade shoe."

"You can tell just by looking at it?"

He took the shoe from Sarah. "Look at this stitching," he said, pointing to a twisted seam. "Shameful work. If your boss said these are originals, she's either lying or she's been duped, although I can't imagine anyone mistaking this cheap imitation leather for a Jimmy Choo." He flexed the shoe. "It has no give at all."

"But it has a label," Sarah protested, tapping the inside of shoe.

"Label schmabel," he scoffed. "I'd stake my reputation on the fact that these aren't designer shoes. In fact, they're not even a good knockoff of a designer shoe. If Mrs. Petrie were alive today, she'd tell you the same thing."

"I should have known," Sarah said, shaking her head. "You can still fix it, right?"

"Yep. Just take me but a minute."

Sarah sat down in a chair and picked up a magazine. She started flipping through the pages, wondering why Hillary would lie about a stupid pair of shoes. How ridiculous! Who cared if they were designer shoes? Sarah certainly didn't. But then again, why would Hillary steal her boyfriend?

You have no proof she stole Damon.

Sarah hated losing an argument with herself, but she was right. She had no proof. Nothing concrete anyway. And besides, what did it matter? She certainly didn't want Damon

back. Not now. Not ever. Dropping the magazine on the table, she opened her purse and retrieved the piece of paper Jake had given her. Gently, almost reverently, she traced her fingers along his cell phone number. She hadn't called him yet. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she was desperate. She might phone him tonight, though. No sense giving him the impression she wasn't interested, either.

Frankly, if Hillary had stolen Damon, Sarah should thank her. She should get down on her knees and kiss Hillary's fake designer shoes. Hillary may not have planned it that way, but she'd actually done her a huge favor. Otherwise, Sarah might have missed out on something special. She might have missed out on Jake. Let Hillary have Damon. She was moving on.

"Here you go, Sarah," Mr. Petrie said, coming out of his workshop. "Right as rain."

Sarah returned Jake's phone number to the safety of her purse and went to the counter. She picked up the shoe. "Oh, Mr. Petrie," she said after examining the heel. "This is perfect. You are a magician. She'll never know it was broken. How much do I owe you?"

"This one's on the house, Sarah."

"Mr. Petrie, I can't do that," Sarah protested. "This is your livelihood."

"Sarah, just say 'thank you Mr. Petrie.' That's all the payment I need. Besides, your money is no good here."

"Oh, thank you Mr. Petrie!" Sarah reached over the counter and hugged the kindly man.

"You're very welcome, my dear," he murmured.

When Sarah pulled away, she could swear she saw the makings of a tear in the old man's eye. *God bless his kind heart*, she thought. She made a mental note to check in on him from time to time, now that she knew he worked just minutes from her office. She could bring him a coffee every now and then. Maybe take him some lunch. She knew he'd appreciate that. "See you next Sunday," she said as she turned away from the counter.

"Have a good day."

"You too, Mr. Petrie."

Sarah waved good-bye and then hurried through the door. As she started her car she checked the time. Eight-twenty. Super! Since Hillary never showed up before nine o'clock, she'd have time to spare. Humming a happy tune, Sarah popped the clutch and headed to work.

Her joy lasted exactly seven minutes.

She'd no sooner pulled into the parking lot of JMS when she spied Hillary's silver Jaguar. "What the . . ." she said, groaning. "Figures. Of all days, Hillary has to pick today to show up on time."

Sarah parked her car, grabbed the bag containing Hillary's shoes and made a beeline into the building. Scampering past Lori Russell, she bid a hasty "good morning" to the kindly receptionist as she sped through the lobby. Thankfully, nobody was in sight—until she rounded the first corner.

"Dang it all," Sarah muttered under her breath, pulling herself up short. Jamie Boyer, Hillary's personal watchdog, was standing in the aisle right outside Sarah's cubicle. No way could she sneak in now.

Of all the miserable luck.

Since Jamie's cubicle was located next to Hillary's at the opposite end of the office, she had to be purposely waiting for Sarah. And that meant Jamie knew she was late. And if Jamie knew, then Hillary knew.

Sarah kept her expression passive as she proceeded down the hall at a more leisurely pace. No sense rushing now. But why hadn't Katie warned her Hillary had arrived early? Wasn't that part of covering for her? Then, for some inexplicable reason, an old rhyming song her elementary school teacher used to play at the start of every physical education class popped into her head:

*Head and shoulders; knees and toes, knees and toes.
Head and shoulders; knees and toes, knees and toes.
Eyes and ears and mouth and nose.
Head and shoulders; knees and toes, knees and toes.*

Sarah had to stop herself from bursting out laughing. That little ditty fit Jamie Boyer to a tee. She *was* Hillary Bowman's head, shoulders, knees and toes, eyes, ears, mouth and nose. And anything else she could think of.

Jamie made a show of checking her watch. "Late night?" she sneered.

"Good morning to you too, Jamie," Sarah sweetly replied. As she stepped around the irritating woman to get to her desk, she started humming the jingle.

"You're in an awfully good mood this morning," Jamie commented. She stood in the doorway of Sarah's cubicle. "For someone who's so late."

"I'll make up the time," Sarah replied. She made no attempt to explain her tardiness to Jamie. "I wouldn't dream of cheating JMS out of thirty minutes."

"Staff meeting at 9:00 a.m." Jaime announced.

"Yep," Sarah said, pulling out her chair. She dropped her purse and the shoe bag under her desk. "It's Monday. I'll be there. Same as always."

"Try not to be late," Jamie quipped as she turned and walked away.

At that point, Sarah did the only thing a mature twenty-six-year-old woman could do in this situation. She stuck her tongue out at Jamie's retreating form.

What a way to start the week.

Sarah logged into her computer and furiously typed an instant message to Katie:

~ JMS Instant Messenger ~

SLyons:

I thought you said you'd cover for me?!!!

Within seconds, Katie fired back a response:

~ JMS Instant Messenger ~

<i>KSaunders:</i>	You should turn on your cell phone. It works better that way.
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Gasping in disbelief, Sarah pulled her phone from her purse. *Dang it!* Katie was right. She had forgotten to turn the blasted thing on. Shaking her head at her own stupidity, she powered up her phone. Sure enough there was a message from Katie warning her that Hillary had arrived early.

She owed Katie an apology.

~ JMS Instant Messenger ~

<i>SLyons:</i>	I'm so sorry. Stupid me. Lunch? My treat?
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<i>KSaunders:</i>	Sushi?
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<i>SLyons:</i>	You got it.
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<i>KSaunders:</i>	You're forgiven. See you in the SAS.
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Sarah logged off her instant messenger and grabbed her coffee mug. She knew she'd need an infusion of caffeine to sustain herself through Hillary's non-productive egotistical staff meeting – or, as Katie liked to refer to them, Hillary's Self-Adulation Session. SAS for short.

Chapter Twelve

"And I'm going to need everyone's cooperation," Hillary tersely announced, "because my workload is such that I can't be interrupted today if I'm to meet all my deadlines. If you need anything, please see Jamie."

Sarah inwardly groaned. No doubt Jamie would let that simple comment go right to her head. Sure enough, Jamie straightened up in her chair, looking for all the world like a puffed-up peacock.

It was going to be a long day.

Without warning, Douglas Waller, general manager for JMS, burst through the door. "Good morning, everybody," he bellowed as he quickly moved to Hillary's side. "Wonder Boy phoned again," he told her. "Now he wants a copy of the current budget. And I need you to review my Operating Plan before I send it to him." Doug dropped a stack of papers on Hillary's desk.

"Budget?" Hillary squealed, casually running her fingers through her hair.

Sarah did her best not to giggle as she watched Hillary's tongue dart out to moisten her lips. She dared a glance at Katie. Her friend silently mouthed, "I told you so."

"You know we don't work from a budget," Hillary balked. "Just leave him to me, Doug. I'll work my magic on him. You'll see. He'll forget all about the financials."

"Not with this kid," Doug cautioned. "I've already told you, he'll only meet off-site and only with Sam or me. He's made it clear he doesn't want to be involved in the business and Sam should leave it that way. Damn him for stirring up this mess." Doug looked around the room, realizing he had an audience. "Let's talk about this later. When did you last update the Cash Flow Statement?"

"December. Why?"

"I just know he's going to ask for one after he reviews the income statements. We need to have all our bases covered. This kid doesn't miss a beat."

"I can't possibly get all these requests done today." Hillary moved Doug's papers to one side on her desk. "I'll look over your plan and dummy up some sort of budget, but he's going to have to wait until later in the week for me to gather all the financials."

"Duly noted. Just do the best you can," Doug advised. He headed for the door. "And I'll stall him from my end."

"Doug," Hillary called out.

Doug turned back to Hillary. "Yes?"

"Happy birthday, Mr. President," she sang in her Marilyn Monroe voice. "Happy birthday to you."

Doug turned bright red, then rushed out of the office.

Hillary laughed. Jamie joined her.

"HB," Katie offered, "If you'd like, I can pull financials for you —."

"No," Hillary snapped, cutting her off. "They're in the penthouse, and only Doug or I have access to that room. No one else has any reason to go in there. Ever."

"Okay," Katie said, sounding confused. "I only wanted to relieve some of the pressure off you."

Hillary relented. "Thank you, Katie. But I'll take care of it. Now where were we before

Doug interrupted us?" She scanned the room, settling her sights on Amy, the general office clerk. "Amy," she began. "Care to tell me where you were Saturday night?"

Amy Hoggen had been employed with the company for almost nine months. Primarily responsible for filing, ordering supplies and handling order-entry, she often pitched in to help Sarah and Katie whenever they had a need. Sarah knew Amy to be a hardworking twenty-three-year-old who liked to keep to herself.

"HB, I told you I didn't think I'd make it Saturday," Amy answered. "I had a family function."

"Then it's a good thing the party was cancelled," Hillary stated. "Otherwise I'd have to call into question your loyalty to this company."

"What?" Amy cried.

"Yes, ma'am," Hillary rebuffed. "Saturday was a mandatory work function. Consider this your warning."

Amy pressed her lips together, not saying another word.

"Sarah," Hillary said, turning her sights on Sarah. Sarah felt her heart start to race. Blast it. Why did Hillary always have to treat people like they were four years old? "Jamie tells me you were late this morning."

I bet she couldn't wait. "She's right, HB," Sarah readily admitted. "I didn't want to forget your shoes." *Okay, technically, that's not a lie.* She handed the bag to Hillary. "I'll stay late tonight to make up my time."

Grinning, Hillary opened the bag and made a show out of removing both shoes. She laid them side by side on her desk. Her grin faltered as she examined the right shoe.

Sarah swallowed heavily. *Forgive me for not being entirely truthful.* "Is something wrong?" she ventured. Thankfully, her voice didn't crack.

Hillary eyed Sarah. "No, Sarah. Nothing's wrong," she curtly replied. "Surprisingly, nothing's wrong at all." She stuffed the shoes back into the bag and dropped it under her desk. "I have a joke for you all."

"Wonderful!" replied Jamie, always the suck-up.

Relieved to have the shoe fiasco behind her without suffering any nasty ramification, Sarah shot a glance at Katie as if to say, 'for someone who's so busy, why is she wasting time telling jokes?'

Katie rolled her eyes.

Hillary began. "Damon and Sarah go to the same church."

"What?" Sarah cried out, glaring at her boss. Jokes about her religion? Jeez oh Pete. This was the kind of crap she'd had to endure in high school. What was Hillary up to now?

"It's a joke, Sarah," Hillary admonished her. "Lighten up."

Lighten up? Where had Sarah heard those words before? She clutched the armrests on her chair. If Hillary said anything derogatory...

"Sarah teaches Sunday school each week but Damon attends sporadically. On one of those sporadic Sundays Damon, asks Sarah to dinner. Happily, Sarah accepts. At dinner, Damon asks Sarah if she'd like a cocktail. Sarah declines. What would she tell her Sunday school class? Following dinner, Damon reaches into his jacket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. He offers one to Sarah. Again she declines. After all, what would she tell her Sunday school class? On the way home, Damon drives past the local motel. He figures, why

not? "Hey, Sarah," he calls, "how about you and I stop at this motel?" Imagine his surprise when Sarah agrees. Following their romp in bed, Damon feels remorse. "Oh Sarah, I'm sorry," he apologizes. "What will you tell your Sunday school class?" Sarah sits up in bed, pulling the sheets over her naked breasts. "I'll tell them the same thing I always tell them... you don't have to smoke and drink to have a good time.' "

Jamie laughed as though it was the funniest joke she'd ever heard.

Katie chuckled and Amy smiled.

Okay, Sarah thought, relaxing her grip on the chair. Knowing Hillary, it could have been worse. Much worse. As it was, Sarah had already heard that particular joke, having read a similar version of it on the Internet. Hillary had merely swapped out the names to suit her purpose. But what Sarah couldn't understand was why Hillary would tell such a joke if she wanted Damon for herself. Could she really be that cruel? Hmm. An idea came to Sarah.

"That was pretty good, HB," Sarah said, giving the woman a hint of a smile. Then she added, "but I'm afraid you're going to have to change the names the next time you tell that joke. Damon and I are no longer dating."

"What?" Hillary acted genuinely surprised. "You two were such an adorable couple," she cooed. "When did this happen?"

Sarah stared at Hillary, keeping her expression passive. *Either she's a heck of an actress or she's entirely innocent. But which is it?*

"We broke up a few weeks back," she informed her boss, casually shrugging her shoulders as if she hadn't a care in the world. "Although Damon didn't handle the situation maturely, whoever he's seeing now did me a huge favor. I wish them only the best."

Flashing a wide grin, Sarah sat back in her chair.

Nobody said anything.

"Well then," Hillary haughtily broke the silence. She fumbled with the papers on her desk. "I'll need all of you to be extra careful when entering payables and receivables. Be sure to use the proper accounting codes. Your errors are causing me extra work."

"HB," Katie piped in, "those codes display automatically. Should we override the system?"

"Absolutely not," Hillary hotly objected. "I want you to check every single code. If you come across one that's incorrect, you're to let me know and I'll go in and make the necessary change. Now get back to work. And remember, I don't want to be disturbed for the rest of the day."

Chapter Thirteen

"Interesting SAS meeting," Katie casually remarked. Having escaped the office to enjoy their lunch hour in peace, Sarah and Katie were seated in their favorite Japanese restaurant, waiting to order. "I loved the way you handled Hillary and the joke situation. It was classic."

"Now I know how David felt after nailing Goliath with his slingshot," Sarah said, chuckling. Their server approached the table and poured each of them a cup of green tea. Then she asked for Sarah's order. "I'll have the spicy shrimp and crab roll, a bowl of Miso soup, and a seaweed salad."

"Yum," Katie said. "I'll have the same."

The girls handed over their menus.

"Did you notice the way Hillary examined the shoes?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah. That was weird, even by Hillary standards," Katie replied. "Good thing you had that heel fixed."

"You know what I think? I think the heel was already starting to go. And I'll bet she knew it and only loaned those shoes to me hoping it would break."

"Then you'd owe her a new pair of designer shoes?"

"Exactly. Except they're not designer shoes," Sarah revealed. "They're fake."

Katie almost choked on her tea. "Of course they're fake!" She burst out laughing. "Why didn't we think of that before?"

"That's not the best part," Sarah said. "If what I suspect is true, then she has to know I had that heel fixed. But she can't say a word about it, because then she'd have to admit she knew the shoe was damaged before she loaned it to me."

Katie held up her mug. "Cheers!"

"I have to tell you that I am feeling a bit guilty about the whole thing," Sarah admitted, tapping her mug against Katie's. "What I did is not exactly honest."

"And cheating your subordinate out of six hundred bucks is ethical?" Katie demanded. "Give it up, Sarah. The good Lord is not going to hold this one against you."

"He won't. But she will," Sarah bluntly stated. "And if I'm right, you know she's not going to let it go. She's going to pull something. I just hope I don't get fired because of it."

The waitress returned with their food.

"This looks so good," Sarah said, picking up her chopsticks. After putting a small dab of Wasabi on a piece of sushi, she popped it into her mouth. "MMmmm," she purred, savoring the succulent flavor. "I'm so glad we found this place." She chased the sushi with a sip of tea.

"Hillary's not going to fire you," Katie said between bites of food. "Believe me, she doesn't want the inconvenience of having to replace you."

"Never say never," Sarah cautioned.

"Trust me on this one," Katie stated. "Enough about her. I want to hear about the motorcycle dude. I leave you alone for ten minutes and wham! You snag a winner. Tell me your secret."

Sarah couldn't help smiling. "I have an interesting story to share." She revealed the accident to Katie. "So I actually met Jake earlier that day; he just doesn't know it."

"Stop! Stop! You're killing me," Katie cried. She was laughing so hard, tears glistened

in her eyes. "This is priceless. Are you sure he has no idea you're the hooker who bumped into his motorcycle?"

"He never said a word," Sarah guiltily admitted. "I know I should have told him, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. So right off the bat, we have a secret between us. It's basic textbook romance."

"Textbook romance?" Katie asked, still chuckling. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't you ever read romance novels?" Sarah countered. "There's always a big secret or a big misunderstanding between the hero and the heroine. And I've fallen right into that trap. I'm the too-stupid-to-live heroine. I should sell my story to Harlequin."

"You worry too much," Katie declared. "The Jake I met Saturday night was not thinking about the hooker who bumped into him. Heck, he probably didn't even remember he owned a motorcycle. At the risk of sounding cliché, he only had eyes for you."

"He didn't mention the accident. But still . . ."

"But still nothing," Katie said, cutting her off. "Next you'll be telling me the whole Middle Eastern conflict is your fault too. Stop with the guilt trip. You are the most honest and true person I know. Sometimes to a fault. You need to stop being so negative. Are you going to call him?"

Katie switched gears so fast, Sarah had to smile. "You know I am," she said, taking a bite of her seaweed salad. "But I'm going to wait until I get home. No way am I doing it from the office and risk Hillary overhearing. She'd be after him, next."

"Who do you suppose Wonder Boy is?" Katie asked.

"Haven't a clue," Sarah answered. "But did you notice how nervous Doug was?"

"You mean, more so than usual?" Katie asked, grinning.

"Yeah. Something's up."

"God help Wonder Boy if Hillary gets her clutches into him. She'll suck him dry." Katie checked her watch. "We'd better head back. You know Jamie's timing us. I wish that woman would get a clue!"

They headed back to work. The rest of the afternoon proved uneventful, thank goodness.

Chapter Fourteen

It took Sarah most of the evening to summon the courage she needed to call Jake. When she wasn't worrying that he wouldn't remember her, she was terrified that he would – and not from the restaurant. If only she'd 'fessed up right from the start, she wouldn't feel so guilt-ridden now. As it was, the very thought of his mentioning the accident caused her to break out in a cold sweat.

In between several aborted dialing attempts, she found herself pacing through her tiny apartment. She argued with herself. She ate an entire bag of Bar-B-Que potato chips, one of her favorite comfort foods. She paced some more, all the while keeping an eye on the clock. Ten o'clock, her official cut-off time for calling anyone on a work night, was fast approaching. "This is so stupid," she finally told herself. "Why can't I just call the guy?" She knew her frayed nerves couldn't stand another day of anticipation, so she picked up her cell phone and determinedly dialed his number.

Taking a deep breath, she glanced heavenward for support and then pressed the send button. She crossed her fingers for luck and waited for the call to connect. He answered on the second ring. "Jake?" she softly queried. "Hi. It's Sarah."

"Sarah, hi," he replied. "I was hoping you'd call."

He was? That response instantly put her at ease.

"How are you, Sarah?"

"Fine, thanks." She loved the way he pronounced her name. Sa..rah. Nobody had ever said her name so sexy before. It gave her shivers. "I just wanted to tell you how much fun I had on Saturday. Believe it or not, you saved the evening. I wasn't having a particularly good time until you came along."

"I could say the same to you," Jake told her. "I was there to meet someone for a business meeting, but he stiffed me."

"We had several people bail on us, too," Sarah admitted. "That's why the party ended early." Careful now, she cautioned herself. Don't talk too long about the party.

"Actually, I'm glad my guy cancelled. Otherwise, I might not have met you."

Sarah sank to the floor, landing in a small heap. This guy was too good to be true. All her fretting had been for naught. "I'm glad, too," she softly said.

Tell him how you met. No!

Tell him! Buzz off.

"So, are you busy Saturday?" he casually asked.

"I could be." She giggled. Gosh, she was acting like a teenager. "What do you think I'll be doing?" What was this? Was she being coy? Was Sarah Lyons actually being flirty and coy? Who would have thunk it?

"Well, considering the Rules of Engagement, how about a picnic in the park?"

He remembered the Rules of Engagement? Impressive. "The one in Westville or the one in Richfield?"

"Westville. By the pond. I haven't been there in a while, but I think there's a long row of weeping willows that will give us plenty of shade from the sun if the day proves too hot."

"I love that pond!" Sarah gushed. "I often go there with a basket of treats and a good book. It's a perfect spot for a picnic."

"Okay, then. It's settled. I'll meet you at the south end of the pond at three o'clock sharp on Saturday."

"What should I bring?"

"You."

How could one three-letter word send shivers up her spine? "Seriously," she said. "I make a mean dessert."

"Okay. You bring dessert."

"What if it rains?" The question popped out of her mouth before she could stop herself. Blast it! Katie was right. Lately she'd been finding doom and gloom in everything. "Should we have an alternate plan?"

"Nope. I'll just bring umbrellas."

She laughed. "I'll see you then."

"Bye, now."

Tossing the phone on the sofa, Sarah got up from the floor and danced her way through her tiny apartment. "I have a date on Saturday," she sang, her voice loud and off-key. "A date with Jake." She executed several nearly perfect pirouettes in the middle of her living room. "We're going to the park. A picnic in the park."

Suddenly the reality of her pending date with her dream biker hit her full force. Sarah stopped dancing so quickly, she stumbled. Unable to catch herself, she found herself back on the floor. This time her butt hit the carpet with a loud thump.

"I have a date with Jake on Saturday," she yelled, flinging herself onto her back. She stared at the ceiling. Saturday was only five days away. What was she thinking, wasting time dancing? She had to pull together a dynamite outfit. She had to create a fantastic, finger licking, call-me-back-for-a-second-date dessert. She needed to rethink her hair and make-up. She had to come up with witty conversation topics.

She picked herself up off the floor. Her emotions spent, what she really needed was to take two aspirin and go to bed.

Jake dropped the phone on the floor and laid back on the sofa, hands clasped behind his head. He stared at the ceiling, a smile growing on his lips. Yep, there was no doubt about it. He was feeling pretty pleased with himself. Without even searching for buried treasure, he'd managed to uncover a gem.

"Thank you, Damon, wherever you are," he said out loud.

When Sarah mentioned the unpleasant start to her evening the night they'd met, he longed to comfort her, telling her he was aware of the shoddy treatment she'd received at the hands of her undeserving boyfriend. And that boss of hers! HB was one lucky woman. If she ever had the misfortune of working for him, she'd be out on her flabby ass faster than most people lost their shirts at the gaming tables in Vegas.

Fortunately, Sarah didn't seem to be aware of HB's connection with Damon. And Jake was damned if he would be the bearer of such news. Ever.

Jake didn't like keeping secrets. But in this particular case, he didn't think he had much of a choice. If Sarah ever learned he had witnessed that embarrassing confrontation between her and Damon, in fact was privy to all the intimate details, he doubted she'd want to pursue a

relationship with him. Women could be funny that way.

Jake decided then and there that the whole nasty episode would remain his dirty little secret. To be on the safe side, he resolved never to mention anything that had transpired prior to his meeting Sarah face to face, including asking her who had been no-shows at her party. As much as he longed to learn if the woman who'd hit his motorcycle was among those missing from the party, he couldn't very well ask one woman about another woman without some sort of explanation. Women could be funny about that, too.

Jake knew there was no way he could reveal what he knew about the whole birthday party business without facing numerous questions. Like how long he'd been at *BLEACHERS*, or where he was sitting before he'd intervened on her behalf. Nope. No way was he ever trotting down that path. No good could come out of it, and he didn't want anything blowing his chance with Sarah.

He was counting the days until Saturday.

Chapter Fifteen

Despite being awake since the crack of dawn, Tuesday morning found Sarah in an exceptionally good mood. Too excited to fall back to sleep, she'd jumped out of bed and prepared for work. Out the door in record time, she arrived at the office seventy-five minutes before her normal starting time. Of course, she doubted Jamie would report *that* to Hillary.

She was amazed at the amount of work she accomplished in the short period of time she had the place to herself. But now she needed a break. She grabbed her coffee mug and headed into the kitchen for a quick refill. While she stirred sugar into her coffee, she resisted the urge to burst into song, but only because she didn't want to subject anyone to her off-key singing voice. She checked her watch. Eight o'clock. Only one hundred and three hours to go until her date with Jake.

Sarah couldn't keep the smile from her face. Not even if she tried.

"Morning," Katie mumbled, stumbling into the room. She clunked her coffee mug on the counter. "Could you fill 'er up, please?" she asked, suppressing a yawn. "My vision's a little blurry right now and I don't want to splash hot coffee all over myself."

Chuckling, Sarah obliged, pouring steaming coffee into Katie's Wonder Woman mug. "Good grief, woman. What happened to you?"

"Late night," Katie said, groaning. She added a dollop of milk to the coffee, but no sugar. "Ron came over to help me work out a business plan. Before we knew it, it was one o'clock in the morning."

"Ron from *BLEACHERS*?"

"Yep," Katie picked up her mug. "Caffeine, work your magic." She slurped the liquid. "Mmm. Good." She took another sip. "He's really savvy when it comes to stuff like that. His managerial and organizational skills are amazing."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"About what?"

"About being ready to start your own business."

"Hell yes!" Katie exclaimed, perking up a bit. "Oops. Sorry. Heck, yes. I'm sick of working my ass off—oops, sorry again—my butt off for people who can't find their way out of the proverbial paper bag, and yet, they make six digit incomes."

"Ssshhh," Sarah warned. "Jamie has ears."

"And a big mouth," Katie added with disgust. "That's the other thing I'm getting sick of."

"My, my," Sarah noted. "Aren't you Miss Grumpy Pants today?"

Katie gave her the evil eye, albeit a tired, bloodshot one. "What do you have to be so perky about?" she asked, setting her mug on the counter.

"I called Jake last night," Sarah confided. She couldn't help giggling. "And we have a date on Saturday."

"Hey, good for you. I'll sound a little more excited once the caffeine hits my bloodstream." She topped off her mug, pouring the rich brown liquid right up to the rim. "Can I ask the plan?"

"Picnic in the park."

Katie nodded in approval. "Romantic. Sounds like a good first date."

"I need a favor, though."

"Ask away." Katie bent down and sipped the overflow so as not to spill any of it when she picked up the mug.

"Can I borrow your car?"

"My car?" Katie's head popped up so fast she reminded Sarah of a Jack-in-the-Box. "What's wrong with yours?"

"My car hit Jake's motorcycle, remember?"

