



No More Secrets, No More Lies

By

Marie A Roy

An Electronic Publication from Forbidden Publications in arrangement with  
author, Marie A. Roy.

Copyright © 2001 by Marie A. Roy.

Previously published under Novel Books. ISBN 1-931696-91-8.

Cover Art and Design by ML Benton, Copyright © 2006.

Edited by Ann King.

# FORBIDDEN PUBLICATIONS

[www.forbiddenpublications.com](http://www.forbiddenpublications.com)

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in part or whole, in any form or by any means, without permission from both the author and publisher. All characters, incidents, situations, institutions, governments and people are fictional and any similarity to characters or persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

To my late husband Bob, who will always be my hero.

## Chapter One

Thunder boomed. Sydney Morgan jumped slightly as cracks of acoustical energy followed. The overhead lights of Farnsworth Investments flickered. Ignoring this early morning summer storm, Sydney turned back to her new secretary, Tamika Harris.

"I realize this is your first day here, so let's get some things straight. I do hope you're good at prioritizing. I expect all of the transcription and the filing completed at the end of each day –"

Suddenly, static crackled through the intercom on Sydney's desk. "G'morning Sydney!" Albert Tibble's voice came through. "If you have a free moment, let's talk!"

Sydney rolled her eyes upward. It was way too early, she thought, for Tibble to be calling her into his office.

"I'll be right there Albert!" She flicked off the intercom, then aimed a rueful smile at Tamika. "One does not wait for a *free* moment when the Vice President summons." She grabbed a pad and pen, got as far as the doorway, then turned, and smiled. "By the way, welcome aboard!"

Seconds later, as series of thunderous explosions pursued Sydney down a monotonous gray corridor, her mind created a list of reasons why Tibble wanted to see her now.

*He didn't like the last analysis she'd completed, or another lay-off was in the works – her name heading the list. No! Worse. The firm changed to a less comprehensive healthcare, an HMO that would probably not cover all Brian's needs. The last thought produced nausea.*

When Tibble's secretary signaled Sydney to go on through, she took a breath before gingerly stepping across the expensive Persian rug that boasted shades of

burgundy and gray. She headed toward the large desk and sat down on a tufted winged-back chair that flaunted its own distinct red and black color. Light and airy, the spacious office contained a slew of expansive floor-to-ceiling windows, attributes her office clearly lacked. All served as poignant reminders that years ago, if she hadn't been so impulsive, so blinded by anger and wounded pride, she might, possibly be enjoying a similarly decorated office with as many, if not more, wide sweeping windows. Inwardly she snorted, picturing her unique view of Farnsworth's parking lot.

"Sydney, please have a seat," Albert Tibble absently commanded, obviously unaware that she was already seated. All she could see now was his balding head, as he was focused on a manila folder, a rather thick manila folder. She shifted in the chair as that same thick manila folder stirred her curiosity.

*Get on with it!* Her mind urged. Years ago, she'd learned to project a screen of self-confidence that allowed no one to detect what was really going on inside her.

*You can be as nervous as hell, but don't dare show it!*

Words expressed by a man she had spent years forgetting, or at least dismissing from her daily thoughts, but whose words at moments like this come in quite handy.

Tibble's head suddenly lifted. He slipped off his rimless glasses, placing the end of one arm into his mouth. His faded brown eyes regarded her with a measure of interest. He then folded the frames and placed them on top of the enigmatic folder, essentially refocusing both their attentions back to it.

"We have a firm here who's going public," he started, "and has requested the use of our services in underwriting their IPO."

Sydney nodded. Ignored the distant groan of thunder. Ignored the butterflies in her stomach.

"Although the telecommunications industry has slowed," Tibble continued, "this company has held its own through smart strategic moves." He returned the glasses to the bridge of his nose.

Sydney nodded, holding back any comment. Tibble, she knew, preferred to finish his spiels without interruption. But the man did ramble. She pushed aside images of similar manila folders piling up on her own work-buried desk.

"The guy in charge is quite the entrepreneur having built his company from scratch."

Her eyes traveled down his stubby fingers that caressed the edge of the yet unnamed folder.

"The shareholders are looking to sell enough stock to raise monies for expansion."

She felt her heart flutter. Ah, a 'big one'; and pictured in her mind's eye the word *promotion* rising like a sweet welcoming sunrise.

"The SEC requires the stock be registered before they sell to the public. That's where you come in. You'll draft up the report for the SEC's approval."

*Possibly substantial pay raises...*

Tibble lifted the folder, raising it several inches above the polished glass. As her eyes struggled to make out the name pasted on the side, a streak of intense lightning flashed through one long expansive window.

"Promising companies," Tibble continued, oblivious to the storm, "still can turn out dismal failures." Deliberately, he lowered the folder. "We can't afford to carry losers on Farnsworth's books. We don't need the aggravation." His gaze fell heavily on her. Then he shoved the enigmatic folder across the glossy surface. "I need *your* opinion on this!" The folder stopped at the edge. Overhead thunder broke, rattling windows.

Sydney ignored the dryness inching up her throat and stared at the voluminous file. She knew what Tibble meant. He didn't want to be the only soul accountable if this company turned out a 'dismal' failure.

Slowly, she drew in a breath. Exhaled.

Read the label.

Reread the label.

*GS ENTERPRISES.*

The mental sound of the words rattled like an elusive pebble trapped inside the drum of a dryer. A peculiar feeling of *déjà vu* tugged inside. Hadn't she heard the name mentioned during a recent conversation? Hadn't she once recommended that same name to—?

"We need to get moving on this!" Tibble directed. "You're scheduled to meet with their people this coming Wednesday morning." He leaned his thickly set frame back into his chair, crossed his arms over a barrel chest that a well-tailored dark gray suit failed to disguise. "That'll give you slightly over two days to pull this together. If there are any questions, call their legal counsel." He drew out a business card from inside the folder. "Name's Greene...Attorney Harold Greene."

Another flash illuminated the room, contaminating everything in its eerie glow.

Somewhere from the depths of Sydney's mind, a long affable face took form. A man with thinning brown hair. Horn-rimmed frames held together strategically with wads of yellowish tape. Harold Greene, who on more than one occasion would find himself as arbiter between her and a certain CEO. The cotton dryness advanced further up her throat. She contracted inside, like the narrowing spiral of a whirlpool.

She read the name again—Harold Greene, Esquire. Was this coincidental? Red-letter warnings resonated in her mind, attaching themselves to the initials G.S. *GS Enterprises...Grant Sinclair...exceedingly handsome Grant Sinclair—too-handsome-for-his-own-good Grant Sinclair. Damn, she thought, he had changed the company's name – and to one she'd once suggested, but he'd deliberately shot down to prove he was in control.*

Tibble, unaware of her angst, ventured off on another spiel. Sydney searched his creviced face for answers to questions she dare not yet ask. She felt rising warmth; the words forming inside her throat died there. Because if this was Grant's company, every emotion connected with that man's betrayal would manifest itself on her face. Dare she take a chance and have Tibble detect her reaction when he confirmed her suspicion?

*No! She wasn't ready!* She wasn't ready for the disturbing *probability* that Sinclair was back in her life.

*You can be as nervous as hell...*

She couldn't even swallow. Somewhat unsteadily, she rose from her chair, and then braced herself against the massive desk. "I'll get on this immediately." She winced at how her voice sounded like a dozen eggshells breaking. Then she gently gathered the cumbersome folder into her arms, thankful that her shaking fingers had something to grasp.

"And you want my impressions by Wednesday?" she asked, thankful her voice at least did not quiver.

"Preferably Tuesday morning...early!" Tibble replied, cutting the time he'd previously given. "I certainly hope those furrowing brows aren't an indication you're having reservation about taking this one on?"

Sydney thought of Brian's baseball game later that afternoon. She had promised her son she'd be there this time. She could pull it off. Sleep was not an option. "Yes. I mean no. I mean...I do want this."

Tibble's regarded her with mild curiosity. "Look at it this way, Morgan; when you meet with them on their own turf, you're sure to get a free lunch."

~\*~

Moments later, before returning to her own office, Sydney ducked into the ladies' room where she soaked a wad of paper towels in cold water and applied them as a compress to the back of her neck. Furiously, she tugged more paper towels from the holder, simultaneously releasing a string of sharp expletives. Her life was finally in place, her past put behind her. She glared over at the enemy—the GS folder lying innocently on the cold marble countertop. Several options rushed through her mind. She could flush the pages down the toilet. Or better yet, put that new shredder to good use.

Sydney heaved a sigh and darted one more hateful glance at the folder.

~\*~



"We've got a priority one," Sydney informed Tamika, deliberately holding down her panic as she walked into her office. "We're handling the GS account." She looked at Tamika, as if expecting she would recognize the name, stand to attention, perhaps even salute. "We need to get a report back to Tibble tomorrow morning." Sydney released a mild expletive. "I have to be out of here by six-thirty. I won't have time to go home and change."

Cautiously, Tamika ventured closer. "Don't worry, I'll work extra tonight, and I'll rearrange my schedule and come in early tomorrow."

Sydney smiled, appreciating the effort. She dropped the folder on her desk, knocking over several decorative desk puzzles, plus a double-framed photograph whose edges were garishly decorated with an assortment of bright colored buttons. Brian had insisted she keep it on her desk. The puzzles helped her maintain a degree of sanity and, she ruefully noted, would get good use in the upcoming week.

Tamika picked up the overturned frame containing two 3x5 photos. "What a darling little boy!"

"My son," Sydney said

Tamika's left brow lifted slightly, and Sydney sensed she was probably looking at Sydney's naked left hand. "Yes, I see the resemblance, especially the blonde hair. And this nice looking man in the other photo, I gather he's your husband—"

"Yes. Unfortunately, he died in a motorcycle accident." Sydney did not bother to look up, but continued to straighten out the puzzles. "I was pregnant at the time with Brian." She thought her words sounded rehearsed, but she also knew they were usually enough to stop further questioning.

Tamika gave a sympathetic nod. "That must've been a terrible time."

"Yes, it was," Sydney replied softly, then took the frame from Tamika's grasp and shoved it behind the puzzles. She redirected her attention to the GS folder, whose dimensions, while now appearing even more intimidating on her smaller-sized desk, were still not as intimidating as Tibble's words.

*"You'll meet with them on Wednesday!"*

As she ran a manicured fingernail along one side of the folder, she felt a sudden sharp pain. *GS Enterprises...Sinclair Associates. Out of your life forever? Yeah, right, joke's on you, kid!* She touched the cover, its porous surface absorbing blood from her finger. Pulling her hand away, she noticed the paper cut. Absently, she sucked her injured finger, and with the other hand flipped open the cover. She sensed Tamika's eyes drilling into the middle of her forehead. Although well over a decade had passed, images of him eddied through her mind—each one threatening to hurtle her into a swirling vortex of time gone; back into that shadowy past where memories could rise like bones from a grave dug too shallow.

"Sydney, is something wrong?"

As if she'd touched a hot plate, she jerked her hand from the folder. But not before reading the first line again—*Grant A. Sinclair, CEO and President of GS Enterprises.*

Tamika put down her steno pad, then reached across the desk.

"No... I'm fine."

Sydney felt as if she had been pushed over the side of a raft, thrown into swirling whitewater rapids, swept up, pushed, dragged, and submerged into an undercurrent of raw visceral emotion. Unable to breathe as the foggy grayness attempted to pull her under again, she helplessly watched herself drown as her mind dredged up more images of that regrettable weekend she had shared with that man. She walked over to the one narrow window that offered that priceless parking-lot view, and pressed her forehead against the cool surface. Morning traffic was easing up. Hartford was a great place to submerge one's identity. *Or so she'd thought.*

A city of insurance companies, banks, and investment firms, a place where you lived and worked in relative anonymity until eventually you became like one of those look-alike compacts that now lined her view. *Or so she'd thought.*

She turned to Tamika. "Yes, I could use something—tea, coffee, anything." Tamika made a quick exit.

Sydney turned back to the window where his reflection emerged. How could she face him after all these years, let alone work with him on this account? Out of the corner

of one eye, she glanced at the folder. Then at her son's picture. *If the truth were known about her and this man...*

Suddenly, she could hear whispered voices; side-glances cast her way from her inquisitive colleagues. How she detested gossip.

"This should help," Tamika said.

Gratefully, Sydney took the cup of steaming coffee from her.

"Look, let's take a break, then get together on this."

Tamika, still looking a bit confused, made another exit.

Sydney settled behind her desk. The storm raged outside, and the one inside her was just beginning.

~\*~

Parents and friends waited anxiously on bleachers, tucked in lawn chairs, sprawled onto blankets spread across summer-scorched grass. Stadium lights flickered as sunset came. Suddenly, blue and red uniforms spilled out from opposing dugouts.

Sydney, carrying a pair of high heels in one hand and a box of popcorn in the other, struggled to reach the top of one bleacher. Once seated, she peered over at the scoreboard. The score was tied at the top of the sixth. All Brian had to do as the Phillies' pitcher was strike out the rival team's next three batters. The championship was in the bag.

Simple enough, she thought. Nonetheless, Sydney's fingers anxiously squeezed the cardboard box. After the game, they were headed for Bradley Airport where he would board a flight to Sarasota, Florida, for a stay with her parents in their new condo located off coastal waters. A poignant lump formed in her throat as Brian took his position on to the pitcher's mound.

"Walk's as good as a hit!" In one fluid motion, Brian pitched the first ball.

"Stee-rike one!" yelled the ump.

A synchronized groan rumbled through the opposite stand. Sydney sucked in the warm July air.

“Stee-ri-ke two!” She exhaled on the following rumble.

Brian, completing his third wind up, released the ball. *WHACK!*

In horror, she watched the ball’s trajectory carry it past the bright lights. As it made a re-entry, it hopped several times before the Phillies’ shortstop scooped it and hurled it to first.

“SAFE!” The next batter wiggled into position. Again, Brian readied for the pitch.

“Why is that southpaw wearing that Mickey Mouse mitt?” someone suddenly shouted. Sydney felt her lips contract into a thin smile.

“Don’t let the glove fool you. He’s the junkman,” a young male voice cried. “Morgan pitches the whole enchilada—fast, curve, knuckle—” Moisture stung her eyelids. Brian sometimes pushed the rules with his pitches. Although his coach did not encourage curve balls, as they were tough on young players’ arms, Brian did what was *necessary* to win. Brian needed no defense from her.

*WHACK!* Jolted by the definitive sound of ringing metal, she strained to follow the disappearing sphere into the starless sky. Brian repositioned himself directly beneath the ball. Again, she held her breath, knowing the ball was coming straight for his eyes. Most kids flinched at the sight of an approaching ball, letting it fall to one side.

Brian let it come right at him; he calmly reached upward, caught it in that ‘Mickey Mouse’ glove. Launched it to his second baseman in time to tag the incoming runner. “OWWWT!”

The next batter approached the plate, his young face scrunched into a pained expression of pure concentration. Brian, taking his cue from his catcher, raised his arm into a wind up, threw three fast pitches, each one crossing the strike zone, each one drawing a strike. On the third out, Brian’s team came up to bat. It wasn’t long before the Phillies had the bases loaded, with Brian on deck and two outs against them. If he

struck out, they would go another inning and the other team could turn the tide. He knew it. She knew it. Everyone in the ballpark knew it.

At this point Sydney couldn't tell if she'd been eating popcorn or cardboard. Brian no longer wore the glove, and his reason for wearing the smaller size was now obvious to everyone in the bleachers. "Hey, that kid's missing a right hand!" Sydney stiffened and bit her lower lip.

"How in Sam Hill is he going to hit the ball?" She tasted blood. *Let them see for themselves. Watch a boy with a formless stump for a right hand play ball.*

"Why doesn't his coach put in a pinch hitter?" That coach, she was tempted to explain, had shown Brian how to hit a ball by using a backhanded approach instead of the usual forearm swing. A swing he'd perfected. Sydney merely smiled, choked back the expletives that begged for release.

The first pitch whizzed low over the plate straight into the catcher's mitt.

"BALL ONE!"

The second pitch, slightly higher.

"Stee-rike one!"

Murmurs of doubt grew, rippled across the bleachers like storm-driven waves. Sydney looked neither to her right nor left, but kept her eyes fixed on the form crouched below the blue batting helmet.

*WHACK!*

The elusive ball floated out of the outfielder's reach, landing on the opposite side of the fence. One by one, Brian and his teammates circled to home.

"Omigod...omigod...they did it!" she cried as caps and gloves flew in all directions. She turned toward the 'voice' that had spouted off about her son's playing ability and shoved the mutilated box of popcorn at him. "Here, you need this more than me." Abruptly, she turned away from his shocked expression, and holding a shoe in each hand, made her way back down the bleacher.

"Hey, Mom, we're undefeated!" Brian shouted through the silver-wired mesh. "We're number one!" he cried over the din of screaming teammates.

Almost at eye level, Brian was fast approaching her five-foot-five height. His broadening shoulders would eventually give him a build much like his father's. She could only nod in response to his words, then blinked to clear the moisture from her eyes, all the while remembering Wednesday's forthcoming meeting at GS. She pushed aside the disquieting feeling that gnawed inside her—a feeling not unlike the rapid approach of impending doom.

~\*~

Sydney pressed down on the accelerator, cautiously eased into the traffic and prayed the aging Celica's engine would not stall as it had been doing too often lately.

"Brian, keep your seat belt fastened at all times, listen to what the flight attendants tell you. Make sure Gram calls me when you get in, and—"

"Aw, Mom, I'm not a baby." He tugged his cap down, concealing a pair of rolling eyeballs. Then he turned toward her. "You won't forget to feed Augie and the hamsters?" he asked, giving his own 'to-do' list. "And make sure you check the lock on his cage. And you better get him some more crickets. Augie likes an occasional snack. Not too many or he'll get too big for his cage. Gee, I wish I could take him."

Sydney let out a sigh, wishing the same. The iguana hadn't been her pet of choice, to say the least. "Brian, it's not that Gram wouldn't appreciate Augie visiting them, but he's better off in familiar surroundings." She could picture her mother now, standing on some chair, peering down at Augie from a safe distance.

"Gee, Mom, I wish you were coming."

"If things let up at Farnsworth, I'll try to fly down for a week. I promise."

"I hope you can at least make it for my birthday."

"I'll try," she said, hoping she could get away by then. Her workload had doubled over the past several months, with no increase in pay or hint of one...at least not until that morning. And then with Brian growing and constantly active, and the

insurance company not willing to pay for extra ‘growth’ replacements for his prosthetic device. Which reminded her...

“Brian, try to remember your prosthesis is not a baseball bat. I’ve had to replace two in six months, and the insurance pays for only one. I still don’t understand how you lost that second one.” She made decent money to get by, but having to pay out-of-pocket expenses for these replacements, had been adding more of a strain to an already over-stretched budget. And now the car was acting up...

She glanced over at Brian’s hand concealed inside the glove. Brian never left home without it. He’d often forget the device, except on Halloweens—it served as a perfect accessory for any pirate costume he could come up with. But forget that glove? Not on your life.

*Grant Sinclair.*

Suddenly, the name sprang forth from some far hidden corner of her mind. After eleven years, images of him still came too easily. His thick blonde hair and those pale gray eyes, compelling eyes that left an unforgettable image in any woman’s mind.

Someone had warned her that sheer power in an office environment was an enticing aphrodisiac. But she also remembered how much she enjoyed watching him make those hardball decisions. Decisions that at times moved mountains. All this had attracted her to him in the first place, but all this now filled her with remorse, even regret, and a poignant reminder of her own indiscre—

“Remember, Mom, make sure the hook is pushed in tight, else he’ll escape.”

“Don’t worry!” she answered brusquely.

“But you don’t like Augie. He knows it. If he gets out, you won’t even try to catch him. You won’t touch him.”

“Look, I admit I’m not too fond of Augie, but it doesn’t mean I won’t take care of him.”

“He likes mainly veggies, but you won’t forget to feed him those crickets?”

She winced inside, but forced a nod.

Seemingly satisfied with her response, Brian settled back into his seat then turned on the radio. A Karen Carpenter song – an oldie but a goodie. Sydney suddenly reached over and pushed the scan button until finally settling on a country western tune.

“Gee, Mom, with this traffic I hope I don’t miss my plane.”

“Don’t worry, I gave us plenty of time,” she replied, throwing mental threats at the car’s engine that it dare not crap out on her now.

Brian’s attention drifted to the music, hers to a night where emotions for one man had embraced more than simple business fascination. Back to a night where memories, like pieces of balsa wood floating in water, refused to sink and invariably kept resurfacing.

“Are we there yet?” Brian asked. His hair stuck out in unruly spikes from beneath his cap. He didn’t appear nervous. Her lips curved into a crooked smile. Brian looked forward to every adventure. Much like someone else, who because of this latest development at Farnsworth, would no longer be a shadowy figure in her past.

“We’re here,” she announced, dismissing all thoughts of *him* as she pulled into the short-term parking area. Moments later, they settled into stiff vinyl chairs. If she hadn’t maxed out her Visa, she would be tempted to purchase a boarding pass for herself and let Tibble go to that meeting in her place.



## CHAPTER TWO

"Help! Tamika, I can't find my desk!" Sydney cried, eyeing the stacks of paper tilted precariously on one end of it.

Tamika, appearing a bit haggard herself, crossed her arms and leaned against the doorjamb. "If you think that's bad, take a look at mine!"

"Let's not panic," Sydney responded.

"Hey, girl, I'm not the one panicking." Tamika uncrossed her arms. "Tibble's called several times for that report." Her words were no sooner expressed than the phone rang.

"That's probably him again," Tamika moaned. "I'll take it out here."

Seconds later Tamika's voice crackled through the intercom.

"Tibble?" Sydney absently asked as she switched on her computer.

"Uh...nooooo. Mr. Grant Sinclair."

Sydney felt her pulse surge, knowing the day of reckoning hath come. "Tell him to hold."

*It wouldn't hurt for him to cool his heels,* she thought ruefully as she stared at the screen. She waited. Waited a moment longer. Then deciding not to push it in case he might hang up, she took several deep breaths and slowly lifted the receiver. "Sydney Morgan speaking. How may I help you?" She mentally applauded the calm in her voice as she put him on speakerphone.

"Syd, you sound the same." His low silky male voice held an enthusiasm most regarded as infectious. Instead, it hit her like a wave of nausea.

"Good morning, Mr. Sinclair," she responded with forced reserve, then detecting a chuckle from his end, winced at the use of his surname.

"Hey, I know it's been a while, but *Mister*? That's a bit formal considering. C'mon, Syd, let's get back to first name basis," he urged. "After all, we'll be working closely getting this IPO off and running." He suddenly paused; and just when she was just about to say something: "Tell me; are you still as delightful to look at as you sound?"

"If there is something I can help you with..." she quickly said, ignoring his last remark, and nervously glancing toward the open door. Her heart was racing, and the handset threatened to slip from her sweaty palm. *You can be as nervous as...*

"If you have questions regarding the account, I'll be happy to answer them, Grant. I've gone over GS's financial data, and I must admit your company has done well. Even back in '87, when many didn't survive that infamous Black Monday."

More than half the Dow's gain from the previous five years, she vividly recalled, had been wiped out during those thirty-nine trading days.

"We've had our setbacks, but as you see, we've weathered most of them."

*Boasting, was he?* But did that surprise her? Grant was always good at fluffing his feathers.

"Yes, you have," she broke in. "Now was there something specific?" she asked, with undisguised impatience. When he did not immediately respond, she suddenly pictured him sitting behind his mammoth desk, measuring his next words to her.

"Since we're going to be all business, the reason for this call is I wanted to briefly touch base regarding tomorrow's agenda. I'd appreciate your informing whoever else may be attending the meeting from your side that I've made luncheon reservations for the attendees and —"

"And that's what you're calling about?" *Did he think she was his Gal Friday? Didn't he know her days of servitude with him were long over?*

"Do I detect annoyance?"

“Annoyance? Actually, for the past day and a half I’ve been up to my earlobes in statistical data, getting this report together, so it might be difficult to find the time to act as your personal messenger.” She swore she could actually hear the air whoosh out of him—then felt a cold horror. Never had she dared talk to a client like this. She envisioned GS’s folder sprouting wings and floating out her window—along with her job. As she massaged her aching temple, she waited for the inevitable comeback.

“Point well taken.”

Her jaw dropped.

“You’re right, Syd, I shouldn’t bother you with mundane matters. I’ll have *my* secretary work with *your* secretary on that matter.”

She straightened. “Uh, no, that’s not necessary. I’ll relay the message.” A Band-Aid approach at best, she thought. “Anything else?” she asked, unable to tolerate the silence.

“Yes.” He seemed to hesitate. “One more.”

“Which is—?”

“I wouldn’t mind catching a glimpse of what I remember to be a pair of delectable earlobes.”

She let out an exasperated gasp. Felt heat spike up both sides of her face. She jumped from behind the desk, bolted across the room, and slammed the door, but not before catching Tamika’s bulging eyes gaping back in obvious surprise. *Had the man changed at all?*

Obviously not, she thought, and immediately took him off speakerphone and picked up the receiver. “Grant, that was uncalled—”

“Sorry. Now don’t go sending me up on harassment charges. It’s just...well, it’s good to hear your voice again. It’s been a long time.”

She sensed nostalgia, even some remorse in his words. Whatever it was stirred something inside her. Some past emotion that she knew damn well she didn’t need to have resurrected.

“I don’t know about you, but it’s been a long ten years—”

"Eleven," she corrected as her eyes focused on the monitor and she absently followed the array of caterpillars that crawled across her screen.

"When I knew you were going to handle our account," he continued, "I couldn't help but think back to the good old days when you and I—"

"Good old days, Grant?" she quickly interrupted. "For whom? No, let's not go there. I'll confess I was somewhat surprised when Tibble informed me we were taking you guys on."