Katie burst out laughing. "Sarah, only you can get into predicaments like this. I swear, you're the reincarnation of Lucy Ricardo."

"I don't believe in reincarnation."

"Good," Katie stated. "Because I'd make a lousy Ethel Mertz."

Chapter Sixteen

Wednesday afternoon dragged.

For the hundredth time that day, Sarah glanced at her watch. Seventy-two hours to go. Best to keep busy, she decided. Then hopefully time would fly. She was in the middle of processing benefit deductions for payroll when her cell phone rang. She glanced at the number and her heart started racing. It was Jake! In the next instant fear clutched her. It was Jake? Was he calling to cancel?

Stop being so negative!

She grabbed her phone. "Hello?" she whispered, deliberately keeping her voice low. She didn't want anyone, especially Hillary, hearing her.

"Sarah, hi! It's Jake."

"Hi, Jake." Quickly glancing towards the opening of her cubicle, Sarah was relieved to find the aisle outside her cubby vacant.

"You okay? I can barely hear you."

"I'm fine. I'm at work," Sarah said, raising her voice slightly. "Personal calls are normally frowned upon, but I worked through my lunch, so I can spare a few minutes."

"Busy?"

"Yeah. Day before payday is always busy."

"You run payroll?"

"Among other things."

"So you're everybody's best friend come payday?"

"Only if their checks are right," she chuckled.

"I won't hold you up then. I just wanted you to know that I'm really looking forward to Saturday. It's what's getting me through the week."

"Aaww," Sarah said, smiling. She leaned back in her chair, twirling her hair through her fingers. "That's sweet. Thank you. You've just made my day."

"Until Saturday," he said.

I'm counting the hours. "See you then," Sarah whispered. "Bye, Jake." She disconnected the call and dropped her phone on her desk.

"Personal call?" Jamie asked, peering over Sarah's wall.

Sarah jumped. "Gosh, Jamie. You scared me. How long have you been standing there?" *Oh, dear Lord. Please don't let her know about Jake.*

"Just passing by. Thought I'd say hi, is all."

Yeah, right, Sarah thought.

"Who's Jake?" Jamie asked.

Blast it! She heard.

"Who?" Sarah asked, scrambling to think of something, anything, to dispel Jamie's knowledge of Jake's existence.

"Jamie," Hillary called sharply from down the hall. For the first time since Sarah began her employment with JMS, she was relieved to hear her boss's shrill voice. "I've been searching everywhere for you," Hillary informed Jamie when she caught up with her. "I need you to cancel my dinner reservations for this evening."

Jamie scampered off after Hillary.

"Dang it," Sarah mumbled, her joy dampened by that nosey busybody. She wondered if she should say anything to Jamie—find out what she might have overheard. Maybe she could think of some plausible explanation of who Jake was without rousing her suspicions. She ran several different scenarios through her head before deciding it was best to let sleeping dogs lie. She just prayed Jamie wouldn't open her big mouth to Hillary.

Yeah, right. And maybe night won't follow day.

Knowing there wasn't a darn thing she could do about the situation, Sarah pushed her concerns aside. She touched her cell phone. "Until Saturday," she whispered.

Chapter Seventeen

Finally, Saturday arrived.

Sarah spent a good portion of the morning leisurely soaking in her bathtub, where jasmine-scented bubbles and country music filled the air. Following her bath, she wasted the next hour trying to style her hair, then nearly had a panic attack when one side of her head crimped perfectly while the other side frizzed out of control. She stuck her head under the sink, wetting down the mess so she could start anew. Why today of all days she decided to crimp her naturally straight hair was a mystery to her. She dried it—again—then pulled it back into a ponytail, letting the shorter ends dangle down along the side of her face. After all, she was going on a picnic in a park, not attending a formal dance, and besides, Jake already knew she had straight hair, so why fuss with it now?

What a difference a week makes. Had it only been a week? Seven long days ago she'd been in misery, dressing for Hillary's soiree. Today, she was literally bouncing off her bathroom walls with glee. Instead of drawing on eyeliner and gluing on fake eyelashes, she lightly touched mascara to her own lashes. A soft pink blush accentuated her cheeks. She was much better suited for the natural lip color she was dabbing on instead of the ruby red stuff she had applied last week.

Today, she liked what she saw staring back at her in the mirror. She smiled, nodding her head in approval.

She was ready to get dressed.

Sarah had spent last evening whipping through her closet, trying on every article of clothing she owned, then promptly discarding each piece for one reason or another. This skirt was the wrong color. Those pants were too dressy. That top had a snag in it. She now had a stack of rumpled clean clothes piled in the corner of her bedroom. She'd deal with them later.

After much anguish, Sarah finally settled on a pair of beige Capri pants and a light green short-sleeved blouse. She knew that particular shade of green brought out the color in her eyes. She got dressed and slipped her feet into a comfortable pair of white Keds.

No fake designer four-inch heels for her today!

Sarah danced her way into her tiny kitchen, then laughed at herself. With the way she was acting, one would think she'd never been on a date.

Well, she'd never been on a date with Jake before. Last Saturday really didn't count. Today would be their official first date. She had every reason to be excited.

She checked the time again. One o'clock. She was ahead of schedule. Two hours to go until she'd meet up with Jake. Time enough to switch cars with Katie before making her way to the park.

Sarah picked up a small wicker basket containing the cream cheese brownies she'd made last night.

Two hours and counting.

"I still don't understand why you can't drive your own car," Katie commented, jangling the keys in her hand.

"Katie, if you don't want me to take your car, just say so," Sarah snapped. She had been in such a good mood, but the closer three o'clock loomed, the more anxious she became. But

she shouldn't take her nerves out on Katie. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, hanging her head and sighing deeply.

"Relax, Sarah," Katie said, lightly touching her on the shoulder. "You're wound tighter than a spring. Any moment now, you're gonna pop. And I don't want to be picking pieces of Sarah out of my hair for the next week."

Sarah gave Katie a wry smile. "It's just that I really like this guy," she confessed. "And I'm afraid if he recognizes my car, he'll remember where he knows me from and that'll blow everything."

"Didn't you tell me you were upset about being deceptive?" Katie reminded her. "What did you call it? Textbook romance?"

Sarah sighed again. Trust Katie to point out the error in her logic. "Maybe I'm hanging around Hillary too much."

"There's always that," Katie agreed. "God knows my morals have taken a hit in the four years I've worked for the woman. But I'm not buying it. Not from you. There's got to be more to this than what you're telling me."

Katie stood in front of Sarah, arms crossed. She wanted answers and Sarah knew she wouldn't budge until she had them. "Fine," Sarah began. "After the accident I asked Jake if he wanted to exchange information and he said '*not interested*'."

Katie waited a moment. "That's it?" she asked, throwing her hands up in the air. "You said there wasn't any damage. So no need to exchange info, right?"

"Wrong," Sarah declared. "It wasn't what he said, but how he said it. He wasn't interested in *me*, Katie. He didn't ask my name because he didn't want to know my name. He didn't want to know anything about me or have anything to do with me. As it was, he could barely bring himself to look at me. He truly believed I was a prostitute who purposely ran my car into his motorcycle in order to solicit him. Believe me, he couldn't get away from me fast enough."

"Sarah, just explain—"

"No!" Sarah cried, cutting her off. She knew she had to do a better job in making Katie understand her concerns. She tried again. "When I was Sarah Lyons, Hooker Extraordinaire, he looked me over like I was a rotten piece of meat. But later, when I was Sarah Lyons, Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, he treated me as though I were a precious gem to be loved and cherished. Believe me, Katie, I don't want to go back to being plain old Hamburger Helper."

Katie hugged her. "Oh, Sarah, honey. I'm so sorry. How awful for you. But you know, if you two continue dating, sooner or later he's going to see your car. Why not take a chance and see what happens? He might not recognize it. You never know."

Sarah thought about it for maybe a minute. "No," she finally decided. "I can't take that risk. Not now. Not before he has the chance to get to know the real me." She revisited the car situation. A crazy idea came to her. "How about you and me permanently switching vehicles? Your Sunfire is almost identical to my Cavalier in age, style and condition. The only difference is the color. Mine is blue and yours is red."

"You want Jake to think I was the hooker?"

"There's no way he'd think it's you," Sarah insisted. "Even if he saw you in the car, he'd never associate the accident with you."

Katie was silent a moment. "Is that what you really want to do?"

Sarah grinned. "You have to admit, it would solve the problem. And besides, you handle a clutch way better than me."

"It's only a temporary fix to the problem," Katie said. "Eventually, you're going to have to tell him the truth. I know you, and you won't be able to stand yourself if you don't."

"I'll deal with that later," Sarah promised. "Please? Can I use your car?"

"I'll tell you what," Katie offered. "I'll switch cars with you on an as-needed basis if you come into business with me."

"What?" she gasped.

"You heard me," Katie said. She dangled her keys in front of Sarah.

"That's not fair! I can't think about that," Sarah moaned. "I have a date with Jake. That's all I can handle right now."

"But you will think about it?"

"Yes," Sarah relented.

"Promise?" Katie demanded.

"Pinkie swear," Sarah said with a laugh, extending her right hand. After she and Katie shook intertwined pinkies, Katie dropped the keys into the palm of her hand.

"Go get your man," she said. "And this time, try not to run him over."

Chapter Eighteen

What a beautiful day!

As Sarah made her way through the park, she found herself surrounded by chirping birds and laughing children. Was it her imagination, or was the grass greener, the sky bluer, and the air fresher? Without a doubt, the sun was brighter.

She started humming, swinging the basket by her side as she walked. She knew there was an added bounce in her step. And she knew Jake was the reason it was there.

Sarah marveled at the number of people in the park. Couples strolling hand-in-hand, families with children, young adults with their dogs. It seemed as if all of Westville had gathered together to enjoy the day.

She decided that the entire town was welcome to share in her happiness.

Sarah ducked as a Frisbee buzzed by her head. "Sorry," called the teenager as he raced by to retrieve it. She just laughed.

She continued towards the row of weeping willows, her eyes peeled for Jake. She hadn't seen him yet, but then again, there were so many people milling about. Suddenly, just as Moses had parted the Red Sea, a break came in the crowd and there he stood. He waved and started moving toward her.

Her breath caught in her throat. What was it with him and her air passages?

Sarah found it hard to believe this dark-haired Adonis was walking towards her. He was dressed in khaki shorts and a light blue T-shirt, totally different from the leather he'd worn the last time she was with him. It didn't matter. He could be wearing sackcloth for all she cared.

"Sarah, hi!" he said, placing a kiss on her cheek. "I'm so glad to see you." He relieved her of the wicker basket and led her to where he had set up a picnic lunch.

His kiss jolted her. "Hi!" was all she could muster.

Great opening line, Sarah.

But how could she be witty with him standing so close? It was all she could do to concentrate on breathing. Gosh, he smelled good. A clean, manly smell. Not like Damon, who usually wore overpowering musk-scented cologne. "Everything looks so nice," she finally managed to say.

Jake had spread a blue blanket on the ground. In the middle of the blanket lay a red and white checkered tablecloth. She noticed a large wicker picnic basket, a bottle of red wine sitting in a silver decanter, and right smack in the middle of the tablecloth sat a glass bud vase holding a single red rose.

"I hope you're hungry, because I've brought a ton of food," Jake announced. He motioned for her to sit and then plopped down on the blanket next to her.

"You know I'm not shy about eating, Jake," she said with a laugh. *That's it, Sarah. Relax. Just be you.* "What can I help you with?"

"I've got it covered," Jake said, waving away her assistance. He opened the picnic basket and pulled out a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. "I always go with the best," he said, grinning. He held out the bucket like it was a prize she had just won on a game show.

"I love KFC!"

"A girl after my own heart," Jake said, not knowing his response sent shivers up and

down her spine.

Jake set the bucket to one side and handed her a paper plate along with a packet of dinnerware. "I also have coleslaw, baked beans, and some home-made biscuits. Well, as home-made as the Colonel can make them."

"And I've brought cream cheese brownies for dessert," Sarah told him.

"Brownies?"

"Yep. My specialty."

"Sarah, brownies are my favorite."

Sarah grinned. "Bonus points for me, then."

Good girl. Now you're acting normal.

"That means you get the pick of the chick," he informed her, handing her the bucket.

Sarah pulled out a chicken leg, then filled her plate with beans, coleslaw and a biscuit.

"I'm a breast man myself," Jake announced, pulling his selection from the bucket.

Sarah fumbled her plate.

She barely managed to straighten it before carefully setting it down on the blanket. She braved a glance at Jake. Thankfully, he hadn't noticed anything amiss. Remembering how he'd ogled her following the accident, there was no doubt in her mind that he was a breast man. And no doubt she was turning bright red with embarrassment.

"Aren't most men?" she blurted out without thinking. Yikes! She meant to divert attention away from breasts, not focus on them. Good grief! Where was Katie with her snappy comebacks when Sarah needed her?

To her relief Jake laughed. "Not necessarily." He continued piling food onto his plate. Then he changed the subject. "Would you like some wine? If not, I have lemonade." He pulled a large silver thermos from the basket.

"Gosh, Jake. You've thought of everything."

"I aim to please."

"I'll have whatever you're having," she said.

"Great. I'll open the wine. I'm not sure if wine is appropriate for a mid-afternoon lunch, but I remembered your drinking it last Saturday, so I decided to bring it along.

He remembered what I drank last Saturday night?

Although this thought should have pleased Sarah, she suddenly felt apprehensive. If he remembered what she was drinking, then surely he'd remember the accident, wouldn't he? Is that why he said he was a breast man? Had he already figured it out and was simply waiting for her to confess?

Don't read into anything.

She held out her plastic cup. "That's very thoughtful, Jake," she murmured as he poured the wine.

"Let's eat," Jake said. He dug into his food.

"So many people in the park today," Sarah casually remarked while they finished their lunch. "It makes for great people watching. I like to imagine their stories. Sometimes good, sometimes not so good. But I always try to leave them with a happy ending."

"Let me guess," Jake said. He stretched out on the blanket, leaning on one elbow. "English major."

Sarah stared at Jake. "With a minor in business. How did you know?"

Jake chuckled. "My mom's an English major. And she does the exact same thing. I remember one time we were sitting in a restaurant where some guy was dining alone. Mom created this elaborate story on how he left his wife for what he thought were greener pastures. All through dinner she regaled us with his misfortunes. His business failed. His ex-wife remarried a wealthy man. His kids didn't want anything to do with him. On and on she rambled about this poor soul and the bad choices he'd made. Of course, now I realize she was trying to teach us something in those stories. Listening to you takes me right back."

"Us?" she asked.

"How's that?" Jake asked.

"You said 'us'," she replied. "Who's us?"

"Oh, my brother Jeremy and I."

"I think you may have mentioned Jeremy last Saturday. Is he your only sibling?"

"Yep. You?"

"Just my dad and me," Sarah said. "My mom died when I was born."

"That's too bad, Sarah." He sat up and moved closer to her. "I lost my dad when I was fourteen, and that was pretty rough. It must have been doubly hard on you, never knowing your mom."

"My dad's an awesome guy," Sarah said. "He did an amazing job being both mother and father. He's the minister at the Christian church in Westville." *Might as well get it right out on the table*, Sarah thought. "So I was raised in a loving home with strong Christian values."

Jake was quiet.

Sarah held her breath. Again with the breathing. He really was having an adverse affect on her lungs.

"That explains it," Jake said.

"Explains what?" she cautiously asked.

"When I first saw you, you had a quality about you that I couldn't put my finger on. Serene, almost angelic."

"Ppfft," Sarah scoffed. She lowered her gaze. "I don't know about being angelic," she said, picking at a blade of grass. *Especially since I haven't been totally honest with you.* "Nobody's perfect. Least of all me."

"Then I'm using the wrong word. But you do have a sense about you."

"I smell bad?" Sarah joked, deliberately misunderstanding him. She was growing uncomfortable with this conversation. Not only because of her deception, but because Damon had said something eerily similar early in their relationship. And look what a jerk he turned out to be.

"Not hardly." Jake grinned. "I haven't known you very long, Sarah, but I've noticed that when I'm with you, I feel like . . . I don't know. I can't explain it. I just feel different."

"Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?" she asked. *I have to know.* Sarah didn't think her heart could take another rejection.

"Oh, believe me, it's a very good thing," Jake revealed. "I like how I feel when I'm with you."

"Thanks, Jake," Sarah said with a smile. "Most guys get intimidated when I tell them of my religious background and that I try to live by those values." *Most of the time, anyway.* "My

former boyfriend said he was cool with it, but then —”

“Sarah,” Jake interrupted. “Your former boyfriend is an imbecile. Just like that lonely man sitting in the restaurant, eating dinner all by himself.” He reached over and placed a hand on her chin, drawing her near. “Trust me, Sarah,” he whispered. “My momma didn’t raise no fool.”

Soft lips touched hers.

And the outside world ceased to exist.

Chapter Nineteen

Monday morning came all too quickly.

Sarah was seated in Hillary's office for their weekly SAS meeting, but she couldn't concentrate on anything her boss was saying. Her mind kept drifting back to Saturday.

Her date with Jake had gone spectacularly well, at least in her humble opinion. And since he'd already made plans to see her again, he must have thought so too. Sarah kept replaying the day over and over in her mind, savoring every little detail. They'd walked off their lunch, casually strolling hand-in-hand along the perimeter of the park—five miles in total—before returning to the blanket under the weeping willow trees. While she relaxed on the blanket, Jake retrieved the lemonade along with her basket of brownies from his car, where he'd stored them during their walk. They'd sipped lemonade, ate brownies and gabbed for hours like two old friends.

Time betrayed them.

Much to her dismay, Sarah couldn't stop the clock from ticking any more than she could stop the sun from setting. All too soon dusk arrived, and with it came the dreaded rangers, shooing them from the park.

There was one uncomfortable moment towards the end of the evening when Jake insisted on escorting her to her car: correction, Katie's car. While she leaned against it, Sarah whispered silent thanks that she'd had the foresight to switch vehicles. She was certain someone as brilliant as Jake would have no problem remembering her car. And then what would she have done?

Then the guilt set in.

Darn it all, Sarah didn't want this 'thing' hanging between them any longer. It was casting a shadow over their time together. She couldn't relax. She had to watch everything she said in fear that something would spark his memory. She decided that if he cared at all for her, he should be able to forgive her this one tiny, itty-bitty little white lie.

They might even share a laugh over it.

She opened her mouth to confess when Jake swooped in and kissed her. And just like that, any notion of revealing anything that might ruin this precious moment flew from her mind.

Their second kiss.

Just as good as, if not better than, their first one. A kiss that set off another round of fire storms in her belly. The feelings he inspired were foreign to her, but she found that she liked them. She liked them a lot. But she was nobody's fool. She knew it was Jake who had awakened these emotions in her. Only Jake. His lips were so soft. So commanding. And if his kiss could invoke such desire, imagine what—.

"Sarah," Hillary addressed her, startling her from her musing. "You're looking rather pleased with yourself this morning." Her boss gave her the once-over, which coming from a female, really creeped her out. "Hmm," Hillary pondered. "What's different about you?"

"I had a good weekend, HB," Sarah said, giving her boss a lopsided grin. "Nothing more."

"With that glow you're sporting, it had to be better than good." Hillary paused, staring at Sarah. "Wait a minute," she said, leaning back in her chair. Tapping a finger along the side

her nose, she portrayed a woman deep in thought. "Can it be?" she finally asked. "Has the minister's daughter finally given up the goods? Who's the lucky guy?"

Sarah laughed. Only Hillary had the gull to ask such a personal question—and in such crude fashion. "No, Hillary," she answered, deliberately calling her by her proper name. "I didn't have sex. Trust me. Everything's still intact." No way was she mentioning Jake's name to this woman.

The thought crossed her mind that Hillary assumed she was dating someone new as opposed to asking if she and Damon had reconciled. As if she'd already known Sarah hadn't taken up with Damon again.

Hmm. Interesting.

"Such a shame, Sarah," Hillary prattled on. "You don't know what you're missing."

Remaining silent, Sarah held her smile. Nothing, not even sitting through Hillary's Monday morning staff meeting or being asked embarrassing questions would spoil her happy mood.

"I bet I know who's made her so happy," Jamie piped in.

Rats! There was one thing that could spoil it.

Sarah's heart dropped and she turned to glare at Jamie. She'd forgotten all about nosey Jamie overhearing her conversation with Jake. Why couldn't that sneaky little big mouth ever mind her own business? *Don't you dare*, she silently warned her.

"Some guy named Jake," Jamie plowed on.

So much for shooting daggers at the woman. Sarah inwardly groaned, aghast that Jamie had blurted out Jake's name. "What are you talking about?" she indignantly asked, trying her best to salvage the situation.

"I overheard you last week when you . . ."

"Sarah, we're all family here," HB interrupted. "Now who's Jake?"

"I don't know," Sarah said. *And technically, that's the truth. I have no idea who Jake really is.* She jerked her head toward Jamie. "She must have been listening in on a private phone conversation, so I can't tell you what she may have overheard." Good grief. How easily the lies slipped from her lips.

"Jamie," Katie interjected. "It's unprofessional to eavesdrop on other people. Not to mention rude to repeat them when you have no idea what you're talking about. That's how rumors get started, and I for one do not want to be privy to someone's personal life. Besides, I haven't heard a thing, and since Sarah and I are good friends, don't you think she'd tell me?"

Jamie glowered at Katie, but said nothing more.

Even though Katie had just told a big fat whopping lie, Sarah didn't bother to rectify the situation. She was too upset with Jamie for blabbing about Jake. Now Hillary knew he existed. Or at the very least, she suspected. And that might be worse. Sarah had worked at JMS long enough to know Hillary reveled in everybody's personal business. She wouldn't let up until she knew everything.

Sure enough, Sarah heard Hillary murmur, "Jake, huh?"

Sarah's breath caught in her throat and she started gasping for air.

Katie pounded on her back. "You okay?"

"Sorry," Sarah gasped. "Coffee went down the wrong pipe."

"You know, you're not supposed to pound on a choking person's back," Jamie pointed

out. "It only makes the situation worse."

"Thank you for that unsolicited medical advice," Katie snapped back. "But I didn't see *you* doing anything."

"I'm okay now," Sarah said. "Thanks Katie."

"I have an amusing story to share with the group," Hillary suddenly announced. "This morning while I was driving to work, I decided to pick up some breakfast at McDonald's. Imagine my surprise when the young man at the drive-thru window started flirting with me. He had to be all of nineteen years old. Ha! That really made my morning."

"The McDonald's on Oswald?" Katie asked.

Sarah was still seething over Jamie's big mouth, but something in Katie's voice caught her attention. She glanced at her friend, startled to find her sitting rigid, her facial features taut. Having suffered through Hillary's staff meetings longer than any of them, Katie had grown immune to their boss's self-indulgent ramblings. Usually she just held her tongue or, if the story was really outlandish, discreetly rolled her eyes. But now, she seemed primed for battle. Something was definitely wrong, and it had to be more than Jamie revealing Jake's existence.

"Yep," Hillary confirmed. "He called me beautiful and said I had the most amazing eyes," she practically purred. "Then he asked if I were married. When I said that I was single, he wanted my phone number. Apparently, I've still got it. And that boy certainly wanted it."

"You go, HB," sang Jamie.

"I know the manager there," Katie declared.

Hillary's head snapped toward Katie. "What?"

"I know the manager," Katie reiterated. She sat back in her seat and crossed her arms. "He's a good friend of mine. I'll mention the incident to him."

"Wh...why?" Hillary sputtered. "Why would you do that, Katie?"

"Because that kid needs to learn it's not okay to hit on his customers. The next time someone might take offense. What'd he look like? I want to make sure I give my friend a good descrip—"

"I didn't take offense," Hillary insisted, cutting Katie off. "And I don't want you saying a word to his manager. You'll just get a nice kid in trouble."

Sarah felt like she was watching a tennis match, what with the way her head kept moving back and forth between verbal lobs. But far from a friendly game, her boss was growing increasingly agitated as Katie kept whacking wicked volleys back across the net. What was the big deal? This wasn't the first time Hillary had boasted about someone hitting on her. Heck, just recently they'd had to change benefit providers because, according to Hillary, the representative handling their former coverage made a pass at her. What possible reason could Katie have to challenge Hillary over this seemingly innocuous issue? Unless it was intended to take HB's focus off of her and Jake. Sarah knew Katie would do something like that.

"HB, that kid is a walking liability," Katie insisted. "McDonald's already suffered a nasty judgment against them when that old lady spilled hot coffee on herself. I don't want my friend facing harassment charges because one of his employees doesn't know any better than to hit on customers."

Ha! There it was. Katie was notoriously loyal to her friends, as Sarah could well attest.

She wondered which one of Katie's many pals had sparked this kind of emotion.

"That's...that's ridiculous," Hillary sputtered, visibly angry now. Her face had turned a blotchy red and when she pointed a finger at Katie, her hand shook. "You're just trying to get some poor kid fired because he thinks I'm attractive," she yelled, screeching the last few words.

Sarah had never seen Hillary this upset before, and quite frankly, it was a frightening sight. The veins in her neck were literally popping out. What had Katie unleashed?

"HB..." Katie said, leaning forward in her seat.

"Enough," Hillary barked. She glared at Katie, her breath coming in short gasps. For more than a minute no one dared speak, and no one moved. Finally, Hillary regained some control over her emotions. "You've ruined my day," she accused Katie, her voice hard. "And for no good reason. I hope you're happy." She glared at the rest of the group. "Does anyone else care to add fuel to the fire?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

All eyes riveted toward Amy Hoggen.

In the few months Sarah had been employed by JMS, she couldn't remember a time when Amy had initiated a conversation during a staff meeting. Usually she sat in the far corner, silent unless something was directed her way. In fact, Amy rarely ventured outside her cubicle during the course of the workday.

Sarah couldn't believe Amy possessed the backbone needed to dive into the middle of this boiling cauldron.

Amy cleared her throat. "I'll be giving my two weeks notice today. My husband and I are relocating."

"Amy!" Katie cried. She reached over and gave her a hug. "I'll be sorry to see you go."

"Where are you moving?" Sarah asked, but Amy didn't get a chance to answer before Hillary pounced.

"Great, Amy," she said, exasperated. "That's all I need, more work thrust upon me." Slamming her hands on her desktop, she continued, "I have half a mind to ask you to leave right now."

"No problem," Amy said. She stood up and addressed her co-workers. "It's been nice working with some of you." She headed for the door.

"Amy!" Hillary hollered. "Get back here. Where do you think you're going? It's not professional to walk out like this."

"Professional?" Amy sarcastically echoed. "Do you even know the meaning of the word?" She addressed the rest of the group. "She's right, you know," she said, jabbing a thumb over her shoulder at Hillary. "She does have half a mind." With her head held high, Amy walked out the office door.

For a second, Sarah thought she'd heard a pin drop.

Hillary picked up the desk phone, her face deathly pale. "Doug," she snarled into the receiver. "We have another problem."

Chapter Twenty

"Another interesting SAS meeting," Katie remarked. "Amy almost made it to her one-year anniversary. It's amazing to me that with only four and a half years under my belt, I'm the most senior office employee at JMS. That kind of turnover doesn't speak very highly of our management team."

Back in their favorite Japanese restaurant, Sarah and Katie enjoyed a lunch of California rolls topped with spicy orange sauce, salad with ginger dressing and their old standby, Miso soup.

"Dang that Jamie and her big mouth anyway," Sarah muttered. "Now Hillary knows about Jake."

"She doesn't know anything," Katie assured her. "Nothing she can prove, anyway. Nice cover, by the way. I didn't know you had that in you."

"Yeah," Sarah murmured. "Me, neither. And I'm not proud of it, believe me. Now I can add lying to my growing list of transgressions. By the way, when I ask forgiveness, I'll be praying for both of us. Thanks for covering about Jake, but I don't want you lying for me."

"Sarah, sometimes you have to do things that seem wrong at the time, but they really aren't," Katie said, flashing a wicked grin. "Take my friend from McDonald's, for example."

"I meant to ask you," Sarah said. "Who do you know there?"

"Ronald," Katie deadpanned.

"Ron?" Sarah echoed, slightly confused. "I thought he worked at *BLEACHERS*." How many Rons did Katie know? And why was she acting so chipper despite the knockdown drag-out she'd just had with Hillary?

"Not Ron Martin," Katie corrected her. "Ronald McDonald."

"Ronald McDonald?" Sarah repeated in disbelief. "What cruel parent would name their poor..." Katie's broadening grin gave Sarah pause and she eyed her friend, suspicion creeping into her mind. Katie wouldn't. She couldn't.

"As in the clown?" Sarah cautiously asked.

Katie nodded.

She did.

Sarah gasped. "Then that story about your knowing the manager—" She set her teacup down with a bang. "You made it up?"

Cocking an eyebrow, Katie raised her cup in a silent toast, then sipped her tea.

"But why? Why would you bait her like that?" Sarah asked, alarmed that Katie would do such a thing. "I know she's nuts, but who cares if some kid hit on her? It happens. You saw how upset she became. I thought she was having an apoplectic fit."

"It *didn't* happen, Sarah. That's the point."

"She didn't go to McDonald's? Did you make the whole thing up to deflect her interest from Jake?"

"Oh, she went to McDonald's," Katie confirmed. "And no, I wasn't trying to steer her away from Jake, although it had the same effect. Which is a good thing, don't you think?"

"Katie..." Sarah said in a warning tone.

Katie laughed. "Unfortunately for Ms. Hillary Bowman, I was right behind her in the drive-thru."

"You're sure?" Sarah asked. If Katie was behind Hillary, didn't that confirm her story?

"How many silver jags with the license plate 4U2NV have you seen tooling around Westville?"

"None," Sarah sarcastically replied. "But you came to work at your normal time and she didn't arrive until well after nine o'clock."

"Don't know where she got to after that, but I do know I was right behind her in the drive-thru at McDonald's on Oswald. Make no mistake about it."

"Okay. Fine. You were behind her. So if she was there, doesn't that confirm her story?"

"Oh, ye of little faith," Katie said. In typical Katie fashion, she was dragging the suspense out for as long as possible.

"If you don't tell me right now..."

Katie laughed. "Thanks to McDonald's intercom, I heard the entire conversation between Hillary and her nineteen-year old admirer. I also witnessed her self-proclaimed hottie handing Hillary her bag of food. That same kid took my order." Katie took another bite of sushi. "I just love the spicy sauce they put on these California rolls. Don't you?"

Grabbing the sushi plate, Sarah threatened, "You're not getting another bite until you spill everything you know."

Katie laughed. "That 'kid' was a seventy-year-old grandma, Sarah, not a nineteen-year-old hottie. Hillary made up the whole story."

Sarah's mouth dropped open.

"And this isn't speculation, like with her so-called designer shoes, or with Damon," Katie pointed out. "I've just proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that our boss is a pathological liar. With a hefty dose of narcissism thrown in for good measure. That, my friend, is a lethal combination. And it's not even the best part."

"How can it get any better than this?"

"I think this was a spur-of-the-moment lie on Hillary's part, brought on by the fact that she knew you were out with somebody new and she just had to one-up you."

Dismayed, Sarah tossed the plate on the table where it landed with a thud. "That's creepy," she said, somberly shaking her head.

Grinning, Katie speared another piece of sushi. "Yep."

Chapter Twenty-One

Sarah, see me. HB.

When they returned from lunch, the first thing Sarah spied was the yellow note ominously beckoning her. She couldn't miss it, what with it being stuck to the center of her computer screen. "Uh oh," she said, pulling the paper free. She handed it to Katie. "Just call me Danielle. I'm about to head into the lion's den."

Katie laughed. "We'll talk later." She crumpled the note and tossed it into Sarah's wastebasket. "IM me when you're out."

"Sure thing."

Katie disappeared into her cubicle while Sarah continued down the hall until she reached Hillary's office. After knocking, she pushed open door and entered Hillary's lair.

"You wanted to see me, HB?" she asked.

"Sarah, yes. Please, sit down." Hillary indicated the chair nearest to her.

Nervous, Sarah sat down. She was relieved to find Hillary in better control of her emotions. She seemed much calmer than when Sarah had last seen her. She was even smiling. But Sarah didn't know whom she should be more leery of, a ranting Hillary or a gracious Hillary. After the shoe incident, Sarah suspected the latter.

"Sarah, I just want to tell you how happy I am that you're working for us. You're like a breath of fresh air in an otherwise stale environment."

Huh?

"I appreciate that, HB," Sarah murmured. "Thank you."

"In light of Amy's sudden and I might add welcomed departure, I'm going to put you on as a permanent employee, effective today."

Wow!

"Thank you," Sarah replied. Although she was sorry to see Amy leave, she had to admit she was relieved to finally become a permanent part of the company.

"And along with that comes a nice raise. Expect an additional hundred dollars in your check each month."

Had Sarah heard right? A raise? Who was this generous woman? "HB, thank you."

"No, thank you."

Frankly, Sarah felt shell-shocked. This friendly and appreciative woman was counter-indicative to what she was used to dealing with. Sarah wondered what the catch was. Warily she glanced at Hillary, who continued to stare at her. When her boss said nothing further, Sarah thought it her cue to leave so she stood up.

"Sarah, I'm not done, yet," Hillary advised.

Sarah quickly dropped back in her seat. "Sorry," she murmured.

"I've been contemplating how to best share this news with you, but I might as well come right out and say it. We're not going to replace Amy, at least not right away. Rather, Doug and I are planning to do some reshuffling of job duties to capitalize on the resources we already have in place. Before we proceed, I just want to confirm with you that you're committed to my team."

"Yes, HB, I am."

"And you're willing to support me?"

Sarah hesitated. "Of course," she replied, not certain where this conversation was headed.

Her response seemed to appease her boss. "Good," Hillary said. "Because starting today I'm going to surround myself with people who are loyal to me. Like Batman had Robin, or the Lone Ranger had Tonto."

Or the Wicked Witch of the West had her flying monkeys.

Sarah began coughing uncontrollably, desperately trying to mask her laughter. Gosh, even when Hillary tried to be nice, she had issues.

Instead of making fun of her, maybe you should try praying for her.

Sarah abruptly stopped laughing and straightened up in her seat. *And I'm supposed to be the Christian,* she thought, feeling ashamed of herself.

"Sarah, are you okay?" Hillary inquired. "You've been choking an awful lot lately."

Sarah looked at her boss. "Yes, HB," she said firmly. "I'm fine. And if I may say so, I feel that everyone supports the company –."

"I'm not talking about the company," Hillary said, cutting her off. "I'm talking about me."

Oh boy, here it comes.

"You saw how unprofessional Amy was," Hillary ranted. "And what about Katie? I'm really disappointed with her behavior today. Totally disloyal to me."

Sarah didn't want to get Hillary riled up again, but she had to speak out on Katie's behalf. "Katie was only trying to help a friend, HB," she said. No need to elaborate on the fact that she was that friend. "Nothing more."

"And what about helping me?" Hillary whined. "Katie needs to rethink her alliances. And you. I want you to feel that you can come to me with anything."

"Okay," Sarah said.

"And it doesn't have to be business-related, you know. I can help you with personal problems as well."

So that's what this is all about. All this drama because she's dying to know about Jake.

"Is there anything you want to tell me?"

"I'm happy to be working here, HB," Sarah said. "Thank you for the opportunity."

"That's it?" HB asked.

Sarah didn't know what else to say so she casually shrugged her shoulders. "I'll give you 110%," she said, inwardly cringing in having to drag out that old stand-by line.

Hillary stared at her, as if she was trying to assess how sincere she was. Sarah held her gaze, but remained silent. Despite her resolve to be more understanding of the woman, there was no way she'd allow Hillary to intimidate her into revealing anything personal. Especially about Jake.

"Anyway, I'm glad you're on board," Hillary said, finally bringing the conversation to an end. "I'll be speaking with the rest of the staff about the reorganization this afternoon. In fact, on your way back to your desk, send in Katie. That's all."

Katie was with Hillary for over an hour, but Sarah knew their meeting had ended when an Instant Message popped open on her screen.

~ JMS Instant Messenger ~

KSaunders: Whew! I'm out. Brutal meeting. From now on call me Robin. Or Tonto. Or Queen's fool. Just don't call me late for payday.

Normally, Sarah would have replied with her flying monkey comment, but in light of her decision to become a kinder, gentler employee she changed her mind.

~ JMS Instant Messenger ~

SLyons: LOL . . . My meeting wasn't nearly that bad. She's finally made me a permanent employee. And she didn't mention Jake, either. Although she did tell me I could come to her about *anything*.

KSaunders: LOLOLOL. About time she made you permanent. She could have done that right away. She just made you wait for her own selfish reasons.

SLyons: Yeah. But at least it's finally happened. BTW, I've decided to take the highway approach with our boss. Kill her with kindness.

KSaunders: You tried that already. Remember? That's when she loaned you her "designer" shoes. ☺

Sarah sighed, nodding her head in agreement. Hillary had tried to pull a fast one on her, but still, something great had come out of her deception.

~ JMS Instant Messenger ~

SLyons: I know, but I'm still gonna try. Harder this time. You know, the golden rule and all.

KSaunders: Better stock up on polish for when that rule becomes tarnished. And it will. Pretty ~~damn~~ darn quick. She'll probably set a world record breaking the tarnish barrier.

SLyons: LOLOLOL. Come on, let's BOTH make the effort. Maybe between the two

<i>KSaunders:</i>	<p>of us we can turn her around.</p> <p>I KNEW you'd drag me into this. ☹ ☹ ☹ I'm telling you, it's wasted energy. I'd sooner tackle the world's hunger problems. We'd have a better chance at success.</p>
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Sarah laughed out loud, then quickly covered her mouth with her hand. The last thing she needed was Big Ears Jamie sneaking over to see what she was laughing about.

<i>~ JMS Instant Messenger ~</i>	
<i>SLyons:</i>	Please?
<i>KSaunders:</i>	FINE. I'll play along. Just remember when it blows up in our faces – and it will – it was YOUR idea.
<i>SLyons:</i>	If it blows up, at least we'll know we did everything we could.
<i>KSaunders:</i>	Not 'if' . . . WHEN.
<i>SLyons:</i>	Wasn't it you who said "Oh ye of little faith?"
<i>KSaunders:</i>	Well, here's another cliché for you: "There's no sense beating a dead horse." Oops, here comes our science project now. CU L8R.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"How about the zoo on Saturday?" Jake suggested. "That's a public place."

Sarah grinned and moved her cell phone to her other ear. "I'll feel right at home since I already work with a bunch of animals."

"You're a veterinarian?" Jake asked. "Then would you rather do something else?"

"I'm kidding, Jake," Sarah admitted, giggling. "I don't really work with animals. Sometimes it just feels that way."

Laughing now, Jake agreed. "I know what you mean."

"But I'd love to go to the zoo with you."

"Then it's a date," he confirmed. "I'll meet you at two o'clock by the front entrance."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Goodnight, Sarah," he said softly.

"Bye, Jake." Sarah disconnected the call and tossed the phone on the sofa. She tried watching television, but soon came to the conclusion that summer reruns were the pits, especially on a Wednesday night. Turning off the TV, Sarah stared into space. Something troubled her. She couldn't identify what it was, but she knew something definitely felt wrong.

She checked the time. Seven o'clock. She picked up her phone and dialed Katie's number.

Katie answered on the second ring. "What's up, GF?"

"Wanna get *Starbucks* with me?"

"Now?" Katie asked.

"I need to talk."

"I'll meet you in fifteen minutes."

"What gives?" Katie asked as soon as they sat down with their drinks. "It has to be something big, because you usually don't do *Starbucks* after five o'clock."

Sarah cautiously sipped her Grande Soy Chai, not wanting to burn her tongue on the hot liquid. "I know. The caffeine keeps me wired for hours, but this tastes so good. And I need it."

"Thank God I don't have that problem," Katie said, sipping her own iced Chai with an added shot of Espresso and a dollop of vanilla syrup.

Sarah didn't know where to begin. Or how. "I'm going to stumble around for a bit because I'm not sure if anything is wrong, per se. It's just that something is tickling the back of my mind and it's making me anxious."

"You need to put that nagging conscience of yours to rest."

"Don't I wish I could," Sarah replied. "I'm probably being neurotic, but let me ask you something."

"Shoot."

"Is it too early to move Jake up to Stage Three?"

Katie set down her drink. "I can't answer that. Only you know when the time's right."

Sarah toyed with her cup. "If I count the Saturday we met, I've had two great dates with Jake. We've had fun together. And we have a third date planned for this Saturday. But, and here's the weird thing, for the second week in a row, he's called me on a Wednesday to

confirm our Saturday date."

"Yeah?"

"He *only* calls me on Wednesdays. Even Damon called me at least once a day – and we saw each other twice a week. So far, I've only seen Jake on Saturdays."

"Do you call him?"

"I did that first night, but," Sarah hesitated. "You know, I just don't want to appear clingy, or pushy, or that I may have stalker tendencies."

"Maybe he's not a phone guy," Katie suggested. "Or he's busy with his job and can't make personal calls at work."

"Could be," Sarah said, her voice trailing off.

"What are you really thinking, Sarah?"

"I don't know," Sarah admitted, sighing. "But something's bugging me."

Using a straw to stir her drink, Katie casually asked, "You're not thinking he's married, are you?"

"Maybe that's exactly what I'm thinking," Sarah said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Subconsciously, anyway."

"Remember three years ago, when I started dating Steve Bender?" Katie inquired. "He'd only call me during the day. I never saw him on weekends and when we did get together, we had dinner at my place, we watched videos at my place and we never went anywhere."

"I remember," Sarah said. How could she forget? Katie wouldn't date for months after the Steve fiasco. In fact, Sarah suspected that Katie still harbored strong emotional feelings for the slug, even though she'd never admit it out loud. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to dredge up bad memories."

"Steve was sweet and charming and swept me off my feet. He said all the right things and made all the right moves. Which is why it took me such a friggin' long time to realize he never wanted to be seen in public with me."

"That's when we created the Rules of Engagement."

"Exactly," Katie said. "Jake's not married, Sarah. Or if he is, she's living on another planet because he's *only* been with you in public. You said yourself that you've told him about our silly rules and he's going right along with them. He's following your lead, Sarah. Totally different from Steve. Please don't confuse the two."

Sarah sighed. "I guess things are going so well I'm afraid the rug will be ripped out from underneath me. Again."

"Sarah, look at me," Katie demanded. "Jake is not Damon."

"But I don't know that, Katie," Sarah insisted. "Damon was good to me too, until Hillary got her clutches into him. I guess I just don't know Jake well enough yet. That's why I'm thinking about moving him up a notch."

"You have to know something about him," Katie said. "What do you two talk about?"

"Well, I know he's in the motorcycle business with his brother and he loves it," Sarah said, then paused.

"What?" Katie prompted.

"I didn't think of it before, but when he's not on his motorcycle, Jake drives a station wagon. A maroon-colored station wagon."

"Really?" Katie asked, surprised. "He doesn't strike me as the station wagon type. That's so *Brady Bunch*. How do you know?"

"He drove it to the park," Sarah said. "I guess he couldn't carry the picnic basket on the back of his bike."

"Sorta blows the whole biker dude persona, doesn't it?" Katie chuckled. "From Evil Knieval to Mike Brady in thirty seconds."

Sarah laughed. "Somehow I can't picture Mike Brady on a Harley. But maybe Jake needs the station wagon for bike parts."

"Then you'd think he'd drive a pickup truck," Katie said. "Yeah," she said, nodding her head. "He's much more of a truck guy than a station wagon guy. Interesting. What else you got?"

"Well, I know his mother and grandfather didn't speak for years because of a family feud. That rift was mended when Jake's dad unexpectedly passed away when Jake was fourteen." Sarah sipped her tea. "Jake's got a great sense of humor, he's considerate, and he's gorgeous. When we're together, time flies. And I really like him. So why am I trying to find something wrong?"

"I'd say once burnt, twice wiser," Katie said. "But I don't think that's what's going on with you, my friend."

"Huh?"

"You're nervous and jumpy because you haven't been totally honest with Jake while he's going out of his way to accommodate you. It's not in your nature to be dishonest and that's what your subconscious is trying to tell you." Katie patted Sarah's hand. "And that's why you're searching to find something wrong with him," she said softly. "It'll get you off the hook."

Sarah felt tears sting her eyes. "I almost told him the truth the other night, but then he kissed me." She looked at Katie and smiled.

"It was that good, huh?" Katie softly asked.

Sarah nodded as a few tears slid down her cheeks. Playing with the lid of her drink, she said, "I'm afraid it's too late to come clean now."

"It's your call, Sarah. But you're at the best stage of a new relationship. The beginning, where everything's fresh and romantic and exciting. Don't let anything spoil what you could build with Jake."

Grabbing a napkin, Sarah wiped away her tears. "I hate it when you're right."

Katie laughed. "I'm only good at giving advice. You know how terrible I am when it comes to my own relationships."

Sarah reached over and hugged Katie. "I'm so glad you're my friend."

"Ditto," Katie said. "Now let's get out of here. Ron's coming over in a little bit."

"Hmm," Sarah said with a smile. "More cooking?"

Katie laughed. "Nope. Just business."

"Yeah, right."

"Seriously. He's prepping me for a bank meeting I have scheduled for next Friday."

"You have a what?"

"I'm going to see what I need financially to get started with *Dinner for Two*. Remind me tomorrow that I need to ask Hillary for the day off."

“Jeez, Katie. That’s great. But why didn’t you tell me you were tied up? I could have waited until tomorrow to talk to you.”

“Business never comes before friendship, Sarah,” Katie stated. “At least not in my world.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Happy to have his date with Sarah confirmed, Jake hung up his office phone and rubbed his eyes. Man, he was tired. Flying back and forth between time zones was wreaking havoc on his system. There was nothing he could do about it now, though, as this was the first and only opportunity he'd have to catch up on paperwork. The rest of his week was booked with customers and Friday night he planned on taking the red-eye back to Cleveland. And he still had to review his grandfather's financials. Damn. If only he hadn't promised his mother he'd help out. Oh well. Once again, there was nothing he could do about it.

He might as well get started. The sooner he got this stuff done, the sooner he could go home and crawl into bed.

Jake turned on his computer and opened up the e-mail Banger finally got around to sending him—six days late. It looked like most of the information he'd requested had been forwarded in attachments. After sending the data to the printer, Jake picked up his mug and went searching for coffee.

On his way to the kitchenette, he glanced at his watch. Five o'clock. He'd probably have to brew fresh coffee because he knew anything left at this time of day wouldn't be drinkable. Sure enough, he was right. After scrubbing the burnt crud from the bottom of the pot, he started another batch.

While the coffee brewed, he thought of Sarah. More than anything, he longed to nurture their relationship. He knew it would be a challenge though, what with them living in different time zones. Her Rules of Engagement weren't helping, either. At this point, he couldn't even send her flowers because he had no idea where to have them delivered. Or to whom. While he understood her reasons for caution, it wasn't giving them the freedom they needed to move to the next level, or stage, or whatever she was calling it.

He was really looking forward to Saturday. Hopefully, he'd find out some personal things about her. Her last name would be nice. Maybe he'd even get an address out of her. And if she was open to that type of dialogue, then maybe he could float other topics by her, like whether or not she was open to the idea of relocating.

Jake brought himself up short. Relocating? Where'd *that* come from?

The smell of freshly brewed coffee lured him from his thoughts. He poured himself a cup and returned to his office. Page upon page of data had fallen from the printer. Damn, he thought. What the hell was this mess? Why was Banger inundating him with all this useless information? All he wanted was year-end income statements for the past five years. Was that asking too much? Five lousy sheets of paper?

Jake picked up the papers, shuffling them until he had two neat piles stacked in front of him. He looked at the sheet on top of the first stack—a purchase order for five hundred plastic toilet seats. What the hell? He sipped his coffee as he riffled through the piles.

It was going to be a long night.

He heard her before he saw her.

"So you're a breast man," the blonde commented, her voice husky. She leaned forward, leaving little doubt in his mind as to why. "I knew it."

Jake gasped. One minute he was uncorking a bottle of wine to share with Sarah and the

next minute the blonde vixen had replaced her, sitting right where Sarah had been only moments before. She was even eating from Sarah's plate, seductively licking bits of chicken from her fingers.

"It's good to see you again, Jake," she said. "I've missed you."

Confused, he looked around for Sarah, but she was nowhere to be found. "Where'd you come from?" he asked. "And where's Sarah?"

"Oh, Jake," she scoffed. "You big tease. Don't you know me?"

"I know who you are," Jake confirmed. "You're trouble." He dropped the wine bottle into the silver bucket and stood up. "I don't know how you managed to pull this off, but it's not going to do you any good. It's Sarah I want, not you. Now, what have you done with her?"

"Jake," Blondie pouted. "What's the matter? Don't you like me?"

Turning away from the brazen woman, Jake frantically searched for Sarah. "Sarah! Sarah!"

"Jake!" Blondie called, running after him. "Jake!"

Jake woke to find his brother standing beside him, tugging at his shoulder. "Jake," Jeremy said, his voice concerned. "You okay, bro?"

Rubbing his face with his hands, Jake coughed and then stood up. "Damn," he gruffly said. "It happened again." He grabbed his coffee mug and headed out of his office.

"What happened again?" Jeremy asked, following him.

Jake turned into the kitchenette. Thank God for coffee, he thought as he poured himself another cup. He took a mouthful, grimaced, then spat the disgusting liquid into the sink. "Blah!" he said, shaking his head. "I just made that coffee, but it tastes like it's been sitting there for hours."

"What time did you make it?"

"Five o'clock."

"Well, being that it's now ten o'clock, it *has* been sitting there for hours."

"What?" Jake checked his watch. Sure enough, it was ten o'clock. "Man, I only laid my head down for a minute. I've been asleep for almost four hours." He dumped the coffee and rinsed out the pot and his cup. He left everything sitting in the sink and returned to his office.

Jeremy followed and plopped down in a chair in front of Jake's desk.

"Look at this crap," Jake said with disgust, pointing to the piles on his desk. "Banger must have sent me every piece of paper that's come through the doors of JMS for the past year."

"What'd ya ask for?"

"Year-end income statements for the last five years and his operating plan. I knew damn well he didn't have an operating plan," Jake admitted. "I just asked for it to get his heart pumping. I also asked for a budget, which is one of the few things he didn't send me. What does Gramps see in this guy?"

"Beats the hell out of me," Jeremy said. Leaning back in his chair, he propped his feet up on Jake's desk and grasped his hands behind his head. "He's hiding something."

Jake looked at his brother. "Then somebody needs to inform the dolt that when you're hiding something, you don't send out everything."

Jeremy laughed. "Bro, that's exactly what you do."

"What?"

"Are you going to go through every piece of paper?"

"Hell no. I won't live that long."

"Exactly."

Jake sat down at his desk. Looking through the pile of papers, he pulled out the purchase order for the toilet seats and handed it to his brother. "Banger's not that smart," he said. "And he's not that stupid, either. Gramps would have his head on a platter."

Jeremy looked over the paper Jake handed him. "He sent you a P.O. for toilet seats?"

"Yep." Jake removed the year-end income statements from the stack and laid them out end to end. "I'll tell you this, Jeremy. On paper, Gramps' company is making money hand over fist, but his expenses are sky-high." He pointed out the section on each of the statements. "Look at this. Every year for the past four years, his expenses have doubled. This past year, they've tripled."

"Get the details," Jeremy advised.

"Don't you think I have them all here?" Jake sarcastically asked, waving his hand over the piles of paperwork.

"No. I think you have everything else. I know you don't want to, but you're going to have to go in there and pull the backup paperwork for those expenses."

"Dammit. I knew you were going to say that."

"It's all in the details, man. I can do it, if you want. But I suspect you'll probably want to see Sarah when you're back in town."

Jake's head snapped up. "How do you know about Sarah? I haven't mentioned her to anybody."

Jeremy smirked and held up one finger. "Your trips to Cleveland. Had to be a girl involved somewhere for you to make three trips back to the old homestead in one month's time." A second finger joined the first. "You've been pretty perky lately, more so than usual. Had to be a woman involved for that to happen."

"Jeremy . . ." Jake warned his brother, to no avail.

"Three," Jeremy said, now holding up three fingers. "You were yelling her name, bro. Good thing I'm the only one here, or the whole office would know."

"I was yelling her name?"

"Loudly."

"Damn." Jake looked at his brother. "What are you still doing here, anyway?"

"Same as you. Getting ready for the Donovan's visit. This is a major opportunity, Jake. And we don't want to screw it up."

Jake sat back in his chair, massaging his temples with his fingers. "I need to clear my head."

"So who is she?"

"She's fantastic, man. Absolutely fantastic."

"Don't tell me."

"You just asked me to tell you. Make up your mind."

Jeremy shook his head, then smiled. "I meant, don't tell me big brother's in love."

"Are you nuts?" Jake scoffed.

"What's the woman who has captured my brother's heart like?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Give it up, man."

"Seriously, I don't know." Jake explained Sarah's Rules of Engagement and was immediately sorry he had when his brother couldn't stop laughing.

"So all you know is her name?" Jeremy asked.

"Her first name. That and the fact that she's a minister's daughter."

"Wild or subdued?"

"What?"

"These things can go either way. Too much religion and a girl rebels, going wild. Or, she's so prim and proper that you're afraid to hold her hand."

"And you know this how, Dr. Freud?"

"How quickly you've forgotten Jennifer, the girl who lived down the street from us growing up."

"Ah, the illustrious Jennifer. Attended an all-girl Catholic school. Wasn't allowed to do anything or go anywhere. Totally prim and proper."

"Until she went away to college," Jeremy finished for him. "Her son is almost nine years old now."