"Pleasantly, I hope. Since our move out of Chicago—"

"Let's leave it at surprised," she interrupted, cutting him off again. "The word *pleasantly* would not apply." She paused.

"Does this mean you're no longer doing business out of the Chicago area?" she had to ask, attempting to make sense from his last statement.

He chuckled. "We still have operations there, but we've moved our headquarters here last October. The state offered good incentives—"

"I see," she replied, feeling a certain wariness building inside. "So that means you're living here permanently," she added, unable to disguise her disappointment.

"I'm hoping you'll tell me I'm wrong, but I'm getting a strong impression Tibble's announcement hasn't been received with open arms. I'm picturing your jaw dropping to below what I remember to be a very sexy navel."

Her mind scrambled for an appropriate comeback, but his reference to any part of her anatomy rendered her ultimately speechless.

"You might want to know that I sport a poignant reminder of our last farewell," he suddenly reminded her. "A faded scar over the left brow. Occasionally it does make for a good story. To those who are brave enough to ask, I tell them it happened defending a pretty woman from a scoundrel's advances. Better that, than them knowing the exact circumstance." He chuckled, and then his voice went deliberately low. "But we both know how this scar came about. Don't worry. It'll always be *our* little secret."

Sydney drew in a quick intake of air. *Dear Lord, had she actually hit him?* She recalled throwing several items that morning, one of which had been a small sturdy Waterford crystal ashtray she'd grabbed in her haste off his dresser bureau...

"Grant, I—"

"Want to apologize? Long overdue, but apology accepted."

"No. No. I'm not apologizing," she cried. "Okay, so maybe I should apologize, considering. But you well deserved that knock on your head, and probably more. Look, this isn't the time to go into all this."

"I can't say that I blame you since companies monitor their calls nowadays. We wouldn't want to give away *all* your little secrets, now would we?" he teased cruelly.

Far-reaching tentacles of panic gripped her, urging her to hang up on him and take the consequences.

"Look, Syd, I understand why you left my place. I should've never made that call to—"

"Puhleeze, any explanation on your part is quite unnecessary, especially now. Like you said, it's been a long time." His words raised her panic another level. She didn't need to hear any of this from him. What excuse could he give? Was it going to change the past, or the consequence of that past?

*Hang up, her mind urged! Hang up now!*

"But I never understood why you felt the need to leave my company. You had a promising career with us," he again reminded. "You can't deny the fact that you'd be in a far better position here at GS and certainly wouldn't be taking directives from someone named *Tibble*."

"You certainly didn't put much effort in trying to locate me," she responded, reminding him that all he had to do was pick up a lousy phone and call her parents to find out the new address.

*But what if he had done just that? What if...* She shook her head, dismissed this latest what-if. "Look, I'm doing just fine here at Farnsworth," she hissed. "Tibble's a fair-minded man. I...I...have another call coming through," she lied, feeling boundaries

dissolving, and needing to end the conversation before she said things she would undoubtedly regret later.

Grant laughed. His laugh was low and sexy. "You can't put a price on loyalty, I'll give you that much. I have an operations meeting to get to anyway." He paused. "Syd, I do believe it's going to be a *pleasure* working with you again. I'm looking forward to tomorrow!"

A dial tone cut off her reply, ensuring *he* ended the call. Absently, she patted her lower lip with the end of the receiver.

Grant had sounded pretty much the same. She could still detect that same amount of arrogance that most gained when they achieved a certain position in life. Yet, although it could've been her imagination, she also detected a small amount of uncertainty in his voice. And that revelation in and of itself produced a slow smile on her face. Had she put *him* on guard? Made him aware that he could no longer dictate her life as he had once done?

As she settled the receiver back into its cradle, she wondered at just how different he would appear to her now. Eleven years could and often did produce a lot of changes in a man. She swung her chair half way around as if to disengage him from her mind. Inadvertently, her elbow struck the pile of GS reports, causing them to fall off her desk and spill across the gray textured carpeting. She bent to pick them up. Realized she'd done more than her share of cursing over the last twenty-four hours. She had tried curbing that nasty habit right after Brian's birth, along with the chain smoking. But certain occasions—like the present—definitely called for such words and such habits. Suddenly she was dying for a cigarette.

She peered through the window at the rain-laden clouds, envisioning herself standing out there on the plaza, in the pouring rain, struggling to light one up. She shrugged, and swung the chair back to its original position, realizing she had her own menacing clouds hovering over her.

She pushed the intercom button. "Tamika, call Tibble's secretary. Tell her when he's free I'd like to go over this stuff with him. And Tamika, thanks for a job well done with that report."

Sydney stretched her arms up and outward to loosen the tightness along her neck and shoulders. Despite the previous day and a half that had had her painfully reliving her past, she was actually feeling good about the GS assignment. As she absently thumbed through the pages of the report, her lips moved into a wry smile. There was no question in her mind. GS was an important acquisition for Farnsworth. She laced her fingers, cradled them against the back of her head, leaned back and stared upward at the ceiling tiles.

*Do not mix business with pleasure*

Not a totally impossible dictate to follow. As long as she didn't cross those certain boundaries *again*, and kept the words bolted firmly in her mind, she saw no reason why she couldn't handle the account.

~\*~

*Tuesday evening*

On the way home, Sydney stopped into *Almost New, Barely Worn*, an out-of-the-way consignment shop tucked into a local strip mall. After trying on several tasteful outfits, she felt her best choice was a soft beige two-piece suit that gave an air of sophistication, while at the same time evoking a calm, collected appearance. The linen fabric modestly hugged the gentle curves of her hips, and the V-shaped neckline flattered, but did not overly accentuate the fullness of her breasts. A budget destroyer at regular price, this was a bargain; the original tag, still attached, attested to the fact the suit had never been worn. She paid the cashier, realizing it was going to be brown-bag lunches for a while.

That evening, while she was carefully hanging the suit inside her closet, the doorbell rang. Through the viewer, she spotted a young man holding a long slender box in one hand, some form of ID in the other. Cautiously, she opened the door.

"Ms. Morgan?"

"Yes."

"These are for you."

Sydney recognized the embossed gold letters of a well-known local florist. Her curiosity piqued as her mind struggled for the source. She took the box from him, and then slowly closed the door. Although she did date occasionally, she could not offhandedly come up with the name of anyone who would send her flowers. She placed the box on the coffee table, stared at it for a moment, and then lifted the lid.

"Mmm, very nice," she commented aloud at the array of twelve long-stemmed red roses cuddled together. Recounting them, she noticed there were actually eleven red roses. Nestled in the center lay a delicate white silk rose.

Brian, she guessed, might've been prompted to do this, especially if his grandparents supplemented the cost. She smiled at the notion, and then picked up the miniature antique-white envelope attached to one stem. She drew out the tiny card and read the short note. As she reread the name, she felt her smile turn upside down. A feeling rose, not unlike what one might experience after turning over a rock and then discovering a nest of baby snakes curled beneath. At first glance, those creatures appeared utterly defenseless, but could ultimately prove dangerous.

*"Syd, let's start off on the right foot. Grant."*

A poignant fragrance of fragile petals permeated the room, forcing her to abandon her first impulse—to dump the pricey bouquet into the outside garbage. Instead, she searched her cabinets for a vase tall enough to accommodate them. Moments later, while carefully arranging the flowers into a milk glass container, she felt a strange sense of excitement stir inside her as forgotten images floated up from somewhere deep in her memory.



*Earthy male scent blending with a tangy after-shave. Warm sensitive hands. Stroking fingertips. Urgent lips, moist against the back of her neck, down along her arms, and elsewhere, seeking, teasing. Coursing heat – penetrating...*

She struggled to dispel the thickening lump inside her throat, which had gone bone dry. Absently, she stroked a white silky petal. It seemed to respond to her touch. Opening up as she had once opened up to him. She released the petal and stepped away from the vase. *Whoa! We're talking years here*, she thought. *How are you able to remember all of this with that one man?*

In her mind the question persisted. The answer came easily enough. Bearing his son, and raising his son, had kept everything ever associated with that man vitally alive. With trembling fingers, she picked up the vase and placed it on the sofa table.

Barriers broken – there was nothing now to prevent her mind from drifting back to those two brief nights they'd shared, nor prevent her from reliving them, if only inside her imagination. Relive that pure raw elemental passion they'd experienced. Two nights and one day of forgetting anyone else existed. If for one more time, to experience, to share, to enjoy those unforgettable moments of forbidden pleasures – if for one more time. The echoing words produced a wistful smile. She stared at the white rose. Yes indeed.

Grant Sinclair was back.

~\*~

*Wednesday morning*

G'morning Sydney," Tamika greeted. "Hey girl, you look absolutely stunning! New outfit?" Tamika had lost most of her first-day-on-the-job shyness.

Sydney had no sooner settled herself behind her desk than the intercom buzzed impatiently.

"Who else but Tibble," Tamika half whispered. "He must've called on that thing a half dozen times. I bet besides the calls I took, he's probably dropped a dozen or so into your voice mail."

Albert Tibble's voice boomed through the gray box. "Morgan! Let's talk!"

Sydney gave an exasperated look. "Yes sir." She also gave the phone a haughty salute. This was not how she had wanted to start the morning, especially after having to leave her car in the auto body shop again, and then having to take a cab into work.

With extended strides, she entered Tibble's office a moment later. "The report looks good!" he greeted. "I'm sure it'll convince Sinclair we're the firm to do the work."

She regarded him with both uncertainty and curiosity. "I thought you wanted to go over the report."

Tibble gave a sheepish smile. "Hey, I've been in this game long enough to know I occasionally need a little hand holding. This is one of the largest accounts this firm has had a chance to grab in a while. We botch this, our heads are on the block."

"I'm not sure if I should shake your hand or shake in my Naturalizers," Sydney said. She then noticed the new navy blue suit that worked well to slenderize his unctuous frame.

"I've decided to come along," he said; his eyes held an unmistakable look of challenge. "The company driver is picking us up in the limo out front."

What could she say? *No? This is my baby. Not yours.* She was sorely tempted. Because she had wanted to handle this account solely on her own. Because she was ready. And Tibble coming along like this was undermining her self-confidence, doubting her ability, and she knew that in all probability this was sending out damaging signals to others that her boss might be questioning her ability to adequately perform her job. Suddenly, the word *promotion* faded from her mind.

"Fine," she found herself answering, and then mentally kicked herself in her own damn butt a hundred times over. "I hope you don't mind but I've asked Tamika to accompany us. She'll be a great help, I'm sure."

Absently, he nodded as he closed his briefcase. "Let's get going. We don't want to be late. I hear Sinclair is a stickler for promptness."

As the three rode down in the elevator, an unsettling feeling churned in Sydney's stomach. In a few hours, she would be in the same room with Grant. Was she prepared? Not in terms of the report or what they would present, but mentally, emotionally? There would be no escape. Nowhere to run. But she had done her running years ago.

Obviously, she hadn't run far enough.

~\*~

As the Connecticut landscape whizzed by, Sydney's mind continued its what-if mode. *What if* she hadn't heard him talking on the phone that morning to Samantha Kyles, who she had later discovered was his fiancée? *What if* she hadn't let her pride and anger drive her away? *What if* she had stayed and had confronted him that morning? How much more different would the scenario of her life have played out? Sydney's heart raced faster as the limo slowed and turned off the Interstate. They drove a short distance before turning up a long winding drive that eventually led to an imposing white stucco three-story complex. Clumps of maple, birch, and oak trees dotted the pristine landscape, accompanied by a medium-sized pond and park benches.

"What a lovely setting!" Tamika remarked. "But I wonder why those people are carrying signs?"

Sydney stretched her neck to get a better view. A group of men, women, and even a few children had congregated along one side of a sweeping driveway. Most carried irregularly shaped hand-painted signs with a variety of sayings.

"Go back to Chicago where you belong!" some of them chanted. "Don't want your kind here!" "Clean up your act!"

Obviously not employees, she decided, as the limo inched its way past their angry faces. Some whose eyes were filled with obvious disgust and animosity managed to get close enough to the car to leer in and shout their threats.

Fearfully, Tamika huddled against Sydney who in turned clutched her hands. Tibble remained quiet, composed, maintaining a straightforward focus that gave Sydney a vague feeling he might know more about what was happening than he was willing to let on. Yet, she couldn't remember coming across anything in GS's present or historical history that would prompt this protest.

The limo coasted around the semi-circular drive, stopping at the entrance. When the crowd kept its distance, she saw why. At the curb stood a tall slender redheaded woman flanked by several large and burly security guards. They exited the limo. The same woman walked over and graciously greeted each of them.

"I'm Alexis Smith, Mr. Sinclair's *personal* assistant." Staying with protocol, Sydney waited for Tibble to speak first. It gave her an opportunity to size up this Alexis Smith. The woman's auburn hair was pulled back into a smart chignon that accentuated the woman's delicate high cheekbones.

"Please follow me," Alexis instructed in cool detachment. One guard closely followed behind them.

Soon after entering the building, Tamika let out a gasp. "Oh my, look at that staircase." Her remark directed their attention to a spiraling staircase that floated up to a sun-filled skylight. They then walked through warming rays of sun toward several elevators, and entered one on the far left. As the polished brass doors swished shut, an awkward hush followed. The sudden intimacy kept all eyes focused onto the inner-mirrored doors.