"Somehow, I don't think that's going to happen with Sarah."

"You never know when they're going to snap."

"Cut it out, Jeremy," Jake warned.

"A little sensitive, aren't you?"

"I guess so. It's just that I don't know that much about her. And it's driving me nuts. She doesn't take personal calls during the day and I've been so tied up here that by the time I get a free minute, it's too late to phone back east. So far I've only managed to get date confirmations. It's frustrating as hell, man."

"So, she doesn't know all that much about you, either?"

Jake hesitated. "She doesn't know I live two thousand miles away, if that's what you're asking."

"What's with the dream?"

"It's crazy, Jeremy." He told his brother about the accident. "And now I keep having these dreams where the blonde is morphing into Sarah. It's weird as hell. So much so that the only way I can tell them apart is their hair color, and the fact that Sarah has amazingly green eyes while Blondie's are blue. Now what the hell does that mean?"

Jeremy grinned. "Your heart wants the good girl but your manhood wants the hooker."

"My *manhood*?" Jake sarcastically asked. "What the hell is that?"

"Just practicing political correctness for when I meet my future sister-in-law, the minister's daughter," Jeremy deadpanned.

Jake crunched up a piece of paper and threw it at his brother. "I'm revoking your medical license, Dr. Freud."

"Get the details, brother," Jeremy said, laughing in earnest now. "Get the details."

Chapter Twenty-Four

"The ostrich reminds me of my general manager," Sarah casually remarked, pointing to a huge bird with glossy black plumage. "Always has his head in the sand."

"Sounds like someone I know," Jake said, laughing. "You know that ostriches don't really stick their heads in the sand, right?"

"I know. But it's still a good analogy. Isn't it funny how certain animals can remind you of certain people?"

"I once had a teacher who made everyone in the class go around the room and compare one person to an animal. Some comments were brutal, but some were right on the money."

"Yikes!" Sarah exclaimed. "That's really risky. She could have instigated all-out war."

"Like I said, some comments didn't go over very well."

"So what were you?"

"I was a panther," Jake admitted. "Probably because I always wore black leather and tooled around on my motorcycle."

"I can see that," Sarah said with a grin, nodding her head in agreement. "I'd probably be a bunny. Or a chicken, since I'm always afraid to do anything wrong."

"Nah," Jake disagreed. "Just because you try to do the right thing doesn't make you a chicken. I'd say you're more like a bear cub, all cuddly and trusting and cute."

Sarah could feel her face grow warm and knew she was blushing. She hung her head in an attempt to hide her burning cheeks. Jake, however, was having none of that. He lifted her chin. "I like cuddly bear cubs," he whispered, then placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Come on," he said, taking her by the hand. "Let's go compare animals to the people we know."

"That's Katie," Sarah pointed to the lion lounging on a large rock in the back of his den. "She's fiercely loyal to her friends, or I guess you'd call it her pride."

"It's nice to know you have a friend like that."

"Believe me, it's nice to have a friend like that."

Their next stop was the aviary. "That's Jamie, a woman I work with," Sarah said, pointing to a mocking bird. "She mimics everything our boss does."

"I could say the same thing about my brother," Jake remarked. "But I guess he could say the same thing about me."

Sarah laughed. "Really? You guys copy off each other?"

"It's more like we annoy each other," Jake commented. He put his arm around Sarah, drawing her close. "I'll tell you more about him when you tell me more about you."

"Too bad there's no vultures here," Sarah stammered, suddenly nervous. "That would be HB, my boss..."

Before she knew it, Jake pulled her close and passionately kissed her.

And right then, with the mocking birds chirping all around them, Sarah knew she was falling in love.

"Sorry about that," Jake said, once he released her. "I shouldn't be pawing at you in public."

"It takes two to kiss," Sarah admitted shyly. She looked around, then smiled. "And no one's here except for the birds."

"Yeah, well, we don't want them mocking us, now do we? What do you say we go grab something to eat?"

Jake returned from the concession stand with a tray holding two lemonades and a basket overflowing with nachos. "So, what's your sign?" he asked as he set the tray down on the table.

"What's my sign?" Sarah asked, taking hold of a glass of lemonade. "Didn't we already have the cheesy pick-up line conversation?" She laughed, then took a sip of lemonade. It tasted cool and refreshing.

Jake selected a nacho and dipped it into the cheese. "Yep, we did. That was my pathetic attempt to weasel some personal information out of you." He ate the chip, then wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I'm a Leo, by the way."

Sarah returned his smile, although she didn't believe for one second that her smile had the same affect on him as his did on her. He also had perfect table manners, so unlike Damon and his French-fry feeding frenzy. She took another sip of lemonade. "Believe it or not, I don't know what being a Leo means. The only astrological sign I know is my own, which is Capricorn. But I don't believe in that stuff, so I rarely pay attention to it."

"I just wanted to know your birthday," Jake sheepishly admitted.

"When's yours?" Sarah countered. She helped herself to a chip.

"Next week."

"Next week?" Sarah squealed.

"Quid pro quo, as Hannibal Lechter would to say. Now when's yours?"

"January third," Sarah said without hesitation. *Hannibal Lechter*? Who the heck was he? "What day next week?"

"Leo and Capricorn," Jake mused. "I wonder if they're compatible."

"Jake!" Sarah cried. She lightly smacked him on the arm. "What day next week?"

He smiled at her. "Saturday. Wanna plan something?"

Sarah sat back in her chair and grinned. "Yes," she said. "As a matter of fact, I do. But first let me see your driver's license. I want to make sure you're not pulling a fast one on me, Mr. What's Your Sign."

Jake pulled out his wallet and removed his license. Using both hands to cover everything but his birth date, he showed it to her. "I'm on to you, Missy," he said, grinning. "You'll get my last name when I get yours."

"I guess that's only fair," she replied, returning his grin. She read his license. "Okay then. You're going to be twenty-eight years old in seven days. We'll have to celebrate, but nothing too elaborate. I mean, it's not like you're turning thirty or anything."

"What do you have in mind?" he asked. Just then his cell phone rang. He popped the phone from his belt clip. "Hmm," he said, turning off the ringer. "No one I need to speak with right now."

She helped herself to another chip. "I have the perfect present for you," she said. "On your birthday, I'll tell you five personal things you want to know about me."

She was rewarded with another brilliant smile. Gosh, he looked absolutely stunning. Breathtaking, really. And she wasn't the only one who thought so. She wasn't blind to the wistful faces on some of the women as they passed by. "I take it you like the idea?"

"I love the idea," Jake said. Leaning across the table, he gave her another kiss. Because there were so many people about, this one was just a quick peck, but she enjoyed it all the same. "So, how are we going to work it?"

"I'll call you some time this week and tell you the plan. Maybe I'll create a treasure hunt and feed you clues one by one."

"Just as long as you're the treasure."

God had surely blessed her.

Sarah and Jake held hands as they strolled back to her car—correction, Katie's car, since she'd made Katie switch vehicles with her again. "Do you want to get together before Saturday?" she ventured. "Maybe as an appetizer, I'll allow you one personal question, but only if I get one personal question in return."

Jake leaned back on the car and placed his hands on her hips, pulling her close. "I wish I could, Sarah, but I'll be in Vegas all week. I won't be back until early Saturday morning." He kissed the top of her head. "Work related. But I'll tell you what. I'm going to give you an early birthday present."

"Really?" she asked. *He travels all week? That could explain why he doesn't call every day. And why he's only free on Saturdays.* "Why would you want to give me a birthday present now? My birthday's not for another five months."

"Because I like you."

She smiled. "Oh, really?"

"Yes, really. Come this weekend, I'm going to tell you everything you've always wanted to know about Jake Rey—oops!" he said, grinning. "That's going to have to wait. Fair?"

"Fair," she agreed, nodding her head. "I like you too, Jake. And that's a freebee."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Not caring who might see, Sarah wrapped her arms around him and returned his kiss with a passion she didn't know she possessed.

"Until Saturday," Jake whispered. He opened her car door and helped her into her seat. Then he bent over and kissed her again. "Drive safe."

Once she was back at her apartment, Sarah wasted no time in phoning Katie. After giving her a blow-by-blow of the date she asked, "By the way, who's Hannibal Lechter?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Ms. Bowman," Lori Russell called, tentatively opening the office door. "I know you don't like being disturbed during your staff meeting, but these just arrived for you." The shy receptionist walked into Hillary's office, carrying a huge floral bouquet wrapped in white tissue paper. She handed the bouquet to Hillary. "I didn't think you'd mind my bringing them to you."

"Oh, my goodness," Hillary cried out. "I can't imagine who'd send me flowers." She set the bundle on her desk, beckoned everyone to gather round, then made a big production out of removing the tissue paper. When she finally tore away the last sheet of paper, a lovely glass vase holding two dozen long-stemmed red roses was revealed.

"Somebody really likes you!" Jamie cried.

"Wow, HB," Sarah remarked. "These are stunning." Cupping several roses in her hands, she inhaled the heavenly scent.

"Who sent them?" Jamie wanted to know.

"I can't imagine," Hillary said, ripping open the card. She read it over, giggling like a little kid at Christmas. "Ladies, listen to this:

Many things catch my eye, but precious few tug at my heart. You've managed both. Looking forward to seeing you again.

"Isn't that romantic," Hillary gushed, carefully returning the card to its envelop. She placed it in the cardholder tucked into the middle of the roses.

"Is it the kid from McDonald's?" Katie asked, tossing Sarah an inconspicuous wink.

Sarah decided to join the fun. "If a nineteen-year old fast-food employee can afford roses like these, I'm in the wrong line of work."

"Come on, HB," Jamie begged. "Details. We want details!"

"Sorry," Hillary said, plopping down in her seat. "A lady doesn't kiss and tell." She picked up the vase and swiveled around in her chair until she faced the windows, then she set the roses on her credenza, where sunbeams shining through the window would highlight their perfection.

"Since when don't you tell?" quipped Katie.

"Since now," Hillary replied. "This guy's pretty special to me and I don't want to share him with anybody just yet. Sorry. You're just going to have to wait until I see how this relationship develops. Now, let's get back to work." She checked her watch. "We're already running late because I was delayed this morning."

All of a sudden, Sarah got a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Once upon a time, Damon had sent her flowers at work. Roses. A dozen long-stemmed red roses. Exactly like those sitting on Hillary's credenza. Actually, he sent them on two different occasions. Sarah glanced at the roses, then at Hillary.

Hillary was staring at her. "Sarah," she said, "you've just turned deathly pale. Are you ill?"

Was Sarah mistaken or was there a malicious glint in Hillary's eye? "Ye..yeah," she stammered. "My breakfast is suddenly not agreeing with me."

"Do you need to leave?"

"I think I need to get some juice," Sarah replied. "I'll be right back."

Sarah hurried from Hillary's office. She headed for the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and removed a can of orange juice. Popping the lid, she practically inhaled its contents. She sat down at the table, wondering if Damon had sent those roses to Hillary. Then she wondered why she cared. "This is crazy," she said out loud.

"What's crazy?" Katie asked, entering the room. "Hillary sent me to see if you're ready to return to the meeting."

"Yeah, I'm ready," Sarah said, standing up. "I felt kind of queasy there for a minute."

"You're thinking those roses came from Damon, aren't you?" Katie guessed.

Sarah nodded. "That would explain her not telling us who sent them. But the bigger question is, why do I care?"

"Because you're human," Katie said. "And besides, it would solidify the fact that you're working for a first class witch who loves to stick it to you. But don't worry. Before the week is out, we'll know who sent those roses."

"Don't get into trouble on my account."

"Not to worry, my friend."

"Feeling better?" Hillary asked as Sarah and Katie rejoined the meeting.

Amazing. She actually sounds concerned. Out loud Sarah said, "Yes, I am." She sat down in her seat. "Sorry about that. I guess my blood sugar dropped, because now that I've had some juice, I feel fine."

"Good," Hillary said, checking her watch again. "Because we're way behind schedule and we've got a lot to cover."

As Hillary droned on and on about her hectic work schedule, Sarah found herself daydreaming about Jake. Every now and then the scent of roses infiltrated her subconscious, bringing unwanted images of Damon along for the ride. Since Damon persisted in plopping himself in the middle of her fantasies about Jake, in her mind she did a side-by-side comparison of the two men.

Jake: tall, dark and handsome.

Damon: average, average and average.

There was no comparison. Jake won by a landslide.

To be fair, Sarah had to admit Damon had been attentive to her, right up until that moment when Hillary had intervened. He'd also been kind and considerate, which was why she'd been so shocked by his behavior at the restaurant. But there was no comparing how she felt when she was with Jake. She just wished she could see him more. Of course, bumping him up to Stage Three should move matters along. She supposed being so secretive about everything could prove problematic for a guy trying to build a relationship with her. Gosh, she couldn't wait for Saturday.

Finally, after nearly forty minutes of mundane nonsense, Hillary drew the meeting to a close.

"Oh, HB, one more thing," Katie said. "I'd like to have Friday off, if that's possible."

"I require a two week notice when scheduling vacations," Hillary admonished. "As you well know."

"I know, HB," Katie said. "But something's suddenly come up and I could really use the day off."

The room was silent while Katie waited for Hillary's response. "Fine," Hillary grudgingly agreed. "But in the future, please refrain from forcing me to bend the rules."

"Thank you, HB," Katie dutifully replied. "I appreciate it."

"Something's suddenly come up?" Sarah whispered as they walked back to their cubicles. "Isn't that a line from an old *Brady Bunch* episode?"

"You mean the one where Marcia gets popped in the nose with a football?" Katie asked, grinning.

Snapping her fingers, Sarah exclaimed, "That's the one. Her date uses that corny line to dump her."

"You're not the only one who watches *TVLand*, you know," Katie giggled. "You can never underestimate the value of information gleaned from an old television sitcom."

"Katie, Katie, Katie," Sarah admonished, imitating Jan Brady's famous lament of her older sister. "You are so bad. I just wish I could be more like you."

"And I wish I could be more like you," Katie said. "See you later," she sang, disappearing into her cubicle.

Sarah continued down the hall. When she heard her cell phone playing the ring tone she'd programmed especially for Jake, she broke into a sprint. She reached her desk in record time and grabbed her phone. "Hello," she said softly, glancing around to ascertain nobody was near.

"Good morning, Sarah," Jake said.

"Jake," she whispered. "Hi!"

"I know you're not supposed to get personal calls at work, so I won't keep you. But I needed to start my week on a high note and calling you seemed to be the only solution."

She melted into her seat. Images of Damon and Hillary and vases filled with roses flew right out of her mind.

"I'm really looking forward to Saturday, and getting to know you better," he told her. "Any clues yet?"

Sarah laughed. "Just in my imagination. You might not be this excited when you realize I'll have you running all over Westville."

"Like I said, just as long as you're the treasure, I'll go anywhere," he said softly. "You have a great day, Sar-Bear."

"You too, Jake," she said, a warm glow encasing her whole being. Sar-Bear? She had a nickname? She'd never had a nickname before. Well, except for Sarafina, which was what her dad had called her when she was young. Sar-Bear. She liked it. "Bye, Jake," she whispered.

And she really liked Jake.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"You have no choice, man, you have to go in there," Jeremy Reynolds informed his brother.

"I know this is just Gramps' way of sucking us into his business," Jake argued. "Which is why I never wanted to go on-site in the first place."

"Gramps knows we have our own business. He's only looking for some help."

"This is what he's hired Banger for."

"Well, apparently Banger isn't getting the job done. Or, Banger could very well *be* the problem. If you want, I'll go. But that means both of us will be in Cleveland during one of the most important weeks of our lives. And that just can't happen."

"No, that doesn't make sense. I'm already going back this weekend. It's my big weekend with Sarah and I don't want anything blowing it. I'll fly in early Friday as opposed to taking the red-eye later that night. Just do me a favor. Call Banger and tell him I want everything ready when I walk through the front door. Tell him if it's not ready, heads will roll."

"Okay, bro," Jeremy assured his brother. "I'll make sure everything's in place."

Somewhere over the Midwest, Jake had the dream again. It left him in a surly mood because this time, Sarah wasn't even in it. This time, the blonde had completely taken over, although he could still recognize remnants of his sweet Sarah. The only thing Blondie hadn't managed to alter was the color of her eyes. No way could she duplicate the beauty of Sarah's green eyes. But why was she infiltrating his dreams? Was she trying to tell him he wanted her instead of Sarah?

Was he really that shallow?

He never used to be. But he couldn't explain why he kept having these ridiculous dreams.

Blondie was getting on his nerves.

Even his mother had commented on his foul mood when she'd picked him up at the airport that morning.

Jake threw his luggage in the back seat of his mother's station wagon and slammed the door closed. He settled into the seat beside his mother, determined not to talk about the dream, or anything else for that matter. He leaned back on the headrest and closed his eyes. He was tired and miserable and he just wanted to get through today and get on with tomorrow.

But his mother was having none of that. "You okay, honey?" she asked.

Jake sighed. "Mom, I'm sorry. I'm in a lousy mood. But you've been great; picking me up from the airport and letting me stay at the house. I know I've been imposing on you."

Without taking her eyes off the road, Mary Reynolds reached over and gently smacked her son upside the head. "Are you insane?" she admonished. "You are not imposing. You live two thousand miles away. I'll take you any way I can get you. And what do you mean by that 'letting you stay at the house' crack? Last time I checked, you're still my son. And until I'm dead and buried, my house is your home. I only wish you and your brother lived closer, that's all."

Jake grinned, rubbing his head. "Mom, anyone ever tell you, you have a wicked right?"

"Just you and your brother," Mary replied. She beamed at her son. "Now what's gotten you all fired up?"

Jake sighed. "Not what, Mom. Who. I think I'm in love."

The next thing Jake knew he was flying forward in his seat when Mary Reynolds slammed on the brakes. Fortunately, his seat belt snapped him back before he hit the dash. "Mom!" he cried. "What are you doing?"

Mary pulled off the road and stopped the car. She turned to Jake. "Son, are you playing games with me?" she asked, her expression serious.

"I wish I were," Jake admitted sheepishly. "But I'm not. And please don't ask me anything about her because all I know is her name. But hopefully, by tomorrow night, all that will change."

"How's that?"

Jake explained the deal with Sarah.

"So Sarah lives here?" Mary asked, her smile returning.

"I know what you're thinking."

"What?" Mary innocently asked.

"You're thinking there's a chance I'll be moving back to Westville."

"A mother can only dream. Besides, isn't that why you and your brother keep spare motorcycles at the house?"

"We keep spare bikes at the house so as not to inconvenience you when we're in town. And Mom, you know our business is in Vegas."

"Yes. I know." After making sure the way was clear Mary, eased her car back onto the road. "And I also know that you and your brother feel Vegas is home because that's where we were last together as a family, before we lost your dad."

Jake fell silent.

"Jackson Samuel Reynolds," Mary said, using her stern 'I'm the Mom, that's why' voice. "You need to understand something. I know you boys think your grandfather disapproved of your dad, but that's not the case. I was the one he was angry with. And not so much angry, but disappointed. He had somebody else in mind for me, but once I met your dad, nobody else mattered. Then I decided against taking an active role in his business. And then I really upset him when I married your father and moved out west. Three major disappointments were just too much for him to deal with at the time. But as you know, all that's been forgotten and forgiven now."

"I know. It's ancient history, Mom," Jake said. He lightly touched her arm. "Let's not rehash it."

"Okay. But if there's one thing I regret, it's that you boys didn't get the chance to know your grandfather the way I know him, before life's challenges got in the way. I have no doubt that he loves me. That he's always wanted the best for me. For us. And he loves you boys. You know that, right?"

"I know, Mom. That's why I agreed to help him."

"I'm glad, son. I really am. You're making an old man very happy."

They both fell silent this time.

Jake spoke first. "Mom, do you want to have dinner with me tonight? After I'm done

with Gramps?"

"I'd love to," Mary said. "I just need to juggle a few things around."

"Wait . . . do you already have plans for tonight?"

"Nothing I can't reschedule."

"No, I don't want you doing that," Jake insisted. "Heck, I wasn't even supposed to be here until tomorrow and besides, I'm not sure how long I'll be tied up with Gramps, so why should you cancel your plans only to sit around and wait for me?"

"You're my son, that's why," Mary said with a smile.

"And you're a great mom." He reached over and gave his mother a peck on the cheek. "But I'll take you out to breakfast tomorrow. I don't want you changing your plans."

"I can't wait to hear more about Sarah."

"Trust me, I can't wait to learn more about Sarah," Jake said with a laugh.

"She has to be someone pretty special to have you beaming like this."

"She is, Mom," Jake agreed. "She is."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

To: Office Staff
From: H.B.
Re: Early Dismissal

Because everyone has worked so hard this week, you may start the weekend early. Work ends at 4:00 PM today. Enjoy your weekend.

“Wow,” Sarah said out loud, deleting Hillary’s e-mail. “This is a first.” Thanks to Hillary’s unexpected generosity, she’d have an extra hour to work on Jake’s treasure hunt. She’d already created five simple puzzles for him to solve. The solution to each puzzle would direct him to a specific location somewhere in Westville. Once he arrived at that destination, he’d find her waiting for him. His reward would be her answering one personal question of his choice.

What a fun way for him to get to know her!

Sarah decided they’d meet at *BLEACHERS*, where she’d give him his first clue. Then she’d leave him to it and hopefully before too long, Jake would solve the puzzle and meet up with her in the park, where they had their first official date. By the time he solved the second puzzle he’d know to go to the zoo. After that, things would take a more personal turn. The solution to the third puzzle would send him to her church and the fourth to the parking lot of JMS, where she worked.

The last puzzle – well, that one was for all the marbles.

Following his completion of the final puzzle, Jake would be directed back to her apartment, where Katie had agreed to prepare a romantic dinner for two. Katie was just as excited about the treasure hunt as Sarah was, because it would give her a chance to experiment with her dinner cuisine.

Before dinner was served, though, Sarah resolved to reveal her secret.

Or maybe she’d wait until after dessert.

Sarah shook her head and got back to work. It was a shame Katie had taken a vacation day, she thought. She’d never believe Hillary had willingly released them an hour early.

At exactly four o’clock, the mass exodus began. Stampede was more like it, Sarah thought, as everyone stormed passed her cubicle and out the front door. She liked where her office was situated. It afforded her some measure of privacy, except of course when Jaime slunk behind her cubby walls and listened in on private phone conversations.

Sarah spent the next half-hour perfecting her puzzles until she was finally satisfied with them. She’d just sent the file to the printer when she heard Doug yelling for Hillary. “Is everyone outta here?”

“I let them go at 4:00 o’clock, just like we planned.”

“And everything’s ready?”

"Don't worry, Doug," Hillary said in her sickening sweet little girl voice. "I told you I'd take care of everything."

"Then let me emphasize what Jeremy said to me. If this stuff isn't ready, I'm to start looking for another job. And I'll tell you what, Hillary, if it's not ready, you're going to need to find another job, too. I gave you responsibility for all of this and now something has sparked their interest. Do you have any idea what that something might be?"

"Doug, trust me. Everything's clean. He just wants to look at the expense accounts. You know Sam never spent a dime on the place. Well, you have to spend money to make money. You've also done a lot of renovating and you have a lot of selling expenses. It'll be fine, you'll see. As for the other, well, don't worry about it. It hasn't come up yet, and I doubt that it will. But even if it does, it doesn't matter. Everything's legit."

"Just do me a favor," Doug said, his tone sharp. "Don't play games with these guys. Be professional. No HB bullshit and no dirty jokes. And please, no personal anecdotes. Trust me. These guys don't want to hear how your cleaning lady barged into your bathroom while you were taking a shower. The faster they're out of here, the better I'll like it."

"Are they both coming?"

"I don't know. We'll find out when one or both of them gets here."

"Doug, relax."

Hillary's voice trailed off and a slamming door told Sarah they were in Doug's office. She exhaled, not realizing she'd been holding her breath during their entire conversation. Holy schmoly! Something big was brewing. And who the heck was Jeremy? Whoever he was, Sarah hoped he'd kick some Hillary butt. And Doug, wow! Apparently his butt was hanging on the line, as well.

Yep. Katie had picked the wrong day to take off.

Everything was ready.

Sarah tucked the clues to her treasure hunt into a protective folder and picked up her purse. She was waiting for her computer to power off when Hillary came up behind her and barked, "Sarah!"

Sarah let loose with a little yelp. "You scared the daylights out of me," she said, bringing her hand to her throat.

"What are you still doing here?" Hillary checked her watch. "It's almost five o'clock. You should have been gone an hour ago."

"I'm just waiting for my computer to shut down."

Hillary slanted her eyes. "Did you hear anything earlier?"

Sarah felt her blood run cold. Her boss could only be referring to one thing—the argument she'd had with Doug. And judging from the pinched look on Hillary's face, Sarah knew better than to reveal that she'd overheard them. But how did she get around the issue without outright lying? "Like what?" she innocently asked. She fiddled with her folder to avoid eye contact.

Sure enough, Hillary replied, "A private conversation between Doug and myself."

Could a shouting match in the middle of an open office be considered private? Yeah it was a technicality, but Sarah grabbed hold of it. She shrugged her shoulders as if she didn't know what Hillary was talking about.

"You didn't hear anything?" Hillary grilled her.

Blast it! Why couldn't Hillary just leave it alone? And why did Sarah always find herself in these predicaments with her boss? She didn't want to lie, but no way did she want to admit she'd overheard them, either. Lord only knew what drama that would cause.

"I was in the ladies room for a time," Sarah offered, again skirting around the truth. "Then I was in the computer room, waiting for some documents to print off."

All of that is true, Sarah appeased her nagging conscious, although she didn't relish the fact that bending the truth was becoming second nature to her. At this rate, she'd have to buy extra thick kneepads for the amount of time she'd be spending on her knees asking forgiveness.

Hillary checked her watch again. "You need to go," she barked. "Now."

"Okay." Sarah lost no time heading for the door. Hillary followed, rushing her along.

"Have a good weekend," Sarah offered once they reached the front entrance.

"No chance of that," Hillary grumbled, practically shoving Sarah out the door. "I have to work all weekend, as usual."

Cry me a river, Sarah thought as the door banged closed behind her. She used to feel sorry for her boss for the amount of hours she seemed to work, until that day when Sarah had to double-back to the office, having left her latest romance novel in her bottom desk drawer. That was when she discovered Hillary only stayed as late as Doug did. And the only reason she remembered the incident at all was that Hillary had made such a big deal out of having to work late that night. After that, Sarah made a mental note to see if her suspicions proved correct. Sure enough, no matter what was going on, once Doug left the office, Hillary wasted little time following suit.

Sarah now found it laughable whenever Hillary complained about her long hours, when in reality she didn't even put in a full day of work. She arrived after nine, took a ninety-minute lunch, then left shortly after Doug, usually around five-thirty or so. Of course, she did come into the office on weekends, but how much of that time was spent on actual work, as opposed to surfing the Internet, was something Sarah would never know.

Forget Hillary. You're about to embark on the best weekend of your life.

Sarah reached her car and got in. She placed the folder on the passenger seat, then gave it an extra pat for good luck. Before starting her car, she pulled down the sun visor and looked in the mirror. "Life is good," she said with a smile. Even her skin was cooperating—no breakouts or blotches—just a smooth, creamy glow. "Is this the look of love?" she asked, then grimaced. "Oh, how corny!" She laughed at herself as she closed the visor. "Even for me."

Sarah had parked her car in front of the building, right outside Hillary's office. As she started the engine, she noticed that Doug and Hillary had moved into Hillary's office. It looked as though they were still snipping at each other. Sarah wondered if this was a continuation of their 'private conversation,' or something else altogether. She watched Doug shake his finger at Hillary, then storm out of her office.

"Forget them," Sarah said, shrugging off their strange behavior. She clicked on the radio, put the car in gear and headed out the parking lot. As she drove past the security gate, she started singing along with Kenny Chesney's latest hit.

She paused at the corner and waved on a motorcyclist to cross in front of her. As it sped down the street she'd just exited from, Jake's image flashed into her mind. Sarah glanced

into her rearview mirror just as the biker roared past the security gate and into the parking lot of JMS.

Didn't Jake's motorcycle look like that?

And didn't he wear a similar black helmet?

Hmmm.

Had Jake somehow found out where she worked and was coming to surprise her? *Anything's possible*, she decided, her heart racing with excitement. She quickly swung her car around and doubled back into the parking lot. She was about to blow her horn when it dawned on her that she was driving her car.

Her car. The car that had hit Jake.

She jammed on the pedals, jerking the car to an instant stop.

Dang it! Now what?

"I'm being ridiculous," she told herself. "Unless he works for the CIA or the FBI, that can't possibly be Jake." *Besides*, she reasoned, *he's not due back in town until early tomorrow morning.*

Still, there was something eerily familiar about that guy. Just to be on the safe side, Sarah decided to hang back. Her hands gripped the steering wheel as she slowly drove along the back edge of the parking lot. She pulled into the last row between two parked cars and turned off the engine. From this vantage point she had a perfect view of the front office, including the lobby.

Hillary came barreling out the front entrance just as the biker removed his helmet.

It was Jake.

Sarah gasped in horror as her heart sank into her stomach. What was he doing here? And why was Hillary greeting him like they were old friends? Hillary, with her patented man-eating grin plastered on her traitorous face. And Jake, smiling like he couldn't wait to be gobbled up by her.

How can this be happening?

Horried, Sarah sat frozen in place as Hillary snaked her arm through Jake's. He didn't shrug out of her clutches. Oh no, not Jake. Ever the perfect gentleman, he moved to open the door for her. Together, they entered the building.

Sarah shook her head, as if a vigorous shaking could erase the vision of Jake with Hillary on his arm from her brain. It just didn't make sense. The night they'd met at *BLEACHERS* Jake told her Hillary wasn't a nice person. Sarah remembered giving him extra points for being a good judge of character. Yet here he was. With Hillary.

She'd been played a fool. Again.

No wonder that boyfriend-stealing sex pig kicked everybody out early, Sarah bitterly thought, releasing her grip on the steering wheel. She flexed her cramped fingers. "How did she find him?" she asked out loud. "This cannot be happening."

But she knew it was. Right before her eyes. And just like coming upon an accident on the freeway, she couldn't turn away. As if locked in a trance, she watched Jake trail Hillary through the office. *Like a dog sniffing after a bitch in heat.* They entered Hillary's office, where Hillary ran to the windowsill and picked up the vase of roses. She swung around and showed them to Jake.

"He sent her those roses?" Sarah sputtered in disbelief. She picked up her cell phone

and pushed recall for Jake's cell phone number. Then she pressed send, keeping her eyes glued on Jake. He reached for his cell phone, glanced at it and then clipped it back on his belt.

Sarah gasped. She'd seen Jake do that once before, when they were together at the zoo. She felt dizzy and nauseous as she remembered him saying, *'No one I need to talk to right now.'*

There was no doubt about it. It was Jake.

"Of course it's him," she spat out. "I'm not blind." Any more than she was blind when Damon had done the same thing to her. "I'm just stupid."

What was it about Hillary that men couldn't resist?

'Leave a message,' Jake's voice mail instructed.

"Jake," she barked into the phone, then forced herself to sound normal. "I was hoping to catch you because I have a conflict this weekend." Screw it. Let him hear how upset she was. It gave her message credibility. "Something's suddenly come up," she said curtly, silently blessing Katie for the inspiration. "We'll have to make it another time."

She ended the message.

"Like the Twelfth of Never," she said bitterly, glaring at Jake and Hillary. "Although I'm sure you'll be able to make alternate plans."

Sarah picked up the folder containing her clues for the treasure hunt. Inside were five sheets of paper with five perfect puzzles she'd lovingly spent hours creating. She wrenched them from the folder and angrily tore them in half, then half again, then once more. She shoved the jagged pieces back inside the folder and flung it on the passenger seat. She'd dispose of it later.

Right now, she had to get out of here before she did something stupid. Or worse.

Sarah put her car in gear and inched her way along the front of the building. As she passed Hillary's window, she did something she had never dared before.

Sarah Lyons, the minister's daughter, flipped Jake and Hillary the bird.

It didn't even bother her that she felt good doing it.

On the radio, Jo Dee Messina began singing her hit single, *My Give-a-Damn's Busted*. "How appropriate," Sarah sneered. She turned up the volume and with a sudden burst of speed, she peeled out of the parking lot.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jake might have missed the turn into his grandfather's business had it not been for the blue Cavalier waiting at the stop sign. He safely maneuvered around the car and roared down the street and through the gates of JMS. He was not looking forward to spending the evening with Banger.

Didn't he know someone with a blue Cavalier?

He pulled his motorcycle right onto the sidewalk in front of the building and turned off the engine. An older woman with blond hair, blue eyes and an engaging smile rushed to meet him. He assumed she was Hillary Bowman, the controller for JMS.

Banger should be out here, Jake thought. For Banger's sake, Jake hoped he was on-site because he was in no mood for any of the man's shenanigans tonight.

Jake greeted the woman, who did in fact turn out to be Hillary Bowman. He supposed she was nice enough, but all he really cared about was that she knew her stuff so he could do what he needed to do and get the hell out of there. Then he'd call Sarah, maybe hook up with her later.

He found it disconcerting when Hillary grabbed his arm. It wasn't as though the sidewalks were icy or wet, or that there was any danger of falling. Maybe she's just the touchy-feely type, Jake reasoned. Still, in this day of sexual harassment, Hillary's actions could easily be misconstrued. Jake made a mental note to mention the incident to Banger. *Let him deal with it, he thought. That's what he's paid for.*

Jake neatly disengaged himself from her grasp when he opened the front door and beckoned Hillary to enter the building. To avoid her snagging onto him again, he deliberately stayed a few paces back as she led him to her office.

And then something even more bizarre happened.

When they entered her office, Hillary ran to the windowsill and picked up a vase of flowers. She prattled on about having a secret admirer. Jake murmured polite pleasantries in all the right places, but he felt her actions a bit immature for someone in her position.

Or did all women feel this way when they received flowers?

Jake thought back to some of his own flower recipients. He could recall only one person who showed off his gifts to the extent that this woman did—his mother. And that was when he was a little kid.

The thought crossed his mind that Hillary was more than a little strange. *But what the hell, he surmised. If she gets me out of here in a timely fashion, she can have all the secret admirers she wants.*

Jake's cell phone rang.

His heart quickened when he saw that it was Sarah calling. Although he really wanted to speak with her, Jake had no intention of taking her call in front of Hillary. Reluctantly, he sent her into voice mail, then grinned. Here he was thinking Hillary odd for gushing over a bunch of roses when he was feeling giddy from a simple phone call. He snapped the phone to his belt buckle.

Banger joined them then and they got down to work.

Two hours later, Jake took a break from the pile of papers sitting in front of him. He

retrieved his voice mail.

"Damn," he muttered while listening to Sarah's message. Not only was he not getting anywhere with Sam's books, now Sarah had up and cancelled on him.

"Something wrong?" Hillary asked him. She leaned over his desk.

Where did she come from? Jake wondered, startled to find her standing in front of his desk. And was it his imagination, or did she sound just like the blonde vixen in his dream?

"Change of plans." He kept his eyes averted from Hillary's plunging neckline and pointed to a pile of paperwork. "Everything in that stack seems to be in order," he told her. "You can take it away."

"You'll find that everything's by the book," Hillary said as she grabbed the pile of papers. "I pride myself on being a high-caliber professional. I only wish others shared my enthusiasm for work."

This woman certainly has a healthy opinion about herself, Jake thought. Out loud he said, "I just can't get my arms around the fact that the expenses have doubled and sometimes tripled over the past few years."

"We've been expanding. And that takes money. Take a look around. The offices have been redone and now we're upgrading the production equipment. Come on, I'll show you."

Funny how Jake made a concerted effort not to let Hillary brush against him, or give her any excuse to touch him. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something about the woman gave him the willies.

She's right about the office though, Jake thought. A lot of money had been spent renovating the place. "Sam approved all this?" he asked.

Hillary ruffled through the stack she carried. "Right here," she said, handing the proposal to Jake. "Of course, the project ran over budget, but I guess that's to be expected these days."

Jake glanced at Sam's signature and returned the document to Hillary. He walked into Banger's office and flicked on the lights. "Wow," he said, looking around. The room was huge, larger than Jake's own living room. Nicer, too. A flat-screen hung from one wall, a large mahogany desk with a matching high-back executive chair centered the room, and a bar was set up in the far corner.

"Is this wise?" Jake asked, examining the contents of the bar.

"Doug does a lot of entertaining after hours," Hillary explained.

"Still, it's a liability to have alcohol on the premises," Jake commented. "Especially when it's not locked up." They left Doug's office and returned to the area where Jake had been working.

"We've never had a problem," Hillary said. "Besides, no one would dare enter Doug's office without permission." She glanced at her watch. "It's getting late. Would you like to grab something to eat?" Hillary sat down on the edge of the desk, swinging one leg back and forth.

Was it his imagination, or was Hillary coming on to him? Jake's stomach muscles tightened at the thought. "Where's Banger?" he asked gruffly.

"Who?"

Jake chuckled, which eased some of the tension he was feeling. What was it about this woman that made him so uncomfortable? "Sorry. Where's Doug?"

"Oh," Hillary laughed. "He's long gone. He left over an hour ago."

"He's gone?" Jake queried. "He left without saying anything?"

"Yeah. He does that a lot. He's caught up with his family. Mostly it's me here, all by my lonesome, late at night. I don't mind, though. I get immense satisfaction doing my job. But I'm a little hungry right now. How about you?"

Hungry for what? Jake wondered. The image of a tigress prepping for a kill flashed in his mind. "Thanks, but I'll pass," he said. "Feel free, though."

A door slammed and they turned toward the sound.

"Jackson, my boy," Sam Marks called as he came down the aisle.

"Sam!" Hillary exclaimed, jumping down from the desk. "What brings you in?"

"My grandson, of course," Sam said, giving Jake a bear hug. "Making any headway?"

"Things look to be in order, Gramps," Jake said, although somehow he felt as though he was missing something.

"Good, good. You hungry?"

"I just asked him the same thing, Sam," Hillary said with a laugh. "But he said he's not hungry."

"Nonsense," said Sam. "Boy's gotta eat." He grabbed Jake by the arm. "Come along, son. I have some things I want to discuss with you. Hillary, don't forget to lock up," he called over his shoulder.

Happy for any excuse to get away from Hillary, Jake gratefully allowed his grandfather to lead him from the office.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Sarah made several unscheduled stops on her way home.

First up was the video store. No more family appropriate films for her. No siree. It was time to break out of her shell. She headed straight for the television section and grabbed the first three seasons of *Sex and the City*, thought 'what the heck,' and picked up seasons four and five as well. She might as well see what she'd been missing, and she had all weekend to do it.

Next stop was the local pizza place, where she ordered an extra-large pepperoni and cheese pizza. She added breadsticks and a double serving of dipping sauce to the order. If she was lucky, she'd put herself into a carbohydrate coma before the weekend was over.

Final stop was the grocery store, where she purchased the last remaining essentials she'd need to get through the weekend. While in the store, she stuffed the folder containing the torn puzzles into a trash bin. No way was she throwing it away at home. She didn't want even the tiniest little scrap of paper from those puzzles soiling her garbage pail.

Sarah moved on automatic pilot. She was going through the motions, but she was dead inside, and she knew it. Somehow, she managed to arrive home without getting into an accident. She dumped her packages on the sofa and headed for her bedroom. Changing swiftly out of her work clothes, she left them in a heap on the floor and pulled on a knee-length nightshirt. She dragged her hair back into a ponytail and returned to the living room.

Picking up her cell phone, Sarah called Katie, relieved to get her voice mail. She didn't want to speak with anyone right now, not even her best friend. "Dinner's off, Katie," she said tersely. "Something's come up. No need to call me; I'll be out of touch for the next few days. I'll call you when I get back." She ended the message and turned off the phone.

"Let the party begin," Sarah said, opening up the pizza box.

Chapter Thirty

"Everything's so bloody expensive anymore, Jackson," Sam complained over dinner. "And too damn technical. Nowadays you need a computer to accomplish what I used to do with a pencil on the back of a paper napkin. You just can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"You're not that old, Gramps," Jake assured his grandfather, surprised to find he meant it. True, Sam was at an age when most people had long since retired, but he still had all his mental facilities about him. And he spun a good story, too. Dozens of them, in fact.

Over dessert, Jake decided he really owed Hillary one. If not for the woman making him so damned uncomfortable, he no doubt would have passed on Sam's dinner invitation. And that would have been a shame, Jake admitted. Up until now, he usually avoided spending time alone with his grandfather. *Past history dies hard*, he supposed. But tonight, he learned that he and his grandfather had more in common than either of them could ever have imagined. Interestingly enough, they also shared many of the same business philosophies as well.

He was enjoying his grandfather's company and resolved to spend more time with him in the future. And he made a mental note to tell Jeremy the same. Jake now knew his mother had been right. Whatever his past faults, Sam Marks really did have the best interests of his family at heart.

"Your grandmother—God rest her soul—and me started JMS over thirty-five years ago," Sam reminisced. "All we had back then was a wing and a prayer. Several years later, Doug came on board. I thought your mother would come along too, but she had other plans." He sipped his coffee. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed not to be leaving the business to my only child or one of her children, but I understand you kids have to forge your own way."

"Gramps. . ."

"It's okay, Jackson," Sam assured him. "Doug wants to buy me out and I'm fine with that. He's practically family anyway, like the son I never had. And he's been with me over twenty-five years now."

"You trust him, Gramps?"

"I have no reason not to," Sam said, visibly startled by Jake's question. "Why?"

"My take on him is that he's a hell of a salesman, but his managing skills leave a lot to be desired."

Sam let loose with a hearty laugh. "That's my Douglas," he said. "He's always been that way. High energy. Flies off in every different direction. That's what makes him so good in sales. But you're right. Time management is not his strong suit."

"What's the story with Hillary?"

"Doug brought her in about four or five years ago. Around the time you and Jeremy headed west, if I'm remembering right. I gotta tell you, I'm not impressed with her, but Doug says he can't run the business without her—that she's an integral part of JMS," Sam revealed. "Personally, I think she's a real ball-buster, that one."

Silently, Jake couldn't agree more. "Do you think there's something going on between the two of them?"

Sam pondered his question. "Early on, I wondered that myself," he finally admitted.

"But now, I don't think so. Not romantically anyway. Doug spends a lot of time with his family. Besides, he knows how I feel about that sort of behavior."

Jake thought back to earlier that night, when he believed Hillary was coming on to him. Did she behave that way with Doug? Jake would bet money that she did. The big question was, did Banger respond in kind?

Jake realized his grandfather was speaking. "I'm sorry, Gramps. I missed that. What'd you just say about your employees?"

"I just said that JMS is a fitting legacy," Sam repeated. "From a two person operation to over thirty employees."

"Thirty employees," Jake echoed. For some reason, a clear mental image of the Salaries Payable section from the balance sheet popped into his mind. He ran through the numbers and did a quick mental calculation. "Are you sure it's only thirty?"

"I can't be certain, but I know it can't be more than thirty-five," Sam replied. "Doug's supposed to send me a monthly recap, but he doesn't always get around to it and since he's taking over, I don't bother with it anymore."

"JMS must pay exceptionally well, Gramps," Jake commented. "From the numbers, I thought you had closer to fifty employees."

"For the past couple years, we've been experiencing an unusually high turnover among the office staff," Sam informed Jake. "Could be that Doug has to pay a higher wage to retain good employees. Like I said, everything's so damned expensive. But that's Doug's problem now, not mine."

"Until the company changes hands, you should pay attention to that kind of stuff. Come on. We're going back to JMS." Jake beckoned for the check.

"What for?"

"I'm going to grab your payroll logs and all the personal expense accounts. I've been looking through capital expenses, payables, receivables and the inventory. I may have been looking in the wrong place."

"What are you looking for?"

"I'll tell you when I find it," Jake promised.

Chapter Thirty-One

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Groaning, Sarah pulled her head from beneath the pillow. Sunbeams streaming through the window practically blinded her as she squinted to read the clock. 12:35. Good grief. She'd been sleeping for almost twelve hours. She really had put herself into a carbohydrate stupor.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Rolling onto her back, she wondered who the heck was pounding on her door. Whoever it was, she wasn't interested. "Go away!" she shouted, her voice raspy. Gosh, her head was pounding and her mouth felt like it was full of cotton balls.

"Sarah!" called a masculine voice. "Open the door!"

Although muffled, she immediately recognized the distinctive voice of Paul Lyons.

Dear Lord! Her father was at the door.

Throwing back the sheet, Sarah sprang from the bed and then promptly sat back down again when the room started spinning.

She held her head in her hands.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

"Just a minute," she hollered. After lying about for so long, she should have realized she'd get woozy standing up too fast. Wisely, she waited a few moments before making another attempt. Once on solid ground, she glanced in the mirror and groaned at her appearance. With her father banging on the door, there was no time for her to hide the puffy red eyes and blotchy red skin caused by hours of endless crying. What a difference from the healthy glow she'd sported only two days ago.

Had it only been two days ago?

"Why bother?" she growled at her reflection. She stumbled from the room. Just as she was about to open the door she spied the *Sex and the City* DVDs sitting on top of her television. No way was she in the mood to deal with that conversation if her father saw them there. She grabbed the DVDs and quickly stashed them under the sofa. Besides, she'd only gotten through the first few episodes before she had to stop watching them. Samantha Jones, one of the show's main characters, reminded her too much of Hillary.

And that was one Hillary too many.

After adjusting her nightshirt and running her fingers through her hair, Sarah reluctantly opened the door. "Daddy," she said as he stepped into the room. "What are you doing here?"

"I was worried about you, kiddo," her father replied, taking his daughter into his arms for a quick hug. "You haven't answered your phone and you weren't in church today."

"My cell's off," Sarah explained, pulling away from her father. Dropping down on the sofa, she tossed an empty bag of Bar-B-Que potato chips to one side, then dragged a rumpled afghan over her bare legs.

Her dad towered over her, staring intently. "It's not like you to miss church without calling me, honey," he commented, his voice concerned. "So naturally, I thought something must have happened."

"Yeah ... well ... sorry about that," she grumbled. "I wasn't feeling up to attending

today. I didn't mean to worry you," she added. She wondered why he hadn't said anything about her appearance. He had to notice she looked like death warmed over.

Sarah leaned her head against the back of the sofa and closed her eyes. She really didn't feel like talking.

Paul Lyons picked up a large pizza box from the floor and lifted the lid. One slice of congealed cheese with dried-up pepperoni pizza remained inside. "I can see why your stomach might be upset."

Keeping her eyes closed, Sarah merely shrugged her shoulders.

Leaving his daughter huddled on the sofa, Paul carried the box into the kitchen and dumped it into the trash bin. Then he spied an empty container of ice cream on its side in the sink and tossed that into the trash as well.

After starting a fresh pot of coffee, Paul stood back and took stock of the situation. Bar-B-Que potato chips, pepperoni pizza, Ben and Jerry's ice cream. Puffy red eyes, unkempt hair, blotchy red skin.

Uh-oh.

Having suffered through their last appearance when Sarah was seventeen years old—after that obnoxious Danfield boy ditched her right before prom—Paul Lyons was astute enough to recognize the Six Signs of the Apocalypse when he saw them.

He knew then that Sarah Elizabeth Lyons was in a world of hurts.

While filling two mugs with piping hot coffee, he said a silent prayer that he'd be able to comfort his troubled child. He returned to the living room, handed her a mug and sat down next to her on the sofa. Silently sipping his coffee, he waited.

And waited.

Ten minutes passed in silence. When they had both finished their coffee, Paul tentatively asked, "Are you going to talk about it?"

"About what?" Sarah replied bluntly.

"What's bothering you."

"Nothing's bothering me," she said evasively. "I didn't feel well this morning. No big deal."

They fell silent again.

Finally, Sarah could stand it no longer. "Daddy...why do bad things happen to good people?"

Her father sighed. "That's the age old question, honey. The best answer I can give you is that we're living in Satan's domain. He already owns the evil people, so he leaves them alone."

Sarah toyed with the corner of the afghan, rolling the end back and forth between her fingers while she considered her father's words. She could feel tears building and try as she might, she was just too exhausted to stop them. She started sobbing.

Her dad took her into his arms. "Sarah, honey, I can't help if you don't tell me what's wrong."

"I...I...I hate God!" she finally blurted out. There. She'd said it. It was out in the open now. All of a sudden, Sarah couldn't hold back. Pushing aside the afghan, she jumped up from the sofa and turned and faced her father, hands clenched at her sides. "All my life I've been the 'good' girl," she shouted between sobs. "I follow all the rules. I don't do drugs. I

don't cheat. I don't steal. And where did it get me? Screwed! That's where."

"Honey..."

"It's true," Sarah shouted. "And you know it. All through history, God-fearing people always get the shaft."

"Honey, please calm down."

"Take Moses for example," Sarah said, stopping long enough to catch her breath. "He dragged those ungrateful Israelites through the desert for forty years. Forty years, Dad! And where did it get him? Nowhere. He wasn't even allowed to step foot in the Promised Land. What kind of crap is that?"

"Sweetheart..."

"And what about John the Baptist? He lost his head. And how about Peter? Or Paul? And look what happened to Jesus! How could God let His only son die like that?"

Paul Lyons grabbed his daughter in his arms and hugged her tight. "Honey, we're not to question God's plan."

"Why not?" she shouted, pushing free from her dad. She stumbled backwards, but caught herself before she fell. "As far as I can see, His plan *sucks!*"

Stunned into silence, Paul could do nothing but stare at his distraught daughter.

Emotionally spent, Sarah stood gasping for breath. Finally, she covered her face with her hands. "You don't understand, Dad," she sobbed. "I can't take it anymore."

"I do understand, Sarah."

"How?" she demanded. "How can you possibly understand?"

"I felt the exact same way the night I lost your mother," he said softly.

His words knocked the breath from her body and Sarah sank to her knees. "Oh, Daddy," she whispered, hanging her head in shame. "I'm so sorry."

Taking hold of his daughter, Paul pulled her to her feet and guided her to the sofa. Keeping his arm draped around her shoulder, he said, "I was very angry with God for a time. Just like you are right now."

"But you're a minister," she said.

"Ministers are human, honey," he replied. "But I found my way again. I pray you do, too."

"Why?" she asked. "Why should I follow a God who allows such pain?"

"I ignored Him for almost a year," Paul admitted, lightly placing a kiss on Sarah's head. "Then one night you fell desperately ill. I found myself back in that hospital where you were born and where we lost your mom. Same sounds. Same smells. Same feelings of despair and inadequacy. The doctors weren't very encouraging. Just like with your mom. I'll never forget their words. 'It could go either way.' I thought about those five little words for almost an hour, realizing they held true for me, too. I could walk away from God forever and never look back, or I could embrace Him and His will. It was my choice to make."

"You never...told me...any of this," Sarah stammered between sniffles.

"You were barely a year old," he told her. "I spent the bulk of that awful night on my knees begging forgiveness and praying for a miracle. And then, just as the sun came up over the horizon, it came. God blessed me that night, Sarah. But it was His plan, on His terms. He puts things in place before they're needed, and we have to trust in that. And in Him."

"I'm sorry, Daddy," Sarah apologized, wiping tears from her face with the backs of her

hands. She hiccuped. "I feel so ashamed. My problems are nothing when compared to what you've been through."

"Honey, life's hard. That's why we need to live our faith, and lean on it during times of crisis."

"That which does not destroy us only makes us stronger?"

"There's a lot of wisdom in those words," Paul said. "As for Moses and the others, well, they understood their reward was in their eternal life, not this one." He pulled Sarah closer to him. "I guarantee not a one of them would trade away their heavenly existence to have had an easier time on Earth."

Sniffing, Sarah cracked a smile for the first time in days. "I guess not."

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

Haltingly, she filled him in.

"Damon surprises me," her father admitted a little while later. "I'd never expect that kind of behavior from him. It just goes to show how anyone can fall to temptation."

"He fooled us, Daddy," Sarah said, trying her best not to tear up again. "But Jake's betrayal really hurts. And what really grates me is how fast Hillary found him. And then she stole him from me, too."

"Are you absolutely certain, Sarah?"

"He was at the office, Dad," Sarah said. "Why else would he be there except to see her? Besides, I saw them through the window."

"Sarah, you need to quit that job."

Sarah looked at her father in surprise. "Wait...you're telling me to quit something?"

Paul Lyons studied his daughter. "When I raised you to always finish what you started, it was to instill in you the value of honoring your commitments. I never meant for you to remain with something that was hurting you physically, emotionally or spiritually. From the looks of things, your place of employment is doing all three. It's time to walk away."

"I plan on it," Sarah assured him. "First thing Monday morning. It just makes me so mad because I really like this job. If it weren't for Hillary, it would be the perfect place to work. Besides, it took me a long time to find it and once I quit, I won't be able to afford this apartment anymore."

"Sarah, don't worry about that. I'll spot you the money until you land another job."

"You already did that the last time I was laid off; I can't ask you to do it again. Besides, it might take a while to find another job. There's nothing here. I might have to relocate."

"Then relocate. Nothing's stopping you."

"Daddy, I can't do that. I can't leave you alone."

Stunned, Paul gaped at his daughter. "Sarah, I'm not alone," he told her. "I have the church. I have friends. And every now and then, I take a lady friend to dinner. Believe me, I am not alone. Nor am I your responsibility."

"Huh?" Sarah shook her head in confusion.

"You have to forge your own path through life, and if that means you have to move away, so be it. I don't want to be the reason, or the excuse, that you're not living your life to its fullest potential."

"Not that," Sarah corrected him. "What do you mean you have a lady friend?"