Alexis spoke first. "Executive offices are located on the top floor."

The doors opened. Like new recruits at boot camp, each obediently fell into step behind Alexis. The security guard remained inside the elevator.

"Restrooms and lounges are located to your left, at the far end of the corridor," Alexis explained. "Just around the corner is the boardroom. Grant...Mr. Sinclair will join you shortly."

Alexis's lavender eyes, Sydney noticed, lit up as the name of her boss slipped from her artfully done lips.

"Thank you, Alexis," Tibble replied. "I think we will head straight for the boardroom and set ourselves up."

Tibble, Sydney knew, wasn't one to waste time. In fact, she was itching to get the whole thing over and done with herself. Since leaving Farnsworth, she'd had this knot twisting inside her stomach.

A soft beige carpeting, subdued track lighting; a few well-placed ficus trees lined the length of the corridor to the boardroom. Once inside, they were greeted by impressive walls of dark oak paneling, an ultra-long, highly polished table, and at the far end a podium, behind which hung a stark white video screen.

"This will certainly meet our needs," Tibble commented. He turned to Tamika. "Please take down any comments made by the group when we present our slides. It'll help keep track of their reactions."

"I think," Sydney interrupted, "we should concern ourselves with *Sinclair's* reaction—"

"I'm quite flattered by that statement, but I assure you my people's opinions are greatly valued by me as much, if not more so, than my own."

She did not need to turn around to know to whom the crisp voice of authority belonged. *You can be as nervous as hell...*

She inhaled, slowly, as she and her co-workers simultaneously turned. Grant was standing a few feet away. He appeared as tall as she remembered. As well built, and, unfortunately, as handsome. An army of *Brooks Brother's* suits marched directly behind and immediately took their assigned seats.

If there were aging signs, they were not yet evident. Five years older than she, at forty-three, he was a man who had definitely entered his prime. *He's a client. You know how to handle clients. The word is professional indifference.* She sighed, hoping to heed that inner voice. *You can be as nervous as hell...*

Grant drew closer. This time she detected a few faint lines around his eyes and mouth. To her dismay, these only enhanced his Viking good looks, and she was forced to admit if only to herself that Grant Sinclair appeared *sexier* than she remembered. The

impeccable custom-made charcoal gray Armani suit hugged his body, accentuating the familiar broad shoulders and tapered waist. Was there any flab beneath that exterior? She could only guess what lay there was rock solid flesh. His sandy blond hair, worn longer than most executives dared, gave a boyish appearance that only added to his appeal.

*Appeal? Okay, so he still appealed to her.*

"I'm glad to see you again," Tibble immediately greeted, extending his hand and grasping Grant's in a firm solid handshake.

Grant took the older man's large paw into his own, smiled, and releasing it, turned to Sydney. Crinkled lines across his forehead suggested he was studying her far too closely to suit her.

Grant flashed an even white smile. "It's been a long time, Syd."

Sydney's heart pounded. How many times had she mentally recreated this reunion inside her mind? How many times had she mentally rehearsed the words she would use—words she would say to him, words that now deserted her, becoming lost somewhere in the dark shadows of her past.

"I'm glad we had a chance to talk the other day," Grant remarked, extending her his hand. His pale gray eyes lingered on her much longer than was socially acceptable under such impersonal conditions.

*You can be as nervous as hell...*

Ignoring the little voice inside her, she placed her hand firmly into his, determined not to give a wishy-washy handshake. His palm felt warm and generous.

Her eyes lingered—longer than necessary—on the well-defined chin. A slight tremble ran through her fingers as they kinesthetically replayed the feel of his thick blonde hair slipping through them. His fingers remained intertwined with hers, as if purposely to delay their removal.

"Thanks for the lovely roses," she said, peripherally sensing Tibble's surprised reaction.

"You're welcome. I... I couldn't remember what your favorite colors were," he said almost apologetically, as if somehow he should have known that very fact. His eyes passed over her in a light caress. When she found the courage to draw her hand from his, he directed his attention to Tibble. "Shall we get started?"

"Uh...why...yes," Tibble stammered, his face reddening as if he'd been caught in some naughty voyeuristic act. The room filled quickly. Sydney noticed the number of women was at a higher than normal ratio, reminding her that most board meetings she'd attended recently resembled an exclusive men's club.

Once everyone was seated, she found herself sitting on Grant's right-hand side. This brought a strong sense of *déjà vu*, and reminded her that this well-sought position was one she had occupied during those *earlier* years.

While they waited for Tamika to pass out Farnsworth material, the musk scent of Grant's aftershave wafted by, suddenly producing a host of once forgotten images. She suddenly thought of satin pillows. She struggled to concentrate on the business at hand. Instead, like ducks in a shooting gallery, the images came, one after the other.

*Disheveled sheets...*

She leafed through the pages of the report that Tamika was handing her, but saw only blurred letters and figures.

*Tangled, naked bodies...*

For a moment, she shut her eyes.

*Murmured promises of delights...*

*A lacy white negligee draped over the end of his bed. One he'd purchased for her that bright Saturday afternoon. One she'd deliberately left behind.*

*Oh Lordy*, she moaned inwardly. She had forgotten about that negligee. Her eyelids quickly flew open to disengage that last image. She forced herself to focus on the wall ahead, all the while avoiding direct eye contact with anyone in the room lest they suspect the thoughts behind her stare.

Oh yes, their passion had taken but a brief moment of time in the grand scheme of things. Yet, sitting near him now, she knew that brief moment would remain forever inside her.

*Not the place to be thinking of such things. Look around you, for heaven sakes! Surrounded by a room filled with levelheaded executives, of which as one of Farnsworth account executives, you are one!*

She squared herself to the white screen, away from the disturbing presence seated beside her, and took in several calming breaths. But when the sleeve of his suit accidentally brushed her arm, she nearly jumped.

"It's been too long, Syd," he whispered. His warm breath fanned the back of her neck. "I'm glad you're back."

Her back stiffened. Too long, he said. For what, since their last business meeting, or since that first and last time they had made love? Deep, deep inside, she felt as if she were melting.

The meeting began.



## Chapter Three

“As you are aware,” Grant began, “over the past fifteen years GS Enterprises has been privately owned. That’s changing as our strategies change.” Grant paused, and then glanced toward Sydney who sat somber, as if purposely displaying little reaction. He returned his focus to the group. “We’re going public and plan to sell enough shares to prospective investors to gain adequate capital for future business ventures. With that in mind, I’ll turn the floor over to —”

Albert Tibble started to stand.

“Sydney Morgan, who’ll explain Farnsworth’s role in the process.”

Tibble, realizing whom Grant had called, slowly sank back.

Sydney stood, a hint of surprise on her face. Cautiously she approached the podium.

*What was Grant trying to do? Set her up? Create friction between her and Tibble? Get her fired?*

*You can be as nervous as hell...*

~\*~

Grant knew Sydney was where she belonged, which meant not sitting on any sideline. Not much disturbed his inner calm, at least not until this moment—when this blonde woman, who was now addressing his people with complex financial data, had walked back into his life earlier.

*You can be as nervous as hell, but don't dare show it!*

These were words he'd lived by, but for the moment had yet to feel their effect. He felt like an awkward schoolboy bent on impressing the pretty teacher; he wanted to do just that. Impress Sydney Morgan. Make her realize he wanted her back, not just there on that podium, but in his life. There'd been a time when he could've easily read that beautiful face. But the blank stare she was directing at him now made that virtually impossible. He'd have to venture a guess that on some emotional level she was still running away, just as she'd run from his place on that cold dismal November morning. He would have thought by now time would have dulled the hurt he was feeling. Yet could he blame her? He'd been a stupid fool. He certainly hadn't done a particularly admirable job at making things right afterward. He'd simply let her go—like he'd done with a lot of other stuff in his life, preferring to deal with them later, or not at all.

Sure she'd run off. But hadn't he been doing the same thing since? Running, mostly from himself and his choices. Nonetheless, it was good to have her behind that podium. Watching her now gave him a sense of relief. Made him feel less adrift. Yes, she was back—whatever the reason.

~\*~

The meeting lasted another hour before adjourning, at which time Alexis joined them with a serving cart that held hot and cold beverages and an assortment of fancy pastries. Sydney sipped the gourmet coffee out of a porcelain china cup, which in and of itself demonstrated GS's commitment to high standards. She nibbled on a freshly baked blueberry muffin.

Purposely, she stood to one side while Tibble engaged himself in lengthy discourse on the options market with Grant. Grant, she couldn't help notice, punctuated his conversation with familiar gestures. It dawned on her that she was looking at an older version of Brian.

Suddenly, she wanted to flee the room. Instead, she continued to sip her coffee, but slipped the unfinished muffin back on to the cart. She had to hang on to that one consolation that no one was going to make the connection between Grant and her son, especially with Brian hundreds of miles away.

She drained her cup, and then geared for a hasty exit. She'd done her job. The rest could easily be done via phone, fax, voice, or e-mail. She did not have to be in this man's company any longer than was necessary. Hurriedly, she shoved papers back into her briefcase.

"Rushing off, are we?" The low timbre voice was like an electric current passing through her spinal cord. Papers spilled from her grasp.

"You haven't forgotten about the luncheon?" Grant asked, bending to retrieve the documents. "You're accompanying me, of course."

Although sounding like a request, Sydney knew it leaned more toward a directive. When she looked up at him, the weight of his gaze moved across her mouth. Purposely, she lowered her head back to the scattered pages to give herself time to regroup.

*You ought to outright tell him no!* her mind urged.

"I should stay with Albert and Tamika," she mumbled, knowing it was a stupid excuse.

"They've already left." A slow smile curved his lips as she furtively glanced around the now practically empty room. How could they take off, abandoning her like that?

"I took the liberty and told them to go on ahead," he said, answering her silent question.

She clutched the crumpled sheets of papers, and then crammed them further into her briefcase.

"Besides, I did want to talk to you; alone." His hand cupped the elbow of one arm as he assisted her to a standing position.

"It appears I have no choice."

His grin turned into a full-fledged smile. A rather wicked smile, telling her she was right on the money. Moments later, as they entered GS's lobby, Alexis approached them. "Grant, security suggests you go out the back, through the service entrance next to the loading dock." The woman ignored Sydney's concerned look.

Grant nodded, making no comment. But Sydney wanted to comment about the commotion going on outside GS's offices. She wanted to ask him about the protestors. He would eventually have to tell her, since that information would have to be disclosed on the proposed prospectus to the SEC. As they backtracked through the lobby area, she felt Alexis's stare penetrate the back of her skull.

~\*~

Once seated inside the white Mercedes, Sydney needed distraction. She needed to think about other things besides the man sitting behind the wheel. Except the only distraction afforded her at the moment was Grant Sinclair. With feigned interest, she focused her attention out her side window.

"Harold called from Chicago and conveys his apology for not attending this morning's session." Sydney stiffened, and simply nodded her head.

"Is it my imagination, or do you seem put out about something?"

She finally turned toward him. "I feel like I'm going to jump right out of my skin. Look at us! So polite, as if what happened between us never occurred. Don't tell me you aren't remembering that awful morning."

"Awful morning?" he echoed. "Who could forget, but hell, I didn't think you wanted to go there. After this much time, I would've thought you had put it all behind you." His grip noticeably tightened on the wheel. "But hey, I'm all ears!"

Sydney could only glare at him. "What good would that do? I wished that whole weekend had never happened!" A sudden burst of guilt shot through her as she remembered Brian.

"It might help," he replied, his restrained anger apparent. "If it'll make you feel better, if it'll clear the air inside here. Because frankly it's getting so thick, I can cut it with a knife."

She crossed her arms. "Rehashing won't change anything."

He snorted.

"Look, Grant, through some twist of fate," she continued, "we've been thrown back together." She uncrossed her arms, looked out the side window. "Besides it's too nice a day," she said instead, knowing this feeble reason was her own cowardly way to slide out of an unpleasant situation. She'd never been good with confrontations, especially in such close quarters. She suddenly pictured him stopping the car and dropping her off on some deserted side road.

For the next several miles, the air did grow thicker, and in their tense silence, Sydney prayed the restaurant would soon appear.

"Syd, I'd like to see us get back on friendlier terms." The words were sudden, coming from nowhere. Sydney turned to face him and found herself becoming swallowed up by soft gray eyes—the same soft grays that had gotten her into a mess of trouble once before. And it wasn't solely his eyes that were drawing her to him now, but everything else about him. The fine chiseled face. The warm sensitive mouth. A poignant pain of remembering such intimate details stabbed at her. Letting this man make love to her had passed a lifelong sentence of remembering. And here they were, back together, but virtual strangers. Strangers who had once been so aware of each other's wants...and needs. A bittersweet irony; he was now looking to her for simple friendship. She blinked back the moisture that rimmed her eyes. As Brian might say, *'Don't get soupy on me now, Mom'*.

She inhaled deeply. Pushed down whatever emotions were threatening to surface. Okay, so he wanted friendship. Good at pretending, she could give him that.