Paul laughed and hugged Sarah close. "A lady who lost her husband several years back. Don't worry, you're still my best girl."

"Daddy, I'm not worried about that. I'm happy for you. It's about time. You need someone in your life."

"And so do you, honey. He is our Lord. Don't ever let the secular world take Him away from you."

"Thanks, Daddy," Sarah said, hugging her father. "And thanks for loving me."

"Always, Sarafina."

After accepting an invitation to join him for dinner later in the week, Sarah gave her father one last hug. She assured him her crisis of faith had passed as quickly as it came, kissed him on the cheek, and sent him on his way.

Feeling a renewed sense of energy, she straightened up the living room and washed and put away the coffee mugs. That done, she decided a long, hot shower was the best remedy to rid herself of a weekend's worth of tears and misery. She headed for the bathroom.

She was halfway across the room when a knock on the door stalled her in her tracks. Assuming her father had forgotten something, Sarah bounded back to the door and flung it open. "Forget something..." She gasped as a parcel of long-stemmed red roses was thrust into her arms.

Peeking out from behind the petals stood Damon.

"You've got to be kidding me," Sarah said, stunned that Damon was at her door. She backed into her apartment. "Is this Your idea of a joke?" she yelled at the ceiling. "'Cuz it's so not funny."

She returned to the hall and faced Damon. She stared at him, wondering what it was about him that had initially sparked her interest. Nothing came to mind, except that she had once felt she could build a future with this poor excuse of a man. Now, all she felt was empty.

"Sarah, I don't want to bother you if you have company," Damon began. "I just dropped by to—" He abruptly stopped talking and stared at her. "Good Lord, Sarah. You look awful. Is everything all right?"

She cringed. Of course she looked awful. She'd been crying all weekend. How'd he expect her to look? "My dad was just here and we had a heart-to-heart..." She faltered. Why should she explain anything to this jerk? "I'm fine," she shot out. "What are you doing here?"

Shuffling his feet, Damon hung his head. "I've come to ask forgiveness," he said, his voice soft. "I've made a terrible mistake."

Wow.

This was a surprise. Too bad for him she was so over him. "Which time?" she asked.

"Huh?" his head popped up.

"The time you and Hillary were downloading porn? The time you didn't return my phone calls for two weeks? Or the time you humiliated me at *BLEACHERS*?" Sarah could feel renewed anger bubbling up inside her.

"All of it," he said, spreading his hands wide. "I apologize for all of it. I don't know what came over me."

"So it's true?" Still holding the roses, she crossed her arms.

"What?"

"You and Hillary?"

"Sarah, it wasn't what you thought."

"Enlighten me," Sarah demanded. "What were you doing at *BLEACHERS* that night?"

"Eating dinner. You know that."

"Then why'd you phone Hillary on your way out the door?" she countered, anxious to see if he'd call her bluff.

He stared at her. "You're not going to forgive me, are you?"

"Oh, yes I am," she stated. It wasn't lost on her that he'd danced around her question. That told her all she needed to know. "Being the Christian that I am, I accept your apology and I forgive you."

"Thanks, Sarah." Smiling, he reached out to hug her, but she abruptly held up the roses, effectively stopping him from wrapping his arms around her. No way did she want him touching her. "Do you want to get some coffee?" he offered.

"No."

"Do you want to plan something—"

"No," she cut him off. "I forgive you, Damon. But that doesn't mean we're going to resume dating."

"Why not?" he whined. "We had a good thing going."

Bemused, she stared at him, then decided that he was right. They did have a good thing going—right up until he ruined it. And now here he was, standing in her doorway, trying to make her feel guilty about something that was entirely his fault. And just like that, for the first time in her life, she had the perfect comeback at the precise moment she needed one.

"We only dated six weeks, babe," Sarah said, using the same nasty tone Damon had employed on her. "Don't read anything more into it than that."

She had to stop herself from laughing out loud when Damon's mouth dropped open.

"You're going to end it just like this, without even trying to work things out?" he had the audacity to ask.

I'm going to end it?

Incredible, she thought, that he's putting the blame on me. And once again, she knew exactly how she was going to respond.

"No muss, no fuss."

Although tempted to slap the roses into his chest, Sarah simply handed them back to him, which he reluctantly accepted. Then, with a smile on her face, she stared him straight in the eye, raised her hand to her forehead and saluted. Feeling immensely pleased with herself, she stepped into her apartment, and without giving him a backward glance, she promptly slammed the door.

"An eye for an eye," she said, casting her eyes heavenward.

She drew the chain across the door and headed for the bathroom.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Fresh from her shower, yet still adorned in her bathrobe and with her hair wrapped in a towel, Sarah entered her kitchen. She felt exceedingly better, but she knew it would take something more than a hot shower to mend her aching heart. She poured herself a cup of coffee from the pot her dad had brewed, and went in search of her cell phone. She found it under the sofa and powered it on. She'd missed seven calls.

Not surprisingly, the first message was from Jake.

Sarah, I'm sorry about this weekend. I was really looking forward to it, but I understand when emergencies happen. I only hope it's nothing too serious. Please call me when you get the chance. I'm thinking about you.

"Yeah, right," Sarah said, hitting the delete button. "I saw how much you were thinking of me."

The next message was also from Jake.

I haven't heard from you. I'm starting to worry. Call me.

"I'd call you a few things, but I'm trying to be a better Christian." She deleted that message as well.

Sarah, it's Jake. I thought we might be able to salvage some of the weekend, but I guess that's not to be. I hope everything's okay. I'm heading back to Vegas. I'll wait for your call.

"You'll be waiting 'til the end of time," Sarah said. That message followed the other two. "And you can stay in Vegas for all I care. I'm not calling you. Ever."

The next four were from her dad. "Jeez-oh-Pete, Dad," she said, deleting each message after she'd listened to it. "Four messages in less than an hour qualifies you for stalker status." She smiled. "But I love you. You're the best dad in the world."

She tossed the phone onto the sofa, removed the towel from her head, and vigorously rubbed it through her hair as she headed for her bedroom. Halfway across the room, it dawned on her that she hadn't heard from Katie. Sarah paused mid stride. She had cancelled her romantic dinner plans—dinner her friend intended to prepare—by leaving a cryptic message on Katie's cell phone. That in itself should have generated several frantic phone calls which, when left unanswered, would have sent Katie pounding on her door. Sarah knew it was totally out of character not to hear something from her. She flung the towel aside and lunged for her phone, hitting the speed button for Katie's number.

Katie answered on the second ring, her voice groggy.

"Katie? You okay?" Sarah anxiously asked.

"No. I'm not. But that's a long, boring story," Katie said. "What happened with Jake?"

"Nothing happened with Jake. Don't change the subject. What's wrong?"

"I could use some caffeine before I go into all the sordid details. Want to meet at Starbucks?"

"Yeah. But give me thirty minutes. I have to dry my hair and get dressed."

"It'll have to be longer than that. I need to shower. Haven't gotten one all weekend."

Sarah chuckled. "I understand perfectly." She checked the time. "How about 5:30?"

"Fabulous," Katie said, although her tone left Sarah with little doubt that she was anything but. "I'll see you there."

"Life sucks," Katie stated bluntly as she picked at her blueberry scone.

"Life is wonderful," Sarah corrected Katie, all the while keeping a sympathetic eye on her friend. "It's the living part that's hard."

"Whatever," Katie said. She pushed her plate aside. "I can't eat any more. You want it?"

Sarah shook her head. After what she'd consumed this weekend, she didn't think her stomach could handle much more than the Grande Soy Chai she was nursing.

They were sitting in the courtyard outside *Starbucks*, neither having much to say. Sarah wouldn't have thought it possible, but Katie was in a worse mood than she was. *At least the weather's nice*, Sarah thought, enjoying the balmy early evening breeze. And it felt good to be out of the apartment. She looked around. Ten tables shared the patio and every one of them was occupied.

"Business is good for *Starbucks*," Sarah commented. As quickly as the words slipped from her mouth, Sarah wanted to grab them back. Of all the stupid things to say. She should bite off her tongue.

Sure enough, Katie wasn't going to let the remark slide without comment.

"I'm glad business is good for somebody," Katie snipped. "How can you drink a hot beverage in the middle of August?"

"Katie, I'm sorry things didn't work out for you at the bank," Sarah said. "But it's not the only bank in town. Don't let one person spoil your dreams."

"Thanks, Sarah," Katie said, relenting. "But they all probably graduated from the Scrooge Institute of Banking." She sat up, squinted her eyes and pursed her lips. "'One out of two restaurants fail within the first two years,'" she said, mimicking the loan officer she'd met with last Friday. "'You can't expect us to invest in a restaurant that's only open for business six hours a day, six days a week.'" She rolled her eyes. "Another dream bites the dust."

"Looks like we both had lousy weekends," Sarah said, sighing loudly.

"I'm sorry Jake turned out to be such a shit. Oops. Sorry. No offense," she added.

"No apologies necessary," Sarah said. "He is a shit."

Katie looked at Sarah with a surprised expression on her face. "You swore," she said in a sing-song voice, although her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "I'm telling God."

Sarah chuckled. "He already knows." It felt good to laugh. *Misery does love company*, she guiltily thought. In the next breath she blurted out, "I'm giving notice tomorrow."

"I knew that was coming. And I don't blame you," Katie said, resting her chin in the cups of her hands. "But I am sorry that Hillary is running you off from a job that you really like."

"You warned me about her."

"And I'm sorry I can't quit right along with you. But I'll have to find something first. I don't want to eat into my savings."

"I understand, Katie," Sarah assured her friend. "Don't worry about me. Things will turn around. I have faith."

Her cell phone rang. "Look who's calling me," she said, waving her phone in Katie's direction. "He's got some nerve."

"Bastard," Katie swore. "Sorry," she mumbled as she grabbed Sarah's phone.

"What are you doing?" Sarah screeched. "Give that back!"

Too late. Katie answered it. "Listen, you," she barked into the receiver, holding Sarah back with one hand. "Stick to your Accounting Whore and leave Sarah alone." She snapped the phone closed.

"Katie!"

"I need to take my anger out on someone," Katie sweetly said. "Why not someone who so richly deserves it?"

Sarah's cell phone rang again.

"Give it to me!" Sarah cried.

"Not a chance," Katie said, laughing wickedly. "Now he's gonna get both barrels." She answered the phone. "Don't play stupid, Jake," Katie yelled. "Sarah saw you with HB. Give it up. You are so busted. Loser."

Katie disconnected the call and flung the phone on the table. "That should take care of Jake the Snake."

Sarah stared at her friend. "Maybe I should have talked to him," she ventured. "Just to see what he has to say for himself."

"Why?" Katie asked. "So he can lie to you like Damon did?"

"I guess you're right," Sarah said.

"Screw 'em."

Chapter Thirty-Three

"She saw me with HB?" Jake asked out loud. Dumbfounded, he sat back in his chair and stared at his brother. "What the hell is she talking about?"

"What's the matter, bro?"

"I haven't a clue," Jake said, angrily shaking his head. He pushed a pile of paperwork to the side of his desk. "I've been trying to reach Sarah all weekend, with no luck. She said she had a family emergency, but she won't return my calls. And now, her friend Katie just chewed me a new one. Katie wouldn't even let me speak with her."

"Women," Jeremy deadpanned. "Can't live with them. Can't ship them off the planet."

"Not funny," Jake cautioned. Disappointed that his weekend with Sarah had been cancelled, he'd caught the first flight back to Vegas early Sunday morning. From the airport he'd come straight to the office, exhausted and in a foul mood. And right now, he had zero tolerance for Jeremy's warped sense of humor.

Jeremy heeded Jake's warning and backed off. "What's all this stuff?" he asked, waving his hand over Jake's desk.

"Payroll stuff from JMS. I think I have a pretty good idea what's going on, but I want to double-check a few things before taking my suspicions to Gramps." Jake paused, took a deep breath, then with one quick movement he swiped the entire pile to the floor. "Damn it!" he yelled.

"Take it easy, Jake," Jeremy said, his voice filled with concern. "I've never seen you like this before." He stooped to clean up the mess Jake had made.

Pushing himself out of his chair with more force than he intended, Jake accidentally flipped it over on its side. It hit the floor with a loud bang. Breathing heavily and with his hands on his hips, he left the chair where it landed. "I don't get it, Jeremy. I've been nothing but patient with Sarah, honoring her stupid Rules of Engagement, exhausting myself flying back and forth across the country to see her, neglecting my business," he said angrily. "And what do I get for it? Screwed. Well, screw her."

"You don't mean that, man."

"The hell I don't!"

"Calm down, Jake."

Jake ran his fingers through his hair.

"Who's HB?"

"Her boss," Jake spat out. He revealed all that he knew about HB. "The only time I ever saw that woman was at *BLEACHERS*, when she was flirting with Sarah's ex-boyfriend. But I never told Sarah about it because I didn't want to risk hurting her. Shit! And this is the thanks I get for it."

Jeremy dumped the papers on the desk. Jake watched as he straightened the mess into a neat pile. At one particular letter Jeremy hesitated, glanced over it, then pulled it from the stack. "HB?"

Jake nodded. "Yeah. From what I could see, a real piece of work."

"Hillary Bowman?"

Jake stared at his brother. "What?"

Jeremy handed him the letter, pointing to the signature at the bottom of the page.

"Hillary Bowman. HB. Could they be one and the same?" Jeremy asked.

"No," Jake said. "HB has long black hair. Hillary has short blond..." he paused, his mind flying back to that night at *BLEACHERS*. He distinctly remembered thinking he hoped HB's hair was a wig. And if that was the case...

"No way." Jake grabbed the payroll book. He flung it open, his fingers running down the names until he came to the name Sarah Lyons. "Damn," he said as he scanned the personal data for her telephone number. It matched Sarah's cell phone number. He continued down the page until he found Katie's name. "Katie Saunders," he said out loud. "This has to be them. I'll be damned."

He looked at his brother. "Unbelievable. Sarah and Katie work for JMS."

Jeremy rubbed his hands together. "Now it gets interesting," he said, releasing an evil chuckle.

"And that means Hillary must be HB. And that means..." Jake slammed the payroll book shut. "Call the airlines," he ordered. "Book me on a flight tonight. I'm heading back to Cleveland."

"Wait a minute, Jake," Jeremy said, holding out his hands to stop his brother. "The Donovans are scheduled in tomorrow, remember? You can't leave. This is the biggest deal of our careers. Maybe our lives."

"You handle it."

"No," Jeremy protested. "I need you here."

"No, you don't," Jake insisted. "You can handle it on your own. You've been dealing with them all along anyway. I'll abide by whatever decision you make."

Jeremy stared at his brother, shaking his head. "This is a multi-million dollar meeting. You're going to blow it off because of a woman?"

"Yep."

"Just like that?"

"Yep."

"And you'll abide by whatever I decide?"

"Yep."

Jeremy sat down in his chair. "I hope she's worth it," he muttered, shaking his head.

"That and much more." Jake pounded his grandfather's number into his phone. "Gramps?" he yelled into the speaker. "We need to talk."

Chapter Thirty-Four

"Staff meeting in ten minutes," Jamie announced, popping her head over Sarah's cubicle wall.

Go away.

No such luck. Jamie would hang over Sarah's wall like an albatross around her neck until she responded to her. "I know, Jamie," she said, sighing loudly. "I haven't missed a staff meeting yet."

And I won't miss them after I'm gone, either.

She didn't bother looking up from the report she was working on. She was in a miserable mood, her head was pounding and if Jamie were smart, she'd leave her alone.

Turns out, Jamie wasn't so smart after all. "My, my," she patronized, prancing around the cubicle wall until she stood in Sarah's doorway. "Sounds like someone's had a lousy weekend. You and Katie must have spent it together. I just came from her cubby and she's bitchy, too."

Sarah refused to comment. She kept her head down in the hopes that the woman would buy a clue and leave her alone. But no, not Jamie. Not when she thought she'd found a new vein of scuttlebutt she could excavate and exploit.

Sure enough, Jamie exclaimed, "Hey! You two aren't fighting, are you? Is that why you're both so crabby? You can tell me, you know," she said, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "I can relate to what you're going through. We can swap stories."

Marveling at the audacity of the woman, Sarah managed to compose herself with a deep calming breath. Then she slowly spun around in her chair until she faced her nemesis. Amazingly, Jamie had a look of rapture about her. In fact, she positively glowed. She even had her hands clasped together as if in gleeful anticipation.

If she licks her lips. . .

It sickened her to think that anyone could derive such pleasure out of someone else's pain.

Sarah sat back in her chair, crossed her arms, cocked her head to one side and arched her right eyebrow. "My personal life is none of your business," she stated bluntly, looking Jamie dead in the eye. "And I know Katie feels the same way." She glared at the woman, feeling a small measure of satisfaction when Jamie's mouth dropped open. She began to lose that glowing look when her cheeks started turning red. *Hopefully with shame*, Sarah thought, then she said, "But just to satisfy your never-ending thirst for knowledge, we are not mad at each other, we've been friends forever and you want to be very careful what you say to me about Katie."

Sarah waited for the woman to storm out of her office, probably to run straight to Hillary with her current tale of woe. Instead, stupid Jamie just had to plod on. "That's not very Christian-like, now is it?" she whined. "I'm only trying to be nice."

Nice? When had Jamie ever been nice to anyone but Hillary?

"No, you aren't," Sarah challenged her. Now that she had resurrected her backbone, she was determined to put it to good use. "You're digging for a tidbit of malicious gossip you can use to your own advantage." Sarah grabbed her coffee mug and stood up, wondering why she'd never noticed that she towered over Jamie by a good two inches. She liked the

feeling of confidence those extra inches gave her. "And for the record, just because someone is a Christian, that doesn't make them a doormat. It would serve you well to remember that in the future."

Sarah brushed past the irritating woman without saying another word.

Score one for the good guys.

She headed into the kitchen where she poured herself some coffee. Katie soon joined her.

"You ready?" Katie asked.

"Oh, yes," Sarah assured her. "Let the games begin."

Fortified with caffeine, Sarah and Katie filed into Hillary's office. Hillary was on her cell phone. Jamie was already there, sitting in the chair next to the window. Of course, she didn't acknowledge either Sarah or Katie as they entered the room.

Probably licking her wounds, Sarah thought. *If we're lucky, she'll choke on a hairball.* She knew she was being uncharacteristically mean, but she meant what she'd said earlier; she was no longer willing to be anyone's doormat. And just to show Jamie she wasn't afraid of her, Sarah sat in the chair next to her. "Good morning, Jamie," she said sweetly. Katie took the seat on the other side of Sarah.

"Morning," Jamie mumbled. Then she looked at Sarah and smirked.

Uh oh. Something was up.

In the past, a smirk like that would have signaled trouble, sending Sarah into an emotional tailspin of worry, but not today. Today, Sarah couldn't care less what Jamie and Hillary had cooked up between them. Let them conspire all they wanted, she decided. She was quitting. She returned Jamie's smirk with a brilliant smile and was delighted when Jamie, confused by Sarah's positive response, broke eye contact first.

Feeling immensely pleased with herself, Sarah sat back in her chair, but despite her resolve not to worry, she couldn't help but speculate what Hillary would spring on her. Nothing nearly as exciting as the news Sarah was prepared to deliver, she'd wager. Nevertheless she did feel anxious. The air in Hillary's office seemed charged with electricity. Something was definitely up.

Sarah dared a glance at the wilting roses on the windowsill. In particular, she studied the card. Had Hillary noticed it'd been moved? No way, Sarah assured herself. With all those petals falling everywhere, anything could have shifted it out of place.

But had she been seen? Was that why Jamie was smirking?

Earlier that morning, before anyone had arrived, Sarah had marched into Hillary's office, determined to learn who had sent those roses, since Katie hadn't had the chance to find out last week. She'd practically ripped the card from its holder, but much to her dismay the card was left unsigned. Typical Hillary. Everything about her had to involve a big mystery.

Sarah hadn't thought anyone had seen her. But who knows? Maybe Hillary had a secret camera hidden in her office. Sarah wouldn't put it past her.

As she nonchalantly glanced around the office, paying particular attention to nooks and crannies, Sarah would not allow herself to feel guilty about invading Hillary's privacy, especially after the weekend she'd just endured. She deserved to know if Jake had sent those flowers. Let Hillary question her. She didn't care. She was quitting anyway.

She glanced at Hillary, gabbing away on her cell. Who was she talking to? And why was she wasting everybody's time, when she could have easily postponed the staff meeting until she had finished her phone conversation?

Inconsiderate, thy name is Hillary Bowman.

Warily, Sarah sipped her coffee, wondering again what kind of drama would play out today. *More flowers, perhaps?* That wouldn't be such a bad thing, she reckoned, since the others were practically dead. Hillary really should throw them away, but knowing her soon to be ex-boss, she'd leave them dead on the windowsill until the cleaning people finally disposed of them.

Maybe the hot guy from the drive-through came on to her again. Oh, wait a minute, Sarah reminded herself. That only happened in Hillary's dreams.

Something was definitely brewing, though. She could feel it.

She debated whether to announce her resignation during the staff meeting or wait until the meeting was over and speak with Hillary in private. Before she could decide though, Hillary snapped her cell phone closed.

Finally, Sarah thought as she settled back in her chair, although she didn't like the smug look on Hillary's face.

Sure enough, Hillary dropped a bombshell.

"Sam is planning to sell the business," she announced without preamble, lightly tapping her cell phone on her chin. "He's discussing it with Doug as we speak."

Sarah gasped. "Mr. Marks is selling his business?"

"Are our jobs in jeopardy?" Katie anxiously asked.

"No, not at all," Hillary said with assurance. "In fact, just the opposite."

Sarah felt a twinge of hope. If Mr. Marks was selling his business, maybe she didn't have to quit after all. Surely the new owner wouldn't put up with Hillary's antics for any length of time. Maybe she could ride it out.

"Because the new owner is Doug!" Hillary suddenly shouted out with glee. She tossed her cell phone on her desk and clapped her hands together.

"What?" Sarah and Katie both cried out.

"How long has this been in the works?" Katie wanted to know.

Sarah noticed that Jamie hadn't said a word. She didn't seem at all surprised, either. Which meant that Hillary had already told her. *So that's what the smirk was about.* Trust Hillary not to keep her mouth shut. She just had to tell someone.

"Apparently Sam's been wanting to sell for some time now, and it looks like today's the day," Hillary said, swiveling back and forth in her chair. "I've been on the phone with Doug all morning, coaching him through the particulars he'll need to address with Sam. They'll be in later today to announce the final details."

So much for riding it out, Sarah miserably thought. Doug was buying the business? For her, that was the worst possible scenario. No wonder Hillary looked so smug. With Doug eating out of the palm of her hand, there'd be no stopping her now.

Hillary's desk phone rang. She hit the speaker. "I'm in a meeting," she said tersely. "And haven't I told you not to disturb me while I'm with my staff?"

"I'm sorry for interrupting, HB, but I have a delivery for you," Lori Russell said, her voice quivering as it came over the intercom. "Should I bring it back?"

Hillary glanced up in surprise. "Yes. Please do," she said in a much kinder tone of voice. She disconnected the call. "Wonder what it could be?"

"More flowers?" Katie jokingly asked.

"I was thinking the same thing," Sarah said, although she knew her voice didn't sound quite as jovial as Katie's did.

Sure enough, Lori Russell came through the door carrying another huge floral delivery.

Sarah gasped. Had Jake sent Hillary more flowers? She felt Katie's elbow jabbing her side, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the bundle Lori carried.

Lori set the flowers on Hillary's desk and quickly left the office.

"Wow!" Jamie exclaimed. "Two weeks in a row. Someone's really got it bad for you!"

Hillary tore at the tissue paper. "They're pink this time!" she cried, stating the obvious. "Two dozen pink roses." She grabbed for the card.

Sarah's stomach churned while Hillary read the card out loud:

A perfect weekend with the perfect woman. I couldn't have asked for more.

The perfect woman my butt, Sarah fumed. *Is Jake insane?* He had to be, because the evidence was staring her right in the face.

"This is a perfect Monday," Hillary gushed. She returned the card to its envelope and tucked it back in with the flowers. "He's so romantic. I wouldn't put it past him to send me roses in a different color each week." She picked up the vase. "Sarah," she barked, "throw those dead roses out. I want to put these babies in their place."

She wondered why Hillary asked her to do it when Jamie was sitting right next to them. *She just wants to rub my nose in it.* Determined to show Hillary her stupid roses didn't matter to her, Sarah waltzed over to the windowsill, grabbed the vase and flung the whole thing into Hillary's wastebasket. Stagnant water splashed everywhere. "Oops," Sarah said without remorse. "Sorry, HB." She returned to her seat.

"Sarah!" Hillary chastised. She bent over the trashcan and fished out the card. "Don't throw out the card." She put the old card behind the new one.

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. "You told me to toss them. So I did. You never mentioned the card." She knew she was being belligerent, but she didn't care. She was so furious she decided to sit on her hands. It kept her from bunching them into fists, or worse, lunging over Hillary's desk and strangling the woman with them.

Hillary made a show of inhaling the sweet fragrance from the roses while Katie, bless her, asked the question they all wanted answered. "Are they from the same guy?"

"Same guy," Hillary confirmed. "I could get used to this."

"I'm glad someone had a nice weekend," Jamie interjected.

Sarah glared at Jamie, who pretended not to notice.

"Yes," Hillary gloated. "The entire weekend was fabulous. Friday we had a romantic dinner. Then on Saturday we—."

"I thought you had to work late Friday," Sarah blurted out before she could stop herself.

Hillary stopped playing with her flowers. "He picked me up here."

Sarah blanched. Then it had to be Jake, no question about it now. That lying snake.

"Who's 'he'?" she spat, glaring at Hillary, daring her to mention Jake's name. She needed to hear it.

"Easy, Sarah," Katie whispered.

Hillary looked taken aback. "I told you. I'm not willing to share him just yet." Hillary turned away, but not before Sarah noticed the smirk on her lips.

That smirk spurred her on. "What time did he pick you up?" she asked curtly.

"I don't think I like your attitude today, Sarah," Hillary said, using a warning tone. "It doesn't matter what time he picked me up, does it?"

"Not really," Sarah said, shrugging her shoulders. She released her hands, sat back in her seat and crossed her arms. To heck with Hillary and to heck with Jake, she decided. She couldn't wait to get out of here. "By the way, Hillary," she announced. "I'm giving you my two weeks notice today."

"What?" Hillary cried.

Not so smug now, are you?

"I'm giving you...my two weeks notice...today," Sarah slowly repeated, as if she were speaking to a small child.

"But why?" Hillary asked. "I just made you a permanent employee."

Why?

Who was she kidding? And what was with the hurt puppy look? "The 'why' isn't important," Sarah told her. "The only question that needs to be answered is, do you want me to work the two weeks? Or not?"

Hillary sat down in her seat. "I don't want you to quit. We've invested a lot of time and money getting you trained."

She doesn't want me to quit?