"Thanks for the roses. What were they? A peace offering?"

Grant gave a low chuckle. "You might say they were. You sounded so annoyed the other day on the phone. I'm so accustomed to giving orders, I forget others might not be as accustomed to taking them."

A slight uneasiness shared her laughter. "Or willing?"

"Ahhh, the Syd I once knew would have responded that very same way. I think we're making progress."

A short silence followed.

"GS's success has been remarkable," she said, breaking the silence. "This IPO should put you guys right back on the map. Although my advice would be to not go ahead until after the summer months when initial public offerings tend to chill off. And considering what's going on outside your office, it might not be a bad idea to wait to file with the SEC."

"You've noticed."

"How could I not? What's happening out there anyway?"

"The neighborhood's up in arms about polluted wells. PCB's."

"PCB's?"

"Polychlorinated biphenyls."

"Oh."

"They say the contaminants are coming from our land because it started soon after we moved into the building. You might say we've been designated as the fall guy?" He heaved a sigh. "This move from Chicago has created some nasty problems. Problems we hadn't anticipated when we purchased the property. Someone, who is no longer employed with us, hadn't thoroughly done his homework. The EPA says we may have to remove hundreds of truckloads of soil and replace it with new soil, which to complete may go into the millions and I'm not talking just dirt."

The tiredness in his voice piqued both her curiosity and concern. The five years she had worked for him, the company had known only steady growth with few major upsets. Whatever obstacles arose then, Grant had easily handled.

"But the reason I'm still in business is through self-preservation, milady. Like the gallant knights who fight for their queen, I'm fighting for mine."

Sensing his need to steer away from the protest issue, at least for the time being, she decided to go along. "As long as you don't over extend yourself, you might get a recommendation for knighthood."

"That's what I always liked about you, Syd." He turned the steering wheel and headed the car up a pebbled drive toward a long rambling white clapboard building. "You were never one to pull punches. You'd keep my head out of the clouds, my feet planted on solid ground."

She said nothing. Grant was right. She'd once had that influence that most who climbed corporate ladders killed for. A sudden bout of nostalgia threatened to engulf her. She did little of that now.

Moments later, they were walking toward the restaurant, which was well known in the area for its food and pricey menu. But as Sydney walked alongside Grant, she suddenly stumbled over a loose stone that had slipped beneath her left heel.

Grant managed to catch her by her waist, preventing her from falling. With her body firmly wedged against his, both of her hands splayed across the solid area of his chest, a feeling passing through her was not unlike an approaching electrical storm.

She could not deny the solid feel of him felt good, almost too good. She cautioned a look upward to tell him that she was okay. But no words came, and she became aware that his mouth hovered a fraction of an inch above hers. She felt her lips parting in response. Realizing what might happen if she lingered in that position a fraction too long, she pushed against him.

"These driveways are wicked on heels. But I'm fine, Grant. You can let go. I'll manage," she said, her voice breathless as she struggled to untangle herself.

"I know. But I let go of you once, and I've regretted it ever since."

His words stirred a host of emotions she didn't want to ever feel again, particularly toward him. It wasn't just physical. The emotional end she knew, if she ever let it go that far again, would be all too impossible to disengage herself from. Also,

parts of her were content to stay, and enjoy the comfort of his embrace. His touch was creating waves of delicious sensations—letting her know that keeping this ‘client’ at bay might prove more difficult than she had originally thought.

Once inside the restaurant, Sydney deliberately put more than the required amount of space between them.

“Tamika, please inform the others to get themselves settled,” Grant told her secretary. “We’ll join them shortly. If Syd doesn’t mind, I’d like to buy her a drink.”

Like a child waking up on Christmas morning, Tamika’s eyes grew wide with curiosity. Slowly, the corners of the woman’s red lips curved into a perceptive smile. Her dark eyes searched both Grant and Sydney’s faces, as if their expressions would clue her to what had actually transpired en route from the GS offices.

“Certainly, Mr. Sinclair,” Tamika responded with far more enthusiasm than Sydney would have liked to hear. “Why, you two just go on ahead and have that drink. Some of your people haven’t arrived yet.”

The mute smile of appeal Sydney gave Tamika was to no avail. Apparently, her secretary saw no impropriety with her boss having a ‘little’ drink with GS’s CEO. In the back of Sydney’s mind, the idea of enjoying a drink with a client was one thing. Enjoying a drink with Grant Sinclair, dangerously another. But moments later, once seated at a round wicker glass-top table located in a secluded section of the restaurant, Sydney immediately gave the waiter her order—sparkling mineral water.

Grant’s only reaction was a raised brow. As soon as their orders were poured and placed before them, Grant lifted his glass of imported beer.

“To you, Sydney Morgan.” His wry smile produced a hesitant one from her. “Your hair style and color are different and your body is slimmer. But oh those eyes, those jungle-green eyes—clear, actually transparent. Windows to the soul.” One side of his mouth jerked with cruel amusement.

An uncomfortable feeling rose inside her, and made her wonder if he’d been playing her along like a wound-up toy. She pressed her fingertips against her glass, then brought the rim to her lips and took several slow sips.



"Didn't you wear glasses at one time?" he asked. "They were dark framed –"

"Contacts lenses," she replied curtly.

His eyes narrowed. She glared back.

"Okay," he began, "you mentioned something earlier about wanting to clean the air –"

"I think that was your suggestion."

"Maybe. Then let's talk about that night, or should I say that morning. I know it's been over ten years, but I somehow remember that weekend going quite well between us."

She shot him a dark look.

He stroked the left side of his face, and then placed his hand down on the table where it curled into a balled fist.

A sudden inner voice besieged her. *Why did you wait this long to confront him? Why didn't you say something right after that phone call? No, you had to go slinking off with your tail between your legs, you and your damn pride.*

She clicked her nails against the side of her glass. "Okay, let's try this. I was your sounding board when it came to P&L statements and bottom lines. How unfortunate that I should go one step beyond the boundary of a business confidante...to one where I would share your bed."

"Look, what happened that night between us maybe shouldn't have happened," he started to respond, instead took a sip of his beer, rubbed the cold glass against his face. "I've never regretted sharing my bed with you."

*Why should you? You weren't the one who ended up pregnant.*

She winced as the thought darted through. She never regretted her decision to have Brian.

"Are you and Samantha still married?" she asked suddenly, directing a glance toward the naked ring finger. "It's hard to tell nowadays."

If he was single, Grant's availability might present a problem. The idea played an array of scenarios. "Sam and I stayed together for five years. We tried everything. Counselors, encounter weekends, a sex therapist," he confessed with complete candor.

She suppressed the urge to laugh. Remembering that passion-filled weekend, she couldn't imagine Grant Sinclair requiring the counseling services of any therapist, sex or otherwise.

"Finally, we threw in the towel. She's married now, happily. I'm glad for her. I know I caused her pain." He took another sip of his beer. "Anyway, she got the *big* house with all the trimmings. I have my company." He smiled the kind of smile that she sensed hid private battle scars.

"You did leave us in pretty bad shape when you left," he reminded her. "Your co-workers were forced to take on the extra load."

In her mind's eye, she saw the top of another can of worms slowly pried open. She shifted uncomfortably, forgetting how good he was at turning tables. She leaned toward him so others would not hear, and whispered in a voice that would make his beer go flat.

"Under the circumstances, if I had stayed I probably would've hurt the company. Purposely given you bad advice. Had you investing in losers. Made sure the bottom line fell not only below the chart, but never got back on." She straightened. "Besides, after reading GS's recent P&L statement, I don't see where my leaving has hurt your company in whatever size, shape or form." She shot him a smug smile.

He let out an exasperated sigh. "You're right. We managed quite well even after your desertion—"

"Desertion!" Feeling her anger rise, she rose from the chair. Then, sensing more than seeing eyes turning her way, and not wanting to bring any more attention to herself, she sank back down. "You *would* see it like that." Her bitter laughter followed. "Hey, so maybe it was a form of desertion." *Let him think what he wanted. It was all water under the bridge.*

"It's good we talk about this stuff," he said. "Let go of some of the issues." He finished his beer. "Let's start fresh. From what I see there's been no long-term repercussion. You've managed to go on and make a good life for yourself. My company is doing well. So why not let bygones be bygones?"

She felt herself suddenly turning rigid. Then sweeping nausea, rising and settling somewhere inside her stomach. Slowly, almost methodically, she twirled her now empty glass between her fingers, rearranging it at times on her napkin, giving his words time enough to digest.

*No long-term repercussions.*

When some of the people from his office stopped by their table, she nodded when he made introductions. Then realizing the conversation drifted to unfamiliar subjects, she allowed her mind to wander and regress and reflect on his previous words.

*No one was really hurt. Let bygones be bygones.*

The words sounded strangely reassuring. Yes, could she actually go on with her life as if that part had never occurred? With Grant, never knowing any of the repercussions? At that precise moment, the thought of telling him about Brian spun erratically through her mind like a teetering top, tempting her to relieve herself of all past repercussions. Except Grant need never know about him. What good would it do now by telling him?

Yet, what-if scenarios stubbornly remained. Sure, go ahead, tell him and maybe enjoy the look of dismay she suspected would cross his face. His pain when he realized the implication of her words. See him tossed into an emotional sea, which in some way would make up for that reckless, impulsive weekend—a weekend where he obviously held no regard for consequence, or repercussions. A terrible dryness coated the inside of her throat when she realized the true purpose of her thoughts—sweet revenge.

Silently, she cursed her choice of drink, wishing she had ordered something stronger. How easy it would be to push the pain of guilt over to him, like Tibble had done unknowingly when he had shoved the GS's folder across his desk that morning,

unwittingly dredging up a soiled past. But this temptation to tell Grant was also evoking an unnamed fear—plus the after effects of hearing the truth, and further repercussions. When the GS group moved away from their table, she stared over at him. “You’re right about letting it go. Starting fresh.”

Grant raked his fingers through his hair. “Does that mean we can put this stuff behind us?”

She faked a smile. “It’s the only way if we’re to have a successful IPO.” She stood. Looked down at him. “And that thing about desertion? Whether you believe it or not, I had a difficult time dealing with the fact I had left your people high and dry. I even thought of coming back. But you know how pride is? I think we should join the others,” she suggested. “It’s part of my job. I wouldn’t want to be called on the carpet again!”

Grant gave her a measured look, his eyes turbulent as stormy seas, his mouth grimly set. “Why am I feeling you’re holding something back?”

Not wanting to say anything more lest she disclose the entire contents of her Pandora’s box, she turned and walked away. Before she could put any distance between them, he was grabbing her arm and turning her to face him.

“I know Farnsworth’s one of the better firms around to handle my account. And since I was told you’re one of their best account execs, I’m smart enough to go along with that.” His grasp tightened. “For the next several months I expect from you total cooperation, total loyalty, and total accountability. I expect you to be ready and able to answer any question I or any of my people may have, and I expect total accessibility for any problems that arise.”

His manacle hold tightened further. Pain or no pain, she refused to cry out and simply stared at him with rebellious unflinching eyes.

“And I don’t want to find out that one day you’ve decided to call it quits because the going got a little rough.” His chin thrust forward, he smiled a smile that told her *he* was in control.

“Grant Sinclair, I don’t take kindly to threats,” she said, her voice straddling both fear and rage. “Might I remind you, since my firm is under contract with your company, I have no intention of rescinding our agreement.”

Managing to free herself, Sydney turned and before he could make any comeback, she headed straight for the dining room where she took her place next to Tibble. Grant chose to sit at the opposite end of the table, well out of ear reach. Her mind shot mental arrows his way.

*What would you have done if you had known about my delicate condition? How would you have explained me to your fiancée? And would you have actually called off those wedding plans? Because, Grant Sinclair, be thankful I spared you the humiliation. And now I hope to spare my son a similar humiliation of ever finding out about you and having you reject him as you rejected me.*

When the luncheon concluded, Sydney again planned to make a swift exit. Feeling like a piece of Swiss cheese, sandwiched protectively between Tibble and Tamika, full of vulnerable holes, she was about to pass through the restaurant’s outer doors when Grant’s familiar voice called out her name. In unison, the three turned.

Grant was walking toward them, a lopsided grin plastered across his face. “There are a few more details we should go over.”

“No problem,” Tibble said, stepping forward; but he withdrew when he saw that Grant’s eyes were focused on Sydney.

“Don’t worry, Al, I’ll make sure your invaluable assistant gets home safely.”

Tibble, showing obvious confusion, could only nod. Moments passed and again Sydney found herself helplessly staring after her co-workers as Farnsworth’s limousine coasted down the pebbled drive. She turned to Grant.

“Why did you do that? We’ve discussed everything that needed discussing,” she cried, and having no choice, walked alongside him to his car, taking extra precaution over the uneven terrain.

“There’s always something needing attending. I’ll think of one on the way back.”

"Whatever we missed today could be addressed when Harold gets back from his trip," she told him, struggling to keep up the pace.

Grant stopped, smiled, and absently brushed a strand of hair from her face. "See, you are one step ahead of me already."

She did not return the smile.

"Look, we'll drive back to my office. From there we'll be taking a helicopter to the airport."

"It seems like you've covered everything," she muttered, as she watched her company's limo fade from view. She felt defenseless, as defenseless as an insect helplessly trapped in a spider's tangled web. "You won this round," she hissed, and climbed into the car, resigning herself to the fact that she would tolerate the man's company a while longer.

Some time later, when the Mercedes pulled into a GS parking space, a few of the protestors still remained. As if an invisible lid had been put in place, no one at the luncheon had mentioned anything about these people. She didn't feel comfortable with all the hush-hush. But not wanting to overturn any apple carts just yet, she figured she'd go along with the status quo. Nevertheless she knew, based on what she would include in the report to the SEC, this situation would definitely not look good to any investor considering adding GS Enterprises to their investment portfolio.

As they approached the GS building, she spotted an ominous-looking machine perched precariously on its rooftop. The contraption reminded her of a silvery hornet, unpredictable and downright scary. And knowing they were going up in that thing, she could actually feel the blood drain from her head.

"Nervous?" Grant asked. "I find that difficult to believe, since you were always the one willing to accept new challenges."

Sydney sighed deeply. Grant was right, but since Brian's birth, she'd become somewhat cautious about taking up certain challenges.

He bestowed a smile that held its own challenge. "I do business whenever, wherever, however. I don't like down time."

Unable to dispute his reasoning, she followed him into the elevator, which took them straight up to the helipad where Alexis was waiting with several bulging attaché cases.

"Hi, Allie. Syd is flying to the airport with me."

An unmistakable look of surprise coupled with defiance crossed Alexis's face. "The company's plane is ready to go," she mumbled. "Harold called and said the deposition went well. He'll be coming in as you're leaving. The limo driver's already there to pick them up." She paused, regarded Sydney as if suddenly remembering she was there. "You'll be riding back with them then, unless you prefer coming back on the helicopter. The reason for sending the limo is none of us can convince Harold to ride inside the chopper."

"Uh, no; the limo is fine," Sydney answered quickly enough, disinclined to tell this woman about her own fear of small flying crafts.

"Let's get going," Grant interrupted.

Sydney felt the tips of her fingers go numb. Cotton dryness coated the inside of her throat. She glanced over at Alexis who, seeming to detect her apprehension, reciprocated with a wide spiteful smile, demonstrating a perverted enjoyment over her predicament.

~\*~

Grant climbed into the back seat instead of sitting up front with the pilot. Within the cramped confines, touching, innocent or not, was going to be unavoidable. The scent of his aftershave produced a pure physical awareness, and Sydney suddenly knew that staying in this man's company was a definite mistake.

As the craft lifted off the helipad, sensing her anxiety, Grant's warm strong fingers deliberately curled around her right hand. She did not pull away, admitting, if only to herself, she needed his touch, at least for reassurance. When she turned to him to say something, his other hand stroked her cheek.

"Don't worry," he yelled, "you're going to enjoy this."

She looked at him. Then wondered. Did he mean the ride? Or this coerced intimacy? These questions echoed in her mind and matched the rhythm of the rotating blades, which in turn accelerated the beating of her heart. Soon she recognized familiar highway patterns and landmarks. When Hartford's skyline came into view, she knew they would soon be arriving at their destination. Only days before she and Brian had taken a similar route via the ground. The thought tugged at her. Brian would've loved the chance to ride in this thing. He would need no prodding or handholding. He'd be right up front asking the pilot all sorts of questions, his inquisitive mind needing to know how each and every dial, gauge, instrument worked.

"I'm coming back in two days. Have dinner with me," Grant said.

His request again sounded more like a demand. "I'll have to check my calen—"

"Break, cancel, do whatever."

With peaked brows, she stared at him. "Should I take that as a corporate directive?" The tips of his finger pressed into her palm.

Suddenly, the helicopter lurched. Grant fell slightly backward, but quickly straightened.

"Sorry, folks...hit an air pocket," the pilot's voice explained.

Awkward silence ensued. Sydney leaned back against the headrest, prayed for quick composure.

The drone of the engine filled the empty silence and lasted until the helicopter landed at the airport. From her position, she could see GS's twin-engine jet standing by ready to depart. As Alexis had said, a black sleek limo was also parked nearby.

"I'll be back on Saturday depending on how things go in Chicago."

Behind his gray eyes, she thought she caught a what-could-have-been look if things had gone differently. Or maybe it was purely her imagination.

"Then how about dinner?" he again asked, his voice less demanding, less confident.

She could not look directly at him. "I still need to check my calendar."



"Fine. Something's happening here, which I'm having a hard time putting into words. Whatever had us sharing a bed together I think is very much alive. I'd like to play this hand out. See what happens."

Her head spun by his words. He was going fast. She felt breathless. She felt like she'd been shoved into an out-of-control roller coaster cart that was about ready to make its fiftieth death-defying plunge.

With somewhat shaky limbs she walked with him toward the waiting limo where upon closer inspection, she could see that two of GS's executives were already tucked inside. She looked up at Grant.

"I know it's been quite an eventful day for both of us," he said, at the same time as he nodded his greeting to the others. Realizing he was still holding her hand in more than a casual manner, she quickly withdrew it before folding herself into the car's interior.

Immediately, Grant turned and headed toward the waiting plane. She stared after him, watched until he disappeared inside. He had said he wanted to play this hand out. She'd never been particularly good at card games.

"Sydney?"

When she turned toward the voice, her eyes fell on shocks of thinning dark-brown hair sprinkled at the sides with gray. "Harold? Harold Greene?"

The man behind the dark glasses nodded. Sydney's eyes fell on the man sitting across from them. "Jim Stoddard...director of environmental affairs," the bleary-eyed man greeted with a proffered hand. "If I look a bit haggard, I just completed two day of intense depositions with the help of yours truly here." He nodded to Harold. "So while you two reminisce about the 'good old days', if you don't mind, I'm catching me a few winks. Wake me up when we pull into Danbury."

"That bad?" Sydney remarked.

"Piecing together stuff that happened years before GS's move into that building has taken serious midnight oil burning, not to mention paper digging," Stoddard explained.

"We've discovered there're toxic waste substances leaking from buried oil drums," Harold added. "The contractors never told us. Probably didn't know either. Seems years before, someone had illegally been dumping the stuff and now it's showing up in well samples. We're trying to find out who's responsible, but that may never be known. Possibly some cover-up has taken place over the years."

Sydney shook her head. "Yes, I saw the protestors."

"They'll be around for a while," Harold said, glumly.

"Timing stinks, what with this IPO coming up."

"Who's going to clean up the spill?" she asked.

"Clean it up?"

"Someone has to start cleaning up the area, right? You don't want to continue polluting those wells."

"Considering the EPA has named us as PRP's, I suppose we're going to end up paying the cost."

She blinked.

"Potentially Responsible Parties," Stoddard clarified, his eyes remaining closed.

"Oh."

"Yeah, bummer," Harold said. "But we may have a lead as to who was doing the original dumping. The drums themselves may give us clues. A part of a label remaining intact might help us trace it back to its source."

"And you're aware, in the meantime, all this stuff is going to have to be reported on the proposed Prospectus I send to the SEC," she reminded him. "Unless you get this resolved beforehand."

"Or unless it was accidentally left off the initial report."

A not-too-subtle warning bell went off in Sydney's mind.

"C'mon, Sydney, it's not the kind of stuff potential investors want to read about when they're looking to invest," he said, echoing her earlier thoughts. Jim Stoddard gave a groan and curled his body into a more comfortable position.

"Let's talk about something more pleasant," Harold said, realizing her concern. "Like what have you been doing with your life?"

He'd purposely switched subjects. Still, the thought of doctoring documents that would be eventually submitted to a government agency was leaving a rather bitter taste inside her mouth.

"I moved east from Chicago," she began. "Accepted a position with a small brokerage firm in Boston, did some networking, and ended up in Hartford. I've been at Farnsworth five years now."

A puzzled expression crossed Harold's face and she could only guess the lawyer in him was sorting through the chronology of ambiguous facts.

"But I never understood why you had to leave us. I don't mean to pry. I'm sure you had your reasons." He gave a faint smile. "I'll say one thing; GS was never the same afterwards. Grant had a string of bad luck following him, both in his personal and business life. I think you were his lucky charm, Sydney."

A tinge of nausea swept through her. "Personal problems?" she couldn't resist asking. "You mean his divorce from Samantha?"

"Let's say right from the beginning the marriage was not one made in heaven," Harold illuminated.

*Go on...go on...*her mind prodded.

"GS became his whole life after the split up."

Like a ticking bomb on the verge of exploding, emotions surged inside, and she flinched when a crash of thunder broke overhead. Seconds later, the tinny rhythm of rain pelted the car's hood.

Harold suddenly laughed. "Grant pretty much plays the field now. No woman's about to tie that man down too soon."

Suddenly, she wanted to hear no more about GS, or Grant's failed marriage, and certainly not about Grant's *active* social life. Like a descending shroud, the weariness of the day was settling on her. She wanted to go home, crawl into shapeless, monotonous sweats and dive under the bedcovers.

Harold, taking notice of her sudden silence, directed the conversation to lighter topics. A wave of sheer relief filled her when they finally pulled up in front of her apartment.

"Glad you're back on our team," Harold said, peering out at the somewhat run-down three-family house where she and Brian lived on the first floor. She smiled, nodded, and then exited the car.

Picking up her mail, she closed the door to her apartment behind her. She listened to the fading sound of the engine, then walked over to the answering machine, and pushed the button for messages.

"Bart's Auto Body," one message started. "Looks like a blown engine. Might want to scrap the thing. Call me at—"

She flipped through the mail. One envelope held the name of her 'phantom' landlord. She ripped it open. Her eyes grew wider as she read the enclosed letter.

*"As of August 1, due to an increase in tax assessments and insurance costs, we have no alternative but to increase rental fees."*

Sydney looked at the amount, which was quite a bit more than what she was paying now. She tore the letter up and flung the scraps into a nearby wastebasket.

An instant replay of the day's events played inside her head. In her mind's eye, she pictured his face, particularly the dark gray eyes, eyes that easily touched a woman's soul. Eyes that once touched hers then had gone on to possess her soul. Tentatively, she ran her fingers across the surface of her lips. She closed her eyes, allowed herself to imagine him kissing her there.

If she could only deny these feelings, pretend they did not exist. But they had...once. And now, without her permission, they were again threatening resurrection.

No, if she were smart enough, she would not let herself get involved again with Grant Sinclair. She needed to maintain balance in her world. She could not let him manipulate her in that same way. But her determination to maintain control of her world did not lessen the ache that had already formed, letting her know somewhere inside she had still had feelings for him.

She hugged herself tight, stood motionless in the dimly lit room. Sporadic light broke through the drawn mini blinds. Rolls of thunder shook the creaking boards in the tired old house. Storm clouds that had stalked her all week were now catching up.

## Chapter Four

Sydney fumbled through her jewelry box, searching for an elusive pearl earring. Finding it, she affixed it to her left ear then glanced nervously at the alarm clock on her nightstand. A sudden image of Grant Sinclair knocking at the front door produced a flood of misgivings. She should've told him she *was* busy tonight. That she definitely could not break her plans.

But then she remembered Grant possessed a stubborn streak a mile long and a mile wide. He'd only come up with some business 'emergency' where she would eventually end up breaking those plans. After applying the last touch of make-up, she gave herself one final assessment. The plain modest neckline of the navy blue dress and below-knee length hemline should definitely keep the man's mind where it belonged, strictly on business.

The thought echoed as she walked into the living room to straighten it up. That's when she noticed the sterling-silver framed photo, out of which a pair of innocent eyes stared back at her. Suddenly, she pictured her son and Grant in the same room, their faces bearing polite smiles while their curiosities grew. They'd measure each other up. And wonder why the other looked so familiar. And each, with those same perceptive gray eyes, would turn toward her – and look to her for answers.

She shook her head to dispel the unsettling scenario. Such confrontation was not about to take place any time soon. As she moved toward the photo, the doorbell rang.

When she opened the door, Grant stood there, a lightweight blue sports jacket thrown casually over one shoulder. "I know... I know. I'm early." A boyish grin covered

his face. "Very nice," he commented as his eyes raked over her form. "I was right." He leaned against the doorjamb. "Getting to know you all over again is going to be a pleasure."

Sydney made no attempt to repress a frown and was tempted to shut the door on his smirking face. Guessing her intentions, he quickly slipped inside.

"Yes, do come right in," she announced after him, her voice none too friendly. "I'll get my purse."

He turned. "What's the big rush? If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were in a big hurry to get this night over with. The plane must've hit a tail wind because my flight arrived ahead of schedule. So I figured I'd come right over. Our reservations aren't for another hour." He paused to measure her reaction. "If you give it a chance, you might enjoy tonight."

She backed away, tempted to tell him that there were phones, and that he could have called. "Fine then; since we don't need to leave right away, would you care for a drink? I've got scotch, bourbon, white wine, or plain mineral water," placing emphasis on the last choice.