And then it dawned on her. Of course Hillary didn't want her to quit. And it had nothing to do with training, time or money. Hillary didn't want to go through the hassle of finding someone new to torture or worse, steal her boyfriend. "I'm afraid that's not an option," she said, her voice hard as steel. "Not anymore."

"Sarah, you're going to miss out on something big," Hillary wheedled. "Doug is going to change things around here."

The only worthwhile change Doug could make would be firing you, and then following you out the door.

"I take it you want me to work the two weeks," Sarah said.

"We'll talk about this later," Hillary decided. "Right now, I want to talk about some of the improvements Doug and I will be making." She looked at Sarah. "Maybe after you hear what we're planning, you'll change your mind."

That will be a cold day in Hades.

"We're going to expand..."

Hillary's desk phone rang again. Angrily she punched the intercom button. "How many times do I have to tell you not to disturb me during my staff meeting?" she shouted.

"I...ah...I'm sor...sorry, HB," Lori stuttered. "But I, um, I thought you'd want to know that, ah, Mr. Marks is on his way in here. Um, I just saw him through the window."

"Sam?" Hillary screeched. "Sam is coming in here?"

"He's walking through the...he's here now." Lori whispered.

Hillary hit the intercom button with such force the unit slid across her desk. "Why didn't Doug warn me they were on their way?" she asked to no one in particular. "I wasn't expecting them until this afternoon." She grabbed her purse from under her desk and pulled out a mirror. After checking her teeth and quickly touching up her lipstick, she ran her fingers through her hair. "It'll have to do," she mumbled. She dumped her purse under her desk. She stood and straightened her too-tight skirt. "You all wait right here until I return. I have to greet Sam."

In her haste, Hillary left the door ajar as she flew out of her office.

Sarah had never seen Hillary move so fast. "Poor Mr. Marks," she quipped. "He's not going to know what hit him." She glared at Jamie. "Do you want me to write down what I just said so you can repeat it word for word to Hillary? Or did you get it all the first time?"

Wisely, Jamie held her tongue.

But Katie burst out laughing. "Who are you and what have you done with Sarah, my meek little friend?"

"Sarah the Meek is dead," Sarah declared.

"Sssh," Jamie broke in.

Sarah and Katie glared at Jamie.

"Listen," Jamie whispered, pointing to the open door.

"You know," Katie said, "for once, I agree with her."

Chapter Thirty-Five

The three of them huddled by the door.

"Sam!" Hillary exclaimed. "I wasn't expecting you. I thought you were meeting with Doug. Where is he, by the way?" Based on the volume of their voices, Hillary and Sam had to be closer to Hillary's office than the front door.

Katie dared a quick peek. "They're standing in the middle of the office, right in front of your cubicle, Jamie."

"Good morning, Hillary," Sam Marks said, keeping his voice professional. "My grandson is with Doug. I've just stopped by to pick up a few things. Then I'll join them straight away."

Jamie whispered, "He has a grandson?"

"Yes," Katie quietly confirmed. "I think he has two. But I thought they lived out of state."

"Is there something I can help you with?" they heard Hillary ask.

"Yes, as a matter of fact there is. Could you call Chuck Hemingway? Tell him I'm here for the computer printouts."

"Sam," Hillary whined. "Why didn't you call me? I would have gotten anything you wanted."

"Bad, bad Mr. Marks," Katie whispered. "Doesn't he know he has to go through Hillary for everything? After all, he's only the owner."

Sarah giggled.

Jamie hushed them. "I can't hear," she explained.

"Where is everyone?" Sam asked.

"In my office," Hillary said. "It's our Monday morning staff meeting. Why don't we call Chuck from Doug's office."

"No need, Hillary," Sam said. "We're right here. You can call from your office."

"They're coming!" Jamie exclaimed.

The three girls scattered, barely managing to return to their seats before Sam Marks bounded through the doorway.

"Hello, everyone," he said, his voice booming. "Sorry to barge in on your meeting."

"Good morning," the girls said in unison.

"Nice to see you again, Sam," Katie added.

In the three months Sarah had worked for JMS, she had yet to meet its owner. Katie had explained to her that although he was semi-retired, he did poke his head in from time to time. *Today must be one of those days*, Sarah thought. *Perhaps he's bidding a fond farewell to the place before selling out to Doug.*

Sam Marks had to be well into his seventies, but Sarah could see remnants of the handsome man he'd once been. Tall and slim and fortunate to have retained a full head of hair, he looked the picture of health. His cheeks were sun-kissed, probably from spending his days playing golf. Men were so lucky, she thought. As they aged, they got better looking. The same held true for her dad. She remembered laughing at pictures of him when he was younger. He had looked like such a geek. But now...

Sarah stared at Mr. Marks. Did she know him? He looked vaguely familiar. Where

had she met him before?

"And you must be Sarah," he said, interrupting her thoughts. He held out his hand expectantly.

He knew her? How was that possible?

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Marks," Sarah said politely, taking his hand in her own. Good grief his eyes were blue! Spellbound, she pumped his hand. How bizarre was it that Sam's eyes rivaled Jake's in intensity? Dang it all anyway, she inwardly groaned. Now why'd she have to go and think about him for? She didn't want to compare this kindly old man with Jake the Snake.

"Call me Sam," he said, smiling at her. Was that a trace of a dimple? "Can I have my hand back now?"

"Oh, sorry," Sarah said, embarrassed. She hadn't realized she'd been pumping his arm up and down the entire time.

Jamie giggled, but Sarah paid her no mind. She was certain she knew Sam from somewhere. And then it hit her. Of course! His portrait hung on the wall in the lobby, although it was partially obscured by the fronds of a large potted palm tree. She passed by that painting every morning. Still, the artist hadn't done him justice, hadn't captured the fire in his eyes. Those eyes so much like Jake's—*stop it, Sarah!*

"Chuck is on his way down, Sam," Hillary informed him, hanging up her desk phone. He ignored her and continued speaking with Sarah. "I hear good things about you, Sarah."

Huh? He hears good things about her? From whom?

Certainly not Hillary. And Sarah doubted Doug would have had anything to say about her, either. Half the time, he flitted around in so many directions, she didn't know whether he was coming or going. But if it wasn't Doug or Hillary, then who? She didn't know anyone else who knew Sam Marks.

"Sarah has just announced she's leaving us," Hillary blurted out.

"What?" Sam asked. He seemed genuinely concerned. He turned to Sarah. "Why? Aren't you happy here?"

"Um, personal reasons," Sarah lamely replied. Darn Hillary. Why'd she have to go and bring up her resignation to Sam for anyway?

"We're going to talk her out of that decision, aren't we, Hillary?" That didn't sound like a question.

Hillary gave Sam one of her fake smiles. "We're certainly going to try, Sam."

"Be sure that you do," Sam said. And that sounded like an order.

How bizarre is this?

Sarah wondered why Mr. Marks should care if she quit. Despite what he might have heard about her, he didn't know her. Not really. And besides, he was selling his business, so in essence he was quitting too. Maybe he was just trying to be nice, but she wished he'd stop showing so much interest in her, because he wasn't doing her any favors. Hillary was bound to notice. And since her boss selfishly hoarded the spotlight for herself, only God in heaven knew what she'd do to Sarah.

It doesn't matter, Sarah. You're quitting, remember?

Just then Chuck Hemingway, the JMS computer guru, walked into the office carrying a thick manila folder. He approached Mr. Marks. "Good to see you again, Sam," Chuck said,

shaking the elder man's hand. "Here's what you're waiting for." He handed Sam the folder.

"I only wish I had it sooner, my boy," Sam said, clapping Chuck on the shoulder. "Thanks for getting it to me on such short notice."

"You're welcome, Sam," Chuck replied. He shook Sam's hand again and without even a glance at Hillary, he turned and walked out of her office.

"Is there a problem?" Hillary asked, her voice shrill.

"Just some glitches I need to address before the company changes ownership."

"Now Sam, you know I'm the controller here. If there's a problem, Chuck should have made me aware—"

"Look at the time," Sam said, cutting Hillary off. "I'll be late for the meeting." He addressed the group. "Good-bye, ladies. No need to walk me out, Hillary. And Sarah," he said, focusing on her. "Please reconsider your resignation."

"Thank you, Mr. Marks," Sarah said quietly. "I will."

Sam left the office.

Oh, boy, Sarah thought. What just happened here? She looked at Katie, who shrugged her shoulders. She didn't have a clue what was going on either.

Hillary ran to the window, straining to see the front entrance. As soon as Sam cleared the building and got into his car, she grabbed her cell phone.

Sarah glanced at Katie. "Doug," she mouthed.

Katie nodded in agreement.

Sure enough, she heard Hillary say, "Doug, it's me. Where the hell are you and why aren't you answering your damn phone? Sam was just here. Chuck gave him something, but Sam wouldn't share. What the hell is going on?" She hung up that phone and picked up her desk phone, pounding out four digits into the keyboard. "Chuck," she spat. "I want you back in my office. Now."

Hillary slammed down the phone, her face flaming red.

Uh-oh, Sarah thought, remembering the day when Hillary had lost her cool with Katie, after the McDonald's incident. Any minute now, Sarah expected to see Hillary's head start spinning.

Sure enough, Hillary took her anger out on her staff. "What are you all sitting around for?" she yelled. "The staff meeting's canceled. Get back to work."

The girls jumped to their feet.

"Oh, and Sarah," Hillary called to Sarah. "A word, please."

Sarah hung back while Katie and Jaime left the office. *Here it comes*, she thought as she stiffened her spine. "Yes?"

"I've changed my mind," Hillary growled, her voice dripping with venom. "Today is your last day."

Bingo.

Hillary had definitely noticed Sam Marks paying special attention to her. "Do you want me to leave now?"

In the past, Hillary's scowl would have reduced Sarah to a gob of jelly. But not anymore. If Hillary expected to see her cry, she was going to be disappointed. Sarah knew in her heart that she had done nothing to inspire such hatred from this vindictive woman, and she wasn't about to give Hillary the satisfaction of reducing her to tears.

"You're to finish out the day," Hillary finally decided. "And be sure to clean out your desk before you leave."

"Don't worry," Sarah said, her tone flat. "I will."

"And make sure you email me the templates for the payroll reports," Hillary ordered. "I shouldn't have to recreate something I've already paid you to do."

"You can access them from the accounting drive," Sarah informed her. "Anything else?"

Hillary picked up her cell phone and punched in some numbers. "No," she stated, shooing Sarah towards the door with one hand. "Go back to your desk."

What a bitch!

And this time, Sarah wasn't going to apologize for her feelings. She'd tried everything to get through to that woman. She'd gone out of her way to accommodate to her, she went along with Hillary's stupid ideas even when they went against her moral judgment, and she'd even prayed for her. But Hillary was one of those people where nothing worked. Not even prayer. It was best to get away from her as quickly as possible.

As Sarah turned to leave Hillary's office, she bumped into Chuck Hemingway. "Oh!" she said. "I'm sorry, Chuck." She stepped around him and with her head held high she walked back to her desk, determined not to show any emotion at all.

Outwardly, she succeeded in appearing calm, but inwardly Sarah vowed to depart this nefarious place and never look back. She was afraid that if she did, she'd turn into a pillar of salt.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Sarah wasn't surprised to find Katie waiting in her office. "Are you okay?" Katie asked, jumping up from the chair. "I swear that woman is deranged. What a bitch."

"My sentiments exactly," Sarah replied, trying her best to keep her anger in check. She yanked open her bottom desk drawer, grabbed her book and stuffed it into her purse. Then she removed the few personal items she had tacked to her wall and stuffed those into a folder.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm getting the heck out of Sodom and Gomorra."

"Huh?"

Sarah stopped what she was doing and turned to Katie. "She told me to consider today my last day."

"What?!!" Katie cried. "What about what Sam said?"

"Come on, Katie. You're smarter than that. It's because of what Sam said that she's making me leave, but not until I put in my last eight hours."

Katie shook her head with disgust. "She really is a psycho-bitch."

"I couldn't agree more. But I'm not waiting until the end of the day. I'm getting out of here just as soon as I get my stuff together."

From a distance they heard Hillary scream, "We'll just see about that!" followed by a slamming door.

"All this drama," Katie muttered. "We belong on network television."

"Yep," Sarah agreed. "We can be our own reality show – professionals working in an unprofessional environment."

"But not for long," Chuck interrupted.

Startled, both girls turned to find Chuck Hemingway standing in Sarah's doorway. "Sarah," he said, "I heard what Hillary said to you, but trust me, you don't want to leave."

Sarah shook her head. "Chuck, I appreciate that, really I do, but she told me today's it. And I won't give her the satisfaction of asking to stay longer. Besides, I don't want to work here anymore. Especially not for her. In fact, I don't want to be anywhere near her, by her, around her, or in the general vicinity of her."

"I understand, but please don't leave now," Chuck begged. "Please." He looked around, then lowered his voice. "I can't go into specific details, but trust me. You do not want to miss what's going down –"

Again, a door slammed.

Peeking over the cubicle wall, they saw Hillary quickly descending upon them. Chuck gave Sarah a stern look, mouthed 'trust me' once again, then moved to intercept Hillary. "Sarah's last day is today?" he inquired.

"Yes," Hillary replied, but she didn't stop moving.

"I'll do the standard lock-outs first thing in the morning," Chuck called after her.

"Be sure that you do," she snapped. She passed Sarah's cubicle, then doubled back and glared at Katie and Sarah. "I told you two to get back to work. Things are going to change around here," Hillary threatened. Katie stepped around her and into the aisle. "I'll get the respect I deserve, or I'll have all of your jobs." That said, Hillary stormed through the lobby and out of the building.

"Where is she going?" Jamie asked, running down the hall. "She didn't tell me. What am I supposed to tell Doug if he calls?"

"Tell him she left in a huff," Katie said with a laugh. "He's used to that."

"I think we've had enough excitement for one day," Chuck said. "Let's all go back to our desks and get some work done." He turned to leave, looked back over his shoulder and said, "Sarah, you're not to leave."

"Okay, Chuck. I won't," Sarah promised.

Chuck headed upstairs to his office.

"The plot thickens," Katie said with a laugh, rubbing her hands together.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

~ JMS Instant Messenger ~

KSaunders:	She's baaaaacccccckkkkkkk!!!!
SLyons:	Yeah, I know. The slamming of her office door was my first clue. My teeth are still vibrating!!!
KSaunders:	Obviously she didn't find Doug.
SLyons:	You think that's where she went?
KSaunders:	I'd bet money on it.

Ten minutes later, Hillary emerged from her office, clapped her hands together and yelled, "Ladies, my office please. Quickly." She returned to her office.

"What now?" Sarah wondered out loud.

Halfway down the hallway, Sarah decided she'd better refuel with more coffee, just in case. She hastened back to her cubicle, picked up her mug, turned and for the second time that day she ran smack into somebody.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized, and then balked. Jake was standing right in front of her, holding onto her arms to keep her from falling. "Jake! What are you doing here?"

He looked exhausted. His clothes were rumpled, his skin was pale and dark circles appeared under his eyes. "Sarah," he began, "we need to talk."

Katie came around the other side of the cubicle. "Sarah, come on. You know the Ice Queen doesn't like to be kept – Jake! What are you doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Sarah sarcastically asked, shaking herself free from his grasp. "He's here to see Hillary. He just didn't count on running into me." She had to get out of here before she started crying. She grabbed her purse and the folder containing her personal items. "I'm outta here."

Jake blocked her path. "Sarah, please. You have to let me explain."

"She doesn't have to let you do anything, buddy," Katie blasted him. "So why don't you keep walking? The Accounting Whore is at the other end," she sputtered, pointing down the hall to Hillary's office. "Sarah, I'm coming with you."

"Katie, you can't quit your job because of me."

"Neither one of you is quitting," said a deep voice from behind Sarah.

Sarah jerked around to find Sam Marks standing next to her cubicle. "Mr. Marks," she gasped. How much had he overheard? "I apologize." She struggled to hold back her tears. "I never meant to bring my personal business into the office."

"No apologies necessary, Sarah," Sam said, his eyes kind. And he seemed awfully jovial for an owner who had just walked in to find two employees wasting company time on personal business. "And I asked you to call me Sam."

Hillary came down the aisle. "Katie, Sarah, where are you—Sam, I didn't know you'd arrived. Lori should have called me. I guess there's a lot of truth behind the 'good help is so hard to find' lament. I'm assembling the staff now. And Jackson, good to see you, again."

Sarah glared at Jake. "I thought you didn't know her."

"Of course I know him," Hillary snapped. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Hillary," Sam interjected. "I could desperately use a cup of coffee. Do you mind?"

"Not at all, Sam, but I'm sure Lori will be happy—."

"Thank you, I appreciate it. One sugar, two creams." Sam then addressed Katie. "Katie, could you go upstairs and tell Chuck I'm here? Ask him to join us in Hillary's office. I'm going to invite Lori Russell as well."

"Sure thing, Sam," Katie said. She squeezed Sarah's arm for support, and then headed for Chuck's office.

"What about the phones?" Hillary wanted to know. "Who will answer them if Lori's in the meeting?"

"The phones can go into voice mail for the short time Lori will be away from her desk. Now about that coffee?"

Sam waited until Hillary hurried off to the kitchen before stepping into the lobby.

That left Jake and Sarah alone, facing off.

Jake looked so tired, but Sarah refused to be swayed by his appearance. Besides, she told herself, he didn't deserve her sympathy. And as much as she wanted him, he didn't deserve her. And why was he still standing here with her? He should be chasing after Hillary. "You need to leave," she said. "Now."

"Sarah, I didn't know you worked for JMS until last night," Jake said.

"Obviously," Sarah spat. "Why would you want to date two women who work for the same company? Now if you excuse me . . ."

She moved to step around him, but he wouldn't let her pass.

"All this could have been avoided except I was trying to honor your Rules of Engagement."

She glared at him, sick and tired of people blaming her for their mistakes. "Oh, so now it's my fault you fell under Hillary's spell? I should warn you, she'll only be interested in you until the next fool comes along. And past practice tells me that should be any day now."

"I don't care about Hillary," Jake insisted. "Please let me explain."

"You can't tell me anything I don't already know," Sarah shot back. "Hillary's the one who lured Damon away, but she lost interest in him when she realized I was seeing you. Wanna know how I know that?" Sarah didn't wait for him to answer. "Because as soon as she dumped him for you, Damon came running back to me, begging forgiveness."

They stopped arguing when the lobby door opened and Lori Russell scampered by, heading towards Hillary's office.

Then Jake asked, "You're back with Damon?" He seemed desperate to know.

"Heavens no. I kicked him to the curb like yesterday's garbage. You can join him."

Sam coughed as he bounded through the lobby door. "I had to move that potted plant;

it was blocking my picture.” He chuckled merrily as he passed by Sarah’s cubicle. Then he turned back. “Hey, you two,” he said, moving between Jake and Sarah. “Come on. You’re going to be late for the meeting. And you don’t want to miss it.”

The next thing Sarah knew, Sam had draped an arm around each of them and was guiding them down the aisle towards Hillary’s office.

Now what do I do?

Sarah really didn’t want to inform the soon-to-be-ex-owner of JMS that he had mistakenly invited her ex-boyfriend to a company staff meeting, but she had no choice. She shrugged out of Sam’s arm and turned to face him. “Jake doesn’t work here, Mr. Marks. And he’s leaving.” She pushed Jake in the direction of the front door, and then with as much dignity as she could muster, she forced herself to walk down the hall towards Hillary’s office.

One more stupid SAS meeting, she promised herself, and she was out of here forever.

Hillary came rushing down the hall with a mug full of steaming coffee. “Here you go, Sam,” she said, handing him the mug. “I’m sorry it took so long. I didn’t know how long the coffee had been sitting there, so I brewed a fresh pot for you.”

“Thank you, Hillary,” Sam said, taking the mug from her. He took a sip. “Perfect. Shall we be about it?”

“Yes,” Hillary eagerly replied.

“You go on ahead and get the staff settled. Make sure there’s enough chairs for everyone. I need a final word with Jackson.”

Sam waited until Hillary was out of earshot. “I guess Sarah’s in for a big surprise,” he said with a chuckle.

“I don’t know if my heart can take it,” Jake replied, clutching his chest.

“Nonsense, dear boy,” Sam said, laughing in earnest now. He clapped Jake on the shoulder. “Anything worth having is worth fighting for. Besides,” he said with a wink, “the best part comes when the fighting is over.”

Sarah was seated next to Katie, filling her friend in on her confrontation with Jake when Sam and Jake strolled into Hillary’s office. “Oh! My! Gosh!” Sarah forced out through clenched teeth. “What is he doing?”

Jake sat in the seat next to Chuck, directly behind Katie. Sarah turned in her seat. “Jake,” she ardently whispered. “Get out of here.”

“Jake?” Jamie cried. “I knew there was a Jake!”

“Shut up, Jamie,” Katie ordered.

“Jake! Leave! Now!” Sarah insisted.

Hillary, who by this time was sitting at her desk, snapped her head up from the documents she was reading. She stared at Sarah. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Hillary,” Sarah stated bluntly.

Hillary glared at Sarah.

Katie spun around in her chair, facing Jake. Sarah heard her whisper, “You have some nerve, buddy.”

“Ladies,” Hillary said hotly. “What do you think you’re —.”

“Hillary,” Sam interrupted. “We should get the meeting started.”

Hillary faltered. "Doug isn't here yet. Shouldn't we wait?" she asked. "Where is he, by the way? I thought he was with you."

"We can get started without him," Sam replied. He walked around Hillary's desk. "May I?" he asked pointedly.

Momentarily startled, Hillary nonetheless evacuated her seat. "Of course, Sam." She moved around the desk, pulled a chair over to the window and sat down.

Sam stood behind the desk and spoke to the group. "Some things have come to my attention that I need to address. First things first. Sarah, I will not be accepting your resignation. From what I can see, you've done a fantastic job in what you've been allowed to do. From here on out, I plan on giving you more responsibility."

Puzzled, Sarah stammered, "Thank you Mr. Marks, but I don't really see how that's possible."

"Katie," Sam continued, ignoring Sarah's protests. "The same holds true for you. In fact, most of you have done an outstanding job, despite the work environment you've been forced to endure. For that, I apologize."

Silence ruled.

Hillary was the first to break it. "Sam, really, the work environment is fine. Doug and I try to provide—"

"Doug is no longer part of this equation, Hillary."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Doug has decided to pursue other interests. He's no longer employed by this company."

Hillary blanched. "But I thought..."

"I know what you thought," Sam told her, cutting her off. "But my plans have changed. I'm very pleased to announce that my grandson, Jackson Reynolds, will be taking over as acting President of JMS."

Jake rose and moved to stand beside Sam.

"Grandson?" Sarah cried out in shock, looking between the two men. Of course! How could she have been so blind? By looking at Sam, she was seeing Jake forty-five years down the road. Sam and Jake shared the same build, the same eye color; they even had the same blasted dimple.

Katie groaned. "I am so fired," she whispered to Sarah.

Sarah didn't respond. Her brain was still processing the fact that Jake was Sam's grandson and he was taking over JMS. Good for him, she bitterly decided. Now he and Hillary could spend all their time together. Although she desperately wanted to leave, she wasn't about to create a scene by jumping up and running out of the office. But as soon as the meeting was over, she was bolting for the front door.

Jake introduced himself to the group and then apologized for his appearance. "I've just flown in from Las Vegas and I'm a little tired right now," he explained. "I'm going to make this short and simple, but before I leave for the day, I want to get to know the people who are responsible for the success of this company." He turned to Lori Russell and asked her name and what she did for the company. He asked the same of Jamie.

Then it was Katie's turn. "Crap," she muttered under her breath. But Jake just smiled at her and asked how her cooking was coming along. Katie looked at him in surprise. "Fine,"

she said. Then she added, "I haven't burned any food lately. But I'm pretty sure I've destroyed a few bridges." She sighed and shook her head.

"I wouldn't worry about that." Jake chuckled.

Not surprisingly, Jake skipped over Sarah and addressed Chuck. "Chuck, can you tell me what policies are in place regarding computer usage as it relates to the Internet?"

"Sure thing, Jackson."

"Call me Jake," Jake said. He glanced at Sarah. "That's what all my friends call me."

Still sitting behind Hillary's desk, Sam started chuckling.

"Okay, Jake," Chuck said. "Our policy is typical for the industry. Access to the Internet is strictly reserved for company business, and employees are forbidden to subscribe to online services via any company-owned computer or phone line."

"Does the policy include surfing questionable Web sites?"

"Absolutely. If an employee accidentally stumbles onto a restricted site and immediately logs off, that's one thing. But pornographic material viewed or stored on any company computer is grounds for immediate dismissal."

"And how is the policy monitored?"

"Random audits are routinely performed and a report is given to Doug."

"And Doug's response?"

"He usually says 'duly noted,' and then I never hear anything further."

"So it's safe to say that no one has ever been disciplined for violating company policy?"

"That's right. No one has been disciplined for violating company policy."

"But it has been violated?"

"Numerous times."

"What do you think of that, Hillary?" Jake asked, turning his attention to Hillary, who had been strangely quiet during this whole exchange.

Hillary didn't look too good. Her face had turned ashen and she was fidgeting in her seat. "Chuck has never brought his concerns to me," she mumbled, keeping her eyes averted.

Jake nodded. "I see." Then he turned his attention to Sarah. "Sarah," he said, his voice soft and tender. "I know you run the payroll."

"Yes, I do." Sarah replied. She couldn't bear to look at him, so she kept her sights locked on a spot on the wall directly over his left shoulder.

"Do you find the salary structure competitive?" he asked.

He was all business, nothing personal, like he'd been with Lori, Jamie or Katie. Well, she could be all business too. After all, she was a professional, or at least she had been until she stumbled into the chaotic world of JMS. "There isn't a salary structure," she answered bluntly. "The wages are all over the place." She hesitated a moment, then decided, what the heck; she might as well forge ahead with her opinion. She looked Jake in the eye. "I've talked about implementing a system that would pay comparable jobs in a consistent manner, but nothing ever came of it. I also created job descriptions, but nothing came of that, either."

"I see," Jake said. Then he addressed Hillary again. "What exactly is your role here?"

Wow.

What was that tone in Jake's voice? He sounded as though it pained him to speak with Hillary. But Sarah knew better. Jake was putting on the performance of his life for her benefit. *Keep it up, Jake, she thought with disdain, and I'll nominate you for a People's Choice award.*

Hillary appeared frazzled, but Sarah already knew her boss was an accomplished actress. And a liar as well. "As you know, I'm the Controller," Hillary stated. She sounded defensive.

"Then I need you to explain to me why Doug's salary was so astronomically high."

Sarah's ears perked up and she sat higher in her chair. The first time she'd run payroll for JMS, she'd been amazed by how well Doug and Hillary were paid. She also noted they didn't feel it necessary to trickle that generosity down to the rest of their staff.

Hillary started to squirm. "That was the salary he and Sam agreed upon."

"Really? Hmm. Then what about yours?"

"Mine is competitive."

"With whom? The President of the United States?"