Grant sighed. "Scotch on the rocks will be fine." He draped his coat over the back of a chair, and then as he settled into the sofa, his eyes roamed the room. She guessed he was mentally taking in the worn carpeting, the somewhat faded wallpaper, and the tag sale furniture she and Brian had carefully selected. Moments later, she handed him his drink.

"I know you're expecting me to sit here and talk about business," he began, sinking further into the sofa cushions, "but I've been talking business since I dropped you off. Frankly, I'm talked out."

Her brows arched in mocked surprise. "Grant Sinclair! Tired of discussing business? C'mon. I vividly recall sessions in your office when you had us staying late, wolfing down those pizzas and foot-long grinders, and talking nothing but business. It's probably why I put on all that weight."

Suddenly she winced at the forgotten bloated image of herself, which even now made her wonder what he had seen in her back then. Remembering Samantha Kyle's wedding photo, the woman he finally ended up marrying. She winced. Slender and graceful, every bride's wish.

"Those were the days," he responded. Suddenly an odd expression washed over his face as he reached behind him into the cushion. When he pulled out a miniature man wearing red tights, a yellow and black cape, and holding a sword, Sydney recognized it as one of Brian's superhero toys, which she immediately extracted from Grant's grasp.

"Must belong to one of the neighbors' kids," she mumbled, throwing it quickly into the side drawer of an end stand. "I'll return it later."

Grant only nodded. "Those days weren't as complicated as they are now," he continued, resuming their previous conversation.

Sydney sat at the opposite end of the sofa. "That's because we knew in what direction we were headed."

He tilted his head.

"Up!" she illuminated. "Your company had no place to go but up. We were all focused on that aspect."

"Are you now saying GS isn't as focused?"

"Going public will help reset your focus," she reassured, "but it would be wiser to invest in those markets where you're still strong and pull out from the weaker ones now with minimum loss."

Sydney had detected a certain amount of discouragement and uncertainty in his words. Uncertainty had never been a word in Grant's vocabulary.

He flashed her a wide engaging smile. "You were so good at that."

"At what?"

"Helping me gain a better perspective. Not telling me what I should or shouldn't do, but giving me options. In the end, I'd make the decisions."



She sighed, realizing she had indeed been missing that element of leverage in her present position. "But you didn't *always* agree with *my* suggestions. Do you forget that it was never without a small struggle? I swear poor Harold purposely kept boxing gloves on hand in case we wanted to duke it out."

Grant laughed. Then his expression turned serious. "How often does Tibble seek your advice? I was surprised to see him at Wednesday's meeting. I'd gotten the impression you were going to handle things entirely."

Until the GS account, she realized Tibble seldom asked for her opinion. "Albert Tibble at times does seek my input. But usually on matters he's pretty much decided on. And as far as the meeting, that was a last minute decision. But I'm okay with it," she was quick to add. "With today's iffy job market, I'm not one to complain."

Sydney was tempted to tell him over the years certain limitations came along with the role of single parenting, particularly in the corporate sector. Lack of time. Lack of energy to stay on the fast track *and* chase after an active child. But telling him required telling him about Brian.

"There was a time, Syd, when for you the sky wasn't the limit." Suddenly, he reached over and touched beneath her chin, his fingers moving into a tender caress. As his eyes locked with hers, she found herself becoming mesmerized.

*Pull back!*

She pulled back.

"People change," she told him. "Priorities get rearranged."

She inched farther away, picked up her wineglass. She studied it, and then took several sips. Composure regained, she ventured a look at him. "It's true I had wanted to make a place for myself in corporate America. And I still do. And I admit I was determined to prove that I, as a woman, could make it as well as any man."

She placed her glass down on to a coaster.

"And you would have," he said, "*if* you had stayed with us."

Trying to ignore the what-could-have-been look that now crossed his face, she gave him a half-hearted smile. "So you keep reminding me." Suddenly, she accidentally

touched the back of his hand, more to keep him at bay than to draw him near. They were strong hands. Hands she knew could be ever so gentle. Patient hands. Unfortunately, time, she mused, had not erased that memory. "And if I recall correctly, *almost* in your opinion was as good as failing."

"You still can do it..."

She felt her smile slip. "I gave up that chance when I walked out on you. And I'm realistic enough to know I won't be reaching that level at Farnsworth for a while. Let's just say as fleeting as it was, I did have my moment in the sun."

Grant's eyes held a gentle warning that she might be treading on sensitive waters. Suddenly he covered her hand with his, closing the safe gap she'd been determined to establish.

"Coming back on the plane, I thought about what I was going to say to you tonight. There were so many things left unsaid —"

"Grant, let's be thankful for that." Her hand strained beneath his.

He withdrew his hand, then leaned back and crossed one leg at right angle over the other, and picked at an imaginary piece of lint. He uncrossed the same leg, and then leaned forward.

"I'm surprised you're not married." One brow slowly lifted.

"There must be a significant other lurking about."

Sydney drew in a long breath. "My work at Farnsworth keeps me quite busy. I don't have time to develop long-term personal relationships."

"C'mon. Someone as warm and enticing...as I know you can be. Choosing to live a celibate life?" He edged closer. "If I took you into my arms right now, your body would tell me what I'm guessing is true. It's been deprived far too long from a certain kind of...loving."

His voice passed over her like dark liquid, a forbidden elixir, reminding her how they had once crossed over that line. Boldly, he placed one hand to the back of her neck and massaged the tense muscles he knew he'd find there. She could not deny that his

touch felt good. In response, she arched her neck. Allowed her eyelids to close. "Grant, you need to understand, I've had my share of relationships."

"And?" he asked, continuing his rhythmic stroking.

She sighed as she found herself surrendering beneath the steady motion of his strong determined fingers; fingers that now easily reduced the knotting that had built up in that spot.

"Not worth going into," she murmured, thinking suddenly of Donald Barnett, a man she had high hopes for but had turned out a great disappointment, ending up filling her with disillusion. "Besides, I'm content where my life is going." Gradually, she opened her eyelids. Stared directly at him. "And that's what counts, isn't it?"

His fingers relaxed their pressure before withdrawing. His eyes retained a look—a look that was more an invitation, creating inside her an undeniable sense of urgency. Suddenly he was draping one arm across her shoulder and gently pulling her against him. His warm mint breath fanned her face. His lips nuzzled against her neck, stroking her with feather touches.

"Grant..." she moaned. She moved one hand up in protest. Beneath her splayed fingers, she felt his solid muscles tightening beneath the shirt fabric. "Don't. We shouldn't. We can't—"

"Don't resist," he murmured, cutting off her words. "I read that look in your eyes. I've always said they were complete giveaways. A man senses certain things from a woman. What a woman wants. What she needs."

Sydney pushed against Grant, but he held her firmly, demonstrating not only his unwillingness to release her, but also his dwindling patience.

The tips of her nipples grew hard, pushing against the fabric of her dress. A slow heat rose. She remembered the feeling only too well. *And* where that feeling could lead, if she allowed it. Her traitorous body let her know its willingness to take part in this surrender, and enjoy every known pleasure he was now promising.

With distance dissolved, Grant's lips captured hers and the exquisite pressure was not unlike a warm, tender blending of souls kept separate too long.

Grant let out a low growl and for a short moment lifted his mouth from hers. “You’re delicious,” he murmured, then kissed her again, and again.

As his kisses deepened, and she experienced the penetrating warm moist tip of his tongue, a faint wondrous moan escaped from her. When after a time his lips gently released hers, it was only to place a trail of feathery kisses down along the delicate slope of her neck. His caresses grew bold. One hand covered a breast. The warmth penetrated the flimsy material of the high-neck dress—her safety net. As his forefinger and thumb purposely teased its nipple, encouraging it to flower beneath his touch, past memories of his lovemaking broke free from some dim corner of her mind. Vivid, heated memories—reminding her of the pleasures she would enjoy *if* she let it go further.

Seemingly drugged by these heady sensations, her body demanding full satisfaction, she felt her will weakening—her mind no longer rational.

“Dear sweet Sydney, it’s been too long.” His voice seemed more relaxed as he unfastened the top button of the high-collared dress. Deliberately, he eased it down one shoulder, baring her soft skin to him.

“Pure, like silk,” he murmured. “Inviting.” He kissed the exposed area.

A quiet hysteria rose inside her. The same inner voice now struggling, crying out.

*Stop him!*

But the internal warning did nothing to prevent the surge of white heat that was coursing up between her thighs. Instead of pulling away, she arched against him, allowing his mouth to find the naked tip of her breast, which he teased and fondled, as if to seek sustenance.

*This is insane.*

*But it’s been so long.*

*Don’t let it happen.*

*Yes, just one more time.*

*But what excuse would you use later?*

Charged flashbacks of the last time they'd made love invaded her mind. Suddenly, out of the corner of one eye she saw the aftermath, the repercussion – Brian's photo.

"NO! We can't!" she moaned, her voice sounding alien.

"You can't mean that," Grant groaned, refusing to listen as he gently pushed her down into a supine position.

A strangled cry escaped. She pushed against him. "Don't do this to me again!"

Hearing the desperation contained in her voice made him finally straighten. Wordlessly he raked his fingers through his hair and mumbled an expletive, more it seemed to curse his actions than what hadn't transpired.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "For a moment I thought you wanted... I thought we could recapture... I wanted you to remember how good it was between us. How good it can be again."

Sydney trembled inside, not just in anger, but because she had also wanted to somehow recapture what they had both once enjoyed. But Grant had to understand they could never go back, never go back to that point in time. It just wasn't possible. What they would be sharing now would be solely a tawdry physical experience and it was something she definitely did not want, especially again with this man.

With unsteady fingers, she refastened the buttons of her dress, all the while struggling to dismiss the erotic images that his recent kisses had evoked inside her mind – images she knew would remain long after he left her. Images that would wake her later as she lay in her own bed... alone.

Seemingly frozen in place, Grant held her in his stare.

"Why can't we give it a try?" he asked. "It's been a long time, but for me it could've been yesterday. Despite rumors you might have heard about my social life, I don't go around acting like some over-sexed schoolboy, especially in this day and age."

Sydney couldn't blame what had almost happened between them entirely on Grant. The physical attraction would always be there. It was a fact she had to face. They'd simply lost their heads, and might always be in risk of losing them again.

Luckily, she'd found hers in time—*this time*. She had learned that life taught certain lessons that were not so easily ignored. And in this day and age affairs were definitely too risky.

"Grant, I'm not as angry as I am embarrassed. We're both adults, not love-starved teenagers. I should've put the brakes on before it got out of hand." With growing heedfulness, they eyed each other.

Grant suddenly let out an uneasy laugh. "Don't you see what we're doing? Apologizing for something we both want." Tentatively, he touched her arm. But she withdrew in renewed panic. Seeing as he was not going to change her mind, he then said, "It's getting late. We should leave anyway."

She could only blink at him in her uncertainty, until she fully realized what he meant. "Will you excuse me while I freshen up?"

He merely nodded.

Sydney quickly exited the room. While she re-combed her hair and retouched her makeup, disturbing thoughts joined her confusion. It would've been easy—too easy—to follow him back to that place where they had once consummated their passion.

She licked her upper lip. Tasted the saltiness. Gently reapplied a rose-colored lip-gloss. Although not bruised, her lips did appear slightly swollen. Looking closely into the mirror, she couldn't help detect something slightly different about herself. Something not in place earlier. Her eyes now held a certain longing. A certain hunger. She closed them for a moment, if only to shut out the truth, then left the room.

Grant was sitting on the sofa, nursing his almost empty glass of scotch. He'd retied his tie and combed his hair. He appeared calm, poised as if what had just occurred between them had never occurred at all.

She suddenly felt annoyed seeing him so composed. He merely smiled at her—a cryptic smile that made him appear oblivious to the impact of his previous actions.

Their entire business relationship could have been jeopardized had she allowed him his way. It was up to her to ensure there would be no repeated performance. He

watched her cross the room. Suddenly, she felt like an unwary prey and her promise to not let anything happen did nothing to slow the wildly beating pace of her heart.

~\*~

With expert grace and determination, Grant drove the Mercedes through Hartford's side streets. Probably, Sydney mused, he was anxious to get the evening over and done with, which was fine and dandy with her.

Despite the suspended tension between them, Sydney started to relax. She was even tempted to slide off her shoes, rub her stocking feet over the thick lush floor mat. Instead, she stretched out her legs. She liked the way the car rode, easy and comfortable. Unlike her own compact with its innumerable mystery rattles. Although she'd never admit it, especially to the man sitting beside her, she liked where she was at the moment; a reminder that at one time it had been like this between them—as easy, as comfortable.

There had been a time when they could talk about anything without any awkward wall being erected. He'd not only been her work colleague, but her mentor, someone she had considered a friend.

But that had been spoiled by seeking more beyond that friendship. Bad judgment that she would allow herself to fall in love with him. Because falling in love had only brought about its share of complications.

"I hope you're going to tell me what that's all about."

She looked toward him, confused.

"That nodding that's been going on for the last five minutes," Grant clarified. "I'd almost forgotten how you'd do that. Sitting in my office, your mind obviously going a mile a minute and your head bobbing up and down. Drove me nuts at times."