"I don't think I like what you're implying."

Sarah hadn't realized she was holding her breath during this exchange. Jake was grilling Hillary, who couldn't seem to charm her way out of what appeared to be a very tense situation. But what Sarah couldn't understand was why Jake was doing it. To Hillary. And in front of her entire staff.

The grilling continued.

"As Controller for this company, isn't it your job to approve expense accounts?"

"Yes."

Jake opened his briefcase and dropped a pile of expense accounts on Hillary's desk. "Then can you explain why Doug's monthly expenses rivaled the paychecks of most of the employees here?"

"I've told you, we're expanding. And Doug does a lot of business after hours, entertaining customers."

"We have salesmen for that." Jake removed another stack from his briefcase. "And yet, their expenses can't even begin to compete with Doug's. It looks like he entertained every night of the week, and at the finest restaurants. And it appears as though he never missed a sporting event, either."

"You'll have to take that up with Doug."

Jake leaned on the desk and crossed his arms. "Here's what I think, Hillary," he said, his tone hard. "Not only did Doug jack up his paycheck, he abused his expense account. He also shirked his responsibilities, letting you run rampant over JMS employees to the detriment of this company."

Holy cow! Did these two have a lover's spat or something? If Sarah hadn't seen Hillary and Jake happily together in this very office last Friday night, she'd never believe he had any kind of romantic feelings for her.

"I resent that," Hillary cried out. "I've done nothing illegal. And you need to bring Doug in here. He can explain everything."

Jake removed a cell phone from his brief case and dropped it on the desk. It was Doug's. No wonder Hillary hadn't been able to rouse him. "I have spoken with Doug. Extensively. About a bevy of things. I'll give you this, you've done a great job ensuring you have all the proper documentation, but there are moral and ethical issues involved here that you haven't been able to conceal."

"I'm not following you."

"Then follow this: Doug gave himself a huge raise so he'd have the necessary capital to purchase this business from Sam. Pretty clever, don't you think? Buying Sam's company with Sam's own money. And he paid you to keep your mouth shut. My best guess is, it's been going on from the moment you stepped foot into this company."

"Sam, you can't believe this," Hillary said, turning to Sam for support. "Why, I've worked my butt off for this company."

"Speaking of that," Jake said, pulling out a manila folder. The same manila folder that Chuck had given Sam earlier that morning.

"Here it comes," Chuck whispered in Sarah's ear.

"Despite your claims of working it off, I've seen more of your butt than I care to." He tossed the folder to the end of the desk and motioned for her to take it.

What? Had Sarah heard that correctly? Had Jake just admitted he'd seen Hillary naked?

Hillary doesn't waste any time, does she?

Sarah turned to Katie, sure that Katie's face would mirror the shocked expression she felt certain was on her own. But Katie didn't look shocked. Far from it. She was sitting back in her chair with an amused grin on her face, obviously enjoying the exchange between Jake and Hillary. All she seemed to be missing was a large bucket of buttered popcorn and a soda pop.

Hillary cautiously rose from her seat and picked up the folder. Warily, she opened it and then visibly blanched. She quickly snapped it shut again.

"I know we depend on sewage for our living," Jake sternly quipped. "But that doesn't mean we have to wallow in it on a daily basis."

"I have no idea where those pictures came from," Hillary protested. "It looks to me like they've been doctored."

Pictures? There were pictures? Of whom?

"They came from this computer," Jake said, tapping Hillary's computer with his hand. "After hearing some of your exploits, I had Chuck investigate a few things. And I'm convinced these are authentic pictures you've produced using company equipment. Not the high-caliber employee I want working for JMS. For the good of the company, you leave me no choice but to terminate your employment." He handed her a sheet of paper. "Sign this resignation and I'll grant you a month's severance package. Don't sign and I guess our lawyers will see each other in court. And make no mistake about it, Ms. Bowman. *That* would be my pleasure."

Sarah couldn't believe what she was witnessing. The high and mighty Hillary Bowman, brought low by the very man she'd stolen from Sarah. If Sarah weren't so angry about the whole situation, she might have enjoyed the poetic justice.

Hillary grabbed the pen and signed the paper. Then she flung the pen to the desk. "I'll need my purse," she said tersely. "It's under the desk."

Sam reached down and pulled out her purse. "Here you go, Hillary," he said cheerfully, tossing it on the desk.

Hillary grabbed her purse. "I'll come back later for the rest of my things."

"Let Chuck know what time and he'll let you in," Jake told her. "He'll escort you to your office, help you gather your personal belongings and then escort you off the premises."

Oh, and leave your keys."

"Fine," she snapped. She dug into her purse, pulled out a small key ring and threw it on the desk. Then she waltzed to the windowsill, picked up the roses and with a look of pure hatred unmistakably aimed at Jake, she flung them into the same garbage receptacle Sarah had thrown the last bunch in. Shattering glass resonated through the room. With one last hateful glare, Hillary stormed out of the office.

There it was, Sarah told herself. The proof she needed that Jake had sent those flowers to Hillary. Why else would she have given him the death glare while throwing them out? But the big question was why Jake had fired her. And in such spectacular fashion. The only logical explanation she could come up with was that Jake had discovered what Hillary and Doug were plotting. *Blood really is thicker than water*, Sarah guessed, even for the romantically involved.

"I'm sorry you all had to witness that," Jake apologized to group, "but it was necessary. I want to close this meeting by thanking you for your continued loyalty to JMS and I can assure you, things are going to be different from now on."

As soon as Jake dismissed the group, Sarah jumped up from her seat, determined to escape the building as fast as her feet could carry her. But Sam called out to her, stopping her in her tracks. She hesitated, then reluctantly turned to face him. Sam came around the desk and stood in front of her. "Sarah," he said warmly, grasping her by both arms. "Would you do an old man a big favor and speak with my grandson?"

"Sam..." Sarah faltered. Her heart was beating so fast her ears were buzzing, making it a little difficult to hear.

"Please," Sam implored. "I promise you, you won't regret it."

"He has two minutes," Sarah reluctantly agreed. "Then I really have to go."

"Thank you," Sam said with a smile. "And if you still want to leave after that, nobody will stand in your way." Then he turned to Jake. "I'm off to see your mother," he said, clapping Jake on the back. "First I need to thank her for securing the future of JMS. And then I owe her an apology. A big one. It's been a long time coming."

"An apology?" Jake asked. "For what?"

Sam stared at his grandson. "Turns out, she picked the better man."

"The better man?" Jake echoed.

Sam nodded and putting his hands in his pockets, he sheepishly shrugged his shoulders.

Jake stared at his grandfather. "You mean...Banger?"

"There's no fool like an old fool," Sam lamented. He headed for the door. "And there's no better time to admit that this old fool was wrong."

"Well, I'll be damned," Jake said with a chuckle. He closed the door behind his grandfather and turned to face Sarah.

Sarah crossed her arms. "The only reason I'm still here is because of Sam," she informed him. But what she really wanted to do was fling herself into his arms. If not for the memory of him and Hillary in this very office, she wouldn't have been able to hold herself back.

"Sarah, I am not involved with Hillary," Jake insisted. "And I did not fire her to keep you here. I fired her because she is a huge liability, she took advantage of an old man, and she

has no morals. She only got away with her antics because she benefited Doug's personal agenda. For that, I apologize."

"You sent her flowers," Sarah accused.

"I did no such thing," Jake protested.

Could it be true? She pushed the thought away, refusing to indulge in false hope. "I saw you through that window," she argued, pointing to the window. "Hillary showed them to you in what I can only assume was her thanking you. And then more arrived today."

"You know what they say about assuming," Jake advised, reaching into his brief case. He pulled out another stack of papers and riffled through them. "Are you aware that everything you do on a computer can be traced?"

"Of course. I'm not a moron. Anyone who watches *CourtTV* knows that." Sarah tried to maintain her anger, but it was getting harder by the second. Besides, she desperately wanted to believe Jake.

Please Jake. Prove me wrong.

"They're called breadcrumbs." He handed her a sheet of paper. "Follow the breadcrumbs, Gretle."

She scanned the Internet sites. "1-800-Flowers?"

"Read the dates."

"Oh my gosh," Sarah said, her voice low. "Hillary sent those flowers to herself." She looked at Jake. The man she was in love with. Correction: the man who had done nothing wrong, while she had been so quick to judge and convict him.

Jake said nothing. He simply stared at her with that heart-melting, lung-constricting smile.

"I'm so sorry, Jake," Sarah whispered, her eyes misting with tears. "I should have known better. Especially after the shoe incident."

"The shoe incident?"

"Ah, that was nothing." Sarah sniffled. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Jake took the paper from Sarah and pulled her into his arms. "Only if you stay with JMS."

"No."

"No?" Jake asked in surprise.

She stayed secure in his embrace, but slowly shook her head.

"Please," he said, murmuring in her ear.

She shivered. "No, Jake, I can't."

He pulled away. "Why not? You told me you loved your job. And I thought you were kinda crazy about me, too."

"I can't work here because of you."

"What?"

"If we broke up, I'd be out of my man and out of a job. I can't take that risk. I won't."

"Trust me. There's no risk." He took her in his arms again. "I'm just going to kiss you until you agree to stay."

"Really?" she said coyly, silently daring him.

"Really."

It only took a minute to convince her. It might have taken longer, but Katie knocked on

the door. "Sorry to interrupt, but Jake, I need to apologize for the nasty way I spoke to you last night. And today."

"Katie," Jake said sternly. "For punishment, I'm going to promote you to Office Manager and give you a raise."

"What?"

"Loyalty. You have it in spades. And that's just what we need around here."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"I love him," Sarah told Katie. This pleasant Sunday afternoon found them back at *Starbucks*, casually sipping their favorite drinks. "I love him more than I could say. And if I lost him, I don't think I'd ever recover from it."

"You have to tell him," Katie insisted. "He deserves to know."

"Since when are you on his side?"

"Since the man sold his business for you. He's moving halfway across the country for you. And in the short period of time he's been here, he's turned JMS around so it's a great place to work. Heck, even Jamie's pleasant to be around. Besides, he's crazy about you. Any fool can see it. And you know as well as I do that you can't continue to let this deceit simmer between you. It'll eat you alive."

"I know," Sarah wailed. "I know." She flung herself down on the table. "But I don't know how to tell him. Especially after everything he's done. He's a better Christian than I am, and he doesn't even attend church."

"He doesn't now," Katie remarked. "But he will."

"How do you know that?"

"Please," Katie scoffed. "The man would walk on water for you."

"Now you're being sacrilegious."

"And you're being ridiculous," Katie rebuffed. "Listen, he's been in Vegas for a week now, finalizing everything with his brother. He'll be back for good next weekend. Why not send him on your treasure hunt? You were going to do it anyway. So do it now. I'm telling you, he's not going anywhere unless it's with you."

"I don't know," Sarah mumbled.

"And I'll cook dinner," Katie offered.

"That reminds me. What about your dream of owning a restaurant?"

"Never mind my dream," Katie told her. "Right now, we're working on yours."

It took Jake exactly eleven minutes to solve the last puzzle—his Sarah really was quite clever—and after a quick pit-stop at his mother's to pick up a few things, he headed back to her apartment.

He'd flown back into town earlier that morning. Sarah had already warned him she wouldn't have time to see him until the treasure hunt, so he went straight to his mother's house. Trust Mom to have breakfast waiting on the table. After a hearty meal of eggs, bacon and hash browns, he'd jumped into the shower. He thought about taking a power nap, then quickly decided against it. Despite not getting much rest these last few weeks, he knew he was too hyped to sleep. He wasn't worried about it, though. He wasn't going to let a little thing like sleep deprivation stand in the way of his being with Sarah.

Jake arrived at *BLEACHERS* ten minutes before two o'clock, the time they'd agreed to meet. He went straight to their designated table, and then had to mask his disappointment when he found Katie waiting for him. For a second, his heart had failed him, thinking Sarah had bailed on him again. Instead, Katie assured him all was in order, that Sarah was simply adding a new twist to the game. Katie handed over the packet of clues with new instructions on what he was supposed to do. He'd wanted to speak with her for a few minutes, to go over

a few things, but she hadn't given him the chance. One minute she was there and the next, she was gone. Just like that.

Jake examined the packet.

Originally, Sarah had planned to meet him at each location, reveal a personal tidbit about herself, and then give him the next clue. Now he had all five clues sealed in their own envelope. The envelopes were numbered in sequential order and once he reached a certain designation, he'd have to hunt for a specific piece of information, which would then allow him to open the next clue.

He raced through the clues. He couldn't wait to get back with Sarah. He actually ached to be with her again. With so much involved in the sale of both his home and business, he hadn't had a minute to spare except for a few random phone calls. It wasn't nearly enough. Never again, he vowed, would he allow himself to be separated from her for any length of time.

Jake pulled into Sarah's apartment complex, relieved to find a parking space right in front of her building. He made a quick phone call. "I'm here," was all he said before snapping the phone closed. The basket he'd used for their picnic lunch—their first official date—sat in the passenger seat. He lifted it, and careful not to jostle its contents, he made his way to Sarah's front door.

Katie answered it, adorned in sleek black pants and a black blouse, with a white apron clinging to her hips. "Welcome, Mr. Reynolds," she formally acknowledged him as she beckoned him enter the room.

Jake handed the basket to Katie and stepped into the apartment, amazed to find that Sarah's living room had been transformed into a romantic bistro. "Wow," he said. "You two have been busy." A small round table covered in a white silk lacy cloth centered the room. The table was already set for two and held a lush bouquet of fresh flowers, flanked by flickering candles. Instrumental music played in the background, completing the quixotic ambience.

"What? No country music?" Jake quipped. "Am I in the right place?"

"Right place, right time," Katie said. She escorted Jake to his seat. "Your table, sir."

"Very nice," Jake commented. "Is Sarah ready?"

"She's running fashionably late. May I get you a cocktail?"

"You're awfully formal tonight." When Katie didn't respond, Jake said, "I'll have whatever the house suggests."

"The house suggests you sit down and get comfortable." Katie lifted the lid of the basket and peeked inside. "I see you've brought dessert." Then she smiled. "You two will never be bored. I'll just hide this away in the kitchen. Be right back."

She returned a few minutes later, carrying a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. "I discovered this vintage while traveling through San Francisco last year. It's become one of Sarah's favorite wines because it carries just a hint of chocolate flavor."

She poured a small amount for him to approve. "Very nice," he said. "I can see why Sarah would enjoy this."

Katie filled his glass. "I'll be right back with your hors d'oeuvres."

"Sarah," Katie whispered, sneaking into Sarah's room. She closed the door behind her.

"Wow!" she exclaimed. "No wonder Jake didn't recognize you." Katie pulled a strand of blonde hair away from Sarah's face. "I barely recognize you. You really did outdo yourself, girlfriend."

Sarah stood in front of her mirror, fumbling with the red corset. "Katie," she whispered, close to tears. "I don't think I can do this. What if he gets up and walks out?"

"You're going to do this," Katie said sharply. "You'll never be happy with this secret hanging over you. Now I've already told him I'm bringing the hors d'oeuvres. And you're them. Let's go."

Sarah panicked. "I can't! I just can't do this."

"You can. And you will." Katie grabbed Sarah by the arm, but Sarah resisted. "I'm not going to drag you," she sternly told her. "Either come with me now, or I'm bringing Jake in here. Either way, this is happening. Tonight. You decide which way it's going to be. Your terms, or mine."

Sarah allowed Katie to pull her to the door.

"We're going to do this just the way we planned," Katie instructed her. "You wait here until I give you the signal." Katie hesitated, then gave Sarah a quick hug. "It's going to be fine," she whispered. "I promise."

With a heavy heart, Sarah hung back behind the door and listened for her cue.

"Okay, Jake," she heard Katie say. "Sarah has a big surprise planned just for you, but you can't peek yet, so I'm going to cover your eyes with this scarf."

Not surprisingly, Jake sounded a little shocked. "Cover my eyes?" he asked. "If Sarah wasn't a minister's daughter, I'd swear you two were up to no good."

"Trust me, Jake," Katie cajoled. "We'd never harm the person who signs our paychecks. Just play along. You won't be disappointed. I promise."

"Okay," Jake said, allowing Katie to cover his eyes.

"Now I'm going to get Sarah," Katie told him.

That was Sarah's cue.

Sarah stepped from behind the door. "He's all yours," Katie whispered. She gave Sarah two big thumbs up and headed into the kitchen, leaving Sarah alone with Jake.

Sarah had done some serious praying over the past few weeks, asking for strength and guidance on how to best handle the predicament she found herself in with Jake. A predicament of her own making, she might add. If only she'd been honest from the start, she could have avoided this whole mess. But now, the moment of truth had arrived. Sarah took a big breath and crossed the room, her knees shaking.

Jake sat patiently in his chair, looking a little bemused, but stunningly handsome even with that ridiculous blue and red silk scarf covering his eyes. If she weren't so afraid of losing him, she'd have burst out laughing. "Jake, I just want you to know that the time we've spent together has been the happiest of my life."

"Thanks, Baby," Jake replied. "I feel the same way."

Sarah melted. In just a few weeks, she had found in Jake everything she could possibly want in a man. If she lost him because of her deception, she didn't think she'd ever forgive herself. She swallowed heavily. "Jake," she faltered, then started again. "Jake, I have something to tell you. About the night we met."

"Best night of my life," Jake announced.

"Mine, too," Sarah said wistfully, her eyes wandering over Jake. *He's perfect.* She couldn't resist touching his shoulder. If things didn't go well, she figured this might be the last time she got the chance.

Jake grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips.

Fresh tears formed in Sarah's eyes as she reclaimed her hand. "Jake, I ... I ... I haven't been entirely honest with you about the night we met."

Jake tilted his head. "We met at *BLEACHERS*. I stopped three idiots from bothering you."

"Yes, yes, I know that," Sarah said. "But I'm talking about the first time we met."

"We've met before?"

"Yes."

Jake shook his head. "Sarah, I'm pretty sure I would have remembered meeting you."

"We met Jake," Sarah insisted. "And I've been keeping it a secret from you." With a deep breath, she removed the scarf from his eyes, then took two steps backward. She stood frozen in place, awaiting his reaction.

Jake blinked. And blinked again. Had he somehow fallen asleep and stumbled back into the dream? He shook his head. No. He was certain he was wide-awake. "Sarah?" he hesitantly asked.

"Yeeessshhh!" Sarah wailed and covering her face with her hands, she burst into tears.

Jake immediately jumped up from his seat and hugged Sarah close. "Sarah, honey," he said, lightly raining kisses on her head. "What is all this?"

"Jake, I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "It was me. I'm the hooker who hit your motorcycle."

"Sarah," Jake said. He started to laugh. "Oh, Sarah." He sat back down in his chair and pulled her into his lap. Picking up a napkin from the table, he used one end of it to wipe away her tears.

"Hillary made us dress up like characters from *Pretty Woman* for Doug's stupid birthday party," Sarah explained between sobs. She took the napkin from Jake and dabbed her nose. "When I first saw you, I thought you were a gift from God. But when you said 'not interested' I thought I'd die from shame."

"Sarah..."

"And then later that night at *BLEACHERS*, when you rescued me from those bozos and you didn't recognize me, I thought I'd been given a second chance for you to get to know the real me."

"Sarah..."

"I couldn't bring myself to tell you the truth. I know I should have, but the more time that passed, the harder it became for me to tell you."

"Sarah..."

"And I kept making Katie switch cars with me because I was afraid you'd recognize my car. But Katie refused to play along anymore."

Jake lightly touched his fingers to Sarah's lips to stop her from talking. "Sarah, I knew it was you."

Sarah stared at him. "What?" She jumped up from his lap. "You knew it was me? Why didn't you say something? Here I was in agony, and you've known all along."

"I didn't know it was you here," Jake said, pointing to his head. "I knew it was you here." He laid his hand over his heart.

Sarah stared at him. He was so handsome. And despite her deception, he didn't seem to be at all mad at her. In fact, he almost seemed relieved.

Jake grasped both her hands. "I've been having crazy dreams about the girl who hit my bike," he told her. Then he started laughing again. "Except she kept morphing into you. For a while there, I thought I was the shallowest human being on the planet, subconsciously wanting you to be something you so clearly aren't. It got to the point where I only knew it wasn't you because of the color of your eyes." He lifted Sarah's chin. "You have the most beautiful green eyes. But the day you hit my bike, your eyes were blue."

"Colored contacts."

"Contacts?"

"Yeah," Sarah readily admitted. "I was trying to impress Hillary so that I could keep my job with JMS. But after the accident, I was so humiliated I changed out of everything." She looked Jake straight in the eye. "I'm so sorry I lied to you."

"I love you," Jake said.

Sarah faltered. Had she heard correctly? "What?"

"I love you," Jake repeated. He took her in his arms.

He loves me?

He loves me!

"I love you, too," Sarah said, grinning widely. "I think I fell in love with you that day at the zoo."

He pulled her closer to him. "The best thing that ever happen to me was when you broke the heel of your shoe and banged into my bike."

"You remember how the accident happened?"

"Something like that doesn't happen every day," Jake said with a laugh. "Especially in Westville."

"Those weren't my shoes."

"I know. They were Hillary's."

"They were fake designer shoes."

"Doesn't surprise me," Jake said. "But I don't want to talk about Hillary." He kissed Sarah. "I want to talk about us." He kissed her again.

"Ah, excuse me," Katie interrupted.

Jake and Sarah broke apart and turned toward Katie.

"I'm glad to see everything's worked out to everyone's satisfaction," Katie said, grinning. "And I hate to keep intruding at the most inopportune times, but dinner should be served in about five minutes, or the results might not be what you expected."

"Thanks, Katie," Jake said, then turned his attention back to Sarah. "Why don't you change into something better suited to this fine dining establishment, before Katie serves our meal?" he suggested.

"Thank you," Sarah said. "I would be more comfortable out of this get-up." She stepped up on her toes and gave Jake a quick peck on the cheek before racing for her bedroom.

The first thing Sarah did after closing her bedroom door was drop to her knees. "Thank

you, Lord," she fervently prayed. "Thank you for sending Jake into my life." She was about to get up when she added, "and I promise never to be that deceitful again. Amen."

Sarah yanked off the wig and tossed it into the trash. She hurried into the bathroom and washed away the makeup. With her face freshly scrubbed, she dabbed on some lip-gloss and mascara. Then she quickly ran a brush through her hair and rushed back into her bedroom where she changed out of the mini-skirt and corset and into a more appropriate mint-green sundress. She grabbed the corset and was about to toss it into the trash as well, when suddenly she flashed back to the accident. In particular, she remembered the way Jake had stared at her. She smiled. Jake might not have been interested in pursuing a relationship with Sarah the Hooker, but there was no doubt in her mind that he had liked what he'd seen.

He had ogled. At her. In the corset.

Never before had anyone looked at Sarah the way Jake had that day. She felt herself grow warm from the memory.

Sarah carefully folded the corset and tucked it into her bottom dresser drawer.

She knew just when she'd wear it again.

As Sarah headed into the living room, one of her father's favorite sayings flitted through her mind: 'the Lord puts things in place before they're needed.'

Thinking back over the past few months, Sarah could clearly see the chain of events that had led her to Jake. Ironically, that path began with Hillary, someone who callously pushed her to the limits of her emotional endurance and caused her to question her religious beliefs. But if she hadn't worked for the stygian woman, she wouldn't have found herself in the position of having to borrow those wretched shoes.

Those wonderfully wretched shoes.

Without them, Sarah might never have run into the love of her life.

Although she'd forgiven her former boss, Hillary wasn't someone she'd ever want to cross paths with again. She'd continue to pray for the woman, though. Her prayer was for Hillary to some day find true happiness and peace in her life.

Just as Sarah had.

Sarah banished Hillary from her mind and crossed the room to where Jake stood waiting for her. "Katie will be bringing dinner in shortly," he informed her as he helped her with her chair. He returned to his seat. "But first, I think a toast is in order."

Sarah picked up her wineglass.

"To new beginnings," Jake said, lifting his glass.

"New beginnings," Sarah repeated with a smile. She gently tapped her glass to his and together, they drank to their future.

Epilogue

Katie slowly entered the room, taking care not to tip the large dome-covered silver platter she carried. She set the platter in the center of the table. "Dinner is served," she proudly announced. Her hand lingered over the handle. "You're going to love this." She flung open the lid.

Sarah blinked and her mouth dropped open in surprise.

What the heck?

Lying on a golden pillow was a beautiful Pomeranian puppy, apparently fast asleep.

"Um," Sarah began. "I don't mean to be rude or anything, but I don't ever remember your braised sirloin tips looking quite like this. What gives?"

With a smile and a shrug, Katie waltzed out of the room.

Sarah suspiciously eyed Jake. "Did you have something to do with this?" She couldn't resist petting the puppy. She scratched the animal behind his ears, and as she did, he perked up a bit, peering out at her through wary eyes.

"I might have," Jake said, grinning. "Go ahead. You can hold him."

Sarah gently picked up the puppy. "He's adorable. Does he have a name?"

"Not yet," Jake told her.

"Oh, and his collar is stunning." She ran her fingers over the diamond-studded collar.

"Cubic zirconium," Jake freely admitted.

Sarah smiled and raised the puppy to eye level, so she could get a better look at him. Then she gasped.

That is not what I think it is. No way.

She glanced at Jake. His handsome face smiled back at her. She shifted her focus back to the puppy, certain she'd been mistaken. Nope. It was still there.

Dangling from the puppy's collar where the dog tags should have been was a beautiful princess-cut diamond engagement ring.

"That one's real," Jake whispered.

Oh. My. Gosh.

"Jake..." Sarah stammered as Jake took hold of the puppy. He removed the ring and returned the puppy to the safety of her lap. Then he bent down on one knee. "We haven't known each other very long, but in that short amount of time I've come to realize you're everything I've been searching for, been waiting for, been longing for, every single day of my life. I love you, Sarah. Will you marry me?"

She couldn't hold back her tears. "Oh my goodness. Yes! Yes! Yes!" She held out her left hand. "Of course I'll marry you."

Jake placed the ring on her finger. "To new beginnings," he said, sealing the deal with a passionate kiss.

The puppy began to yip.

"Looks like this little guy approves," Jake said with a laugh. He picked up the puppy and held him close to his face. "See? You were worried for nothing. I told you she'd say yes."

"Oh, you did, did you?" Sarah teased back. She admired her ring, not quite believing it was on her finger. "Obviously Katie was in on this whole caper."

"That Katie can really keep a secret," Jake said with admiration. "She managed to keep

yours from me and mine from you without being disloyal to either one of us. That's quite an accomplishment. But knowing what I do now, I feel kind of bad putting her in that position."

"Yeah. Me too," Sarah admitted. "But knowing Katie, she wouldn't have done it if she hadn't been working towards a common goal—bringing us together."

Jake handed the dog to Sarah. "What do you think we should name him?"

Sarah thought a moment. Then smiling mischievously, she asked, "How about Jimmy Choo?"