"Sorry, I was thinking—"

"That I could tell. And don't apologize. I thought I'd never say this, but I missed that. The only thing that ever bothered me was if you were going to let me in on some of those private conversations."

She grinned. "I haven't forgotten how you'd mimic me. And if Harold was in the room, he'd join in and there we'd all be, bobbing our foolish heads." She laughed, remembering those comical episodes. "Can you imagine if your stockholders saw us doing that now at these board meeting? What they would think about your company's management...a bunch of crazy head bobbers."

"And who says other companies don't have head-bobbing sessions?"

She laughed again.

A comfortable pause followed.

"We had some good times, huh?" he commented, nostalgia clearly evident in his voice. She hesitated before responding and her *yes* came out more as a sigh. Over the years, she'd sorely missed those moments of intimacy rarely found in present corporate environments.

"To answer your question about the head bobbing, I was thinking about us."

His silence prompted her to continue.

"I couldn't help think about the friendship we once enjoyed. I'll admit I miss that. Everything's so competitive. It's not easy forming friendships when you can't tell who your friends really are." She ventured a glance his way. The sound of the car's engine seemed to ease up.

"Yeah, I know what you're saying," he answered, softly.

"It was sheer stupidity on our parts to get so carried away that night," she went on. "Why did we have to spoil it? I sometimes think if we had left the sex part out, if we had kept everything strictly on a platonic level..." She drew in a deep breath. "If I hadn't put more into what was simply not there. We would have at least remained friends. Good friendships always last."

"What are you saying, Sydney?"



"Let's not fall back into that trap. That whole weekend was based entirely on simple curiosity."

He stiffened and she could feel a renewed tension building between them.

"Curiosity?"

"Yes. We were curious to discover if there was more to our relationship than there actually was," she clarified. "Don't you see? You were my boss, my mentor, and my friend. We shouldn't have pushed it further than that." Suddenly a thought rose in her mind. Why couldn't she have expressed these same words to him back then? The answer came, instantly, and she knew too well the reason. It had been her anger, and her own pride—then a seven-pound, four-ounce bundle of consequence.

Suddenly, a car's blinding headlights passed them, illuminating a small spider's web on the right hand corner of the dash. A work-in-progress, she mused. So much like her life.

"I was all of those things to you?" Grant asked.

Pulling her thoughts back, she turned and could see that one side of his face was lifted into a half smile.

"It's probably why I haven't met anyone since who's been able to fill all those slots."

"You better watch what you're saying. I could be taking all this as a real ego boost."

Nostalgia swept through her, and when she glanced out her side window, she noticed they had arrived at the restaurant. She felt suddenly famished. Ever since leaving her apartment, a certain hunger had been growing inside. But she knew that hunger wasn't due to lack of food. No indeed! Her appetite had been sharpened for other savory things.

Except, for the moment, that appetite would have to be satisfied instead with a well-served meal.

## Chapter Five

They slipped inside the quiet elegant restaurant. As the maitre d' pulled out Sydney's chair, Grant suddenly asked, "Mind if I sit there?"

The chair faced out toward the other patrons, allowing a better view of the entire dining area. The one Grant would have had to sit in offered a limited view. But seeing no reason to ignore this request, at the same time disregarding the odd feeling tugging inside her as to why he was making it, Sydney merely nodded.

The waiter then handed them each a menu.

"I think we already know what we want," Grant quickly responded. "The Chateaubriand, and would you suggest a nice red wine to go with that?"

Sydney gave a slight cough. "If you don't mind, I'd like to try the poached salmon. I've heard it's excellent here."

The waiter nodded, and then slid a wary look Grant's way.

"Poached salmon? I don't remember your fondness for fish,"

Grant commented. "You used to love Chateau —"

"Must have me confused with someone else," she replied, keeping her focus on the menu. "An ex-wife perhaps?"

Grant studied her for a moment then turned back to the waiter, whose face exhibited obvious confusion.

"Then we had better go with a bottle of white —"

"Red will be fine," Sydney interrupted, folding her menu before handing it back to the waiter.

"With fish?" Grant asked, incredulous that she would dare make the suggestion.

"Sure, why not?" She threw him a look that clearly intimated a challenge.

The waiter's head volleyed back to Grant's side.

"Yeah, sure why not," Grant echoed, folding his menu.

Sydney smiled. "I guess you forgot, I never particularly cared for white."

Grant studied her again, but this time decided not to argue, and after ordering a selection of appetizers, handed back his menu. "I'll have the prime rib instead, well done, end cut if available, and a bottle of whatever red house wine you do have.

The waiter gave a sympathetic nod, tucked the menus beneath his arm and disappeared, but soon after returned with a platter of assorted appetizers, among which was an offering of delicately steamed oysters.

"Aren't these well known aphrodisiacs?" he asked, moving them around the plate, seemingly undecided about trying one. Sydney snickered, wondering what else he was thinking.

Maybe after ingesting a few, she might jump him right there on the spot. "Yes, I think some do believe they are. No use sending them back." Her eyes suddenly widened, and almost defiantly, she scooped several shells on to her own plate. Then she made a quick mental note to have her keys ready at the front door later.

After they finished with the appetizers, they moved into the main entrée. Neither lacked for topics to discuss, reminding Syd that one of Grant's redeeming qualities was his willingness to listen to whatever views she had on any subject—politics, stock portfolios, the latest stage play, or the book she was presently reading.

"Are you going to let me in on what's behind that enigmatic smile?" he asked at one point in the conversation.

She glanced up and smiled. "As long as we're finished discussing the world's problems and how to solve them?"

Grant leaned slightly toward her. "So far we've tackled the recession, unemployment, why man keeps screwing up the environment, if men like me from Mars will ever figure out what women like you from Venus really want. Now with that

behind us," he went on, wiping his mouth with the corner of his napkin, "let's get on to something that has been puzzling me. Something I want to put to rest."

A not so subtle warning flashed inside her mind, especially at the way Grant's voice had taken on a more serious, almost impersonal tone, and it created in her rising angst. He took a longer than usual sip of wine. When he put the glass down, the intensity of his gaze threatened to pull her into its very core.

"I have no problem understanding why you left my apartment that morning. Hell, you never gave me the chance to offer you any breakfast. But I can't understand why you had to leave the company. You were never one to run away from a problem. I'm sensing there's more behind what you've so far been willing to tell me. You women call it intuition. I call it gut feeling." His mouth now took on an unpleasant twist as one large hand covered hers as if to prevent her from running off. And she would've done just that. Run off as she had done that morning. In fact, when she tried pulling away, he kept her hand firmly planted beneath his. Anyone walking past their table would label them as star-struck lovers.

*Lovers, my eye*, she thought, and struggled for the words that would answer his questions without giving away the whole truth. "I'll make it simple for you, Grant," she began in a staged whisper. "I left your place and eventually your employ because I had wanted to get as far away from you as I possibly could. I didn't want to face the humiliation of others regarding me as *that* woman scorned. Remember there were a few from GS who knew I'd stayed with you that entire weekend."

He opened his mouth to say something.

"And," she continued, aptly cutting him off, "considering the close business relationship we already enjoyed I'm sure it was enough to confirm what was already inside their perverted little minds. Sydney Morgan climbs up the corporate ladder by first climbing into bed with her boss."

He opened his mouth again.

"Of course, the clincher was when I heard you the next morning whisper sweet nothings on the phone to dear sweet Samantha Kyles, who I remember you once telling

me was a childhood sweetheart. Somewhere along the line, I never caught on to when she *actually* became your fiancée. Something inside me snapped. I ran because I wasn't about to stay around to find out how important she was to you, and how *unimportant* I'd become." She twisted her hand beneath his, but failed to pry it loose.

He exhaled a whoosh of air that sounded like she had driven a hard fist straight into the middle of his solar plexus. For one split second, he did lift his hand off hers, and then fearing she'd bolt out of there, retrieved it. Although the warmth of him felt good in the air-conditioned environment, she found herself shivering.

"I've never been sorry about us making love," he began softly. "I know I have no right to expect you to believe me, but that wasn't my style that morning. There were...extenuating circumstances."

She tilted her head. "Extenuating circumstances, huh?" she repeated. "You wouldn't care to elaborate?"

As Grant's expression changed, she could see parts of a wall tumbling down. At the same time, a thread of panic was winding itself inside her heart, threatening to stop it from beating. She was feeling like a pressure cooker, knowing the same concept applied to telling the truth. Steam had to be released gradually else it would explode in her face. Deliberately, she choked back the words that would allow her to tell him about his son. It was too damn soon.

Before he could go on to explain further, she added, "Grant, let's not rehash what can't be changed. Basically, I made a fool of myself over you." Her voice lowered. "Sleeping with the boss; tacky, real tacky. But then again I was willing to risk a lot back then. And if it hadn't been for that damn call, I might've gone on playing the part of a fool. I actually consider myself fortunate to get out of what might've been a difficult situation. At the time, I sincerely felt I had no other recourse but to put as much distance between us as I could."

She ignored the increasing pressure of his hand tightening on hers.

"I consider myself lucky. I can get up mornings and look at myself in the mirror and feel no shame. I'm not sure if I could have done that now, knowing I had stayed."

Grant said nothing. But Sydney knew from the expression in his eyes, that bottom portion of an iceberg was just surfacing. Would she have been willing to put up with all the gossip if that phone call had never occurred? If what's-her-face hadn't come into the picture? The questions rose and settled in her mind like storm swells, questions to which she was not ready to give or know the answers. She was suddenly grateful for the restaurant's dim lighting.

"Look at me!" he gently commanded. He reached over with the other hand and lightly brushed his fingertips across her lower lip, then moving them beneath her chin. He tilted her head upward and forced her to look into his eyes. "I thought I could push you and what happened that night out of my mind." His voice lowered to a whisper and when she stiffened, he drew both hands back. "Some guys don't have problems with stuff like that. Some dame walks out on them without so much as a backward glance. They merely shrug it off."

The blunt cruelty inherent in his words made her cringe.

"You were never some dumb dame. If you had stayed and we had talked, I might not have gone ahead and married Samantha."

She was dumbstruck by this sudden admission, seemingly coming from nowhere. What was he implying? If she hadn't left, he wouldn't have married that other woman? They might've had a chance? Damn him, she didn't need any more of these *what-if* scenarios.

"Don't you dare be putting the blame for your failed marriage on what I did or didn't do just because Samantha found out a little too late what I was lucky enough to find out in time — fidelity does not fall high on your list of priorities." Her voice rose an octave. "After listening to you on the phone, I knew I would soon be out of the picture. Or at least out of your bed." She inhaled deeply to calm herself. "When I saw you standing there in the hallway, naked, I don't think I realized at first that those soft spoken words weren't meant for me." She could not repress a wicked laugh. "And such tender words. And there I was, just as naked, listening to you expressing them into another woman's ears. I literally wanted to crawl out of there. I think I did."

Sydney paused to draw in a fortifying breath, and then gulped down some water as the picture of that morning grew vivid in her mind. "I guess that's when I spotted, among other things, that ashtray." She gulped in more air, toyed with the pieces of salmon. "I threw that ashtray at you because I had to let you know you couldn't manipulate people's lives."

Instinctively, his hand went to the faded scar above his left brow.

"Don't worry, you've carved a far deeper one in me," she responded, releasing a laugh that practically bordered on hysteria. "So now you know the whole story. I left because I wanted no part of any man who tries to manipulate the emotions of people like he manipulates strategic moves inside his boardroom."

Feeling as though they had reached sword's point, a choking silence followed. And with that silence, grew a palpable tension. She had released the emotional dam inside her. She kept her eyes focused on the now cold salmon. Her appetite destroyed, she would have to ask the waiter for a doggie bag, wondering if she would enjoy poached salmon for breakfast.

"I'm sorry," he said, in a low whispered voice, his face clearly demonstrating a pained expression that squeezed her heart. "Samantha called to ask me to meet her later. I didn't want to go. And I should've said something. But she sounded very distraught."

Sydney shook her head, not wishing to hear any of it.

"She said she needed to talk to me," Grant went on. "Look, I didn't mean to hurt you." He paused, picked up his glass, and then changing his mind, put it down. He fumbled with his fork.

Whatever was going on inside him, Sydney sensed it had to be hurtling around like some spinning top.

He gave a snort. "Hell, I know I ended up hurting you *and* Samantha. I wished I had known you were awake. Who knows, maybe I did know but I didn't want to admit to my stupidity. I didn't know how to back out of a trap I had created. You have to

understand, I cared about Samantha, but it wasn't until much later I knew the feelings I held for her were far different from what had I felt for you."

One raised brow signaled him to expand.

"During those times when you and I made love, I experienced a deep satisfying passion—the kind of passion, when discovered between two people, can't be ignored or denied. An unforgettable passion."

She winced, knowing she'd been thinking along similar lines. She studied him, and although she wished she hadn't seen it, she did see the glint of purpose in his eyes. He wanted her to believe him. He needed her to believe him. He sat back in his chair, grew silent as he patiently waited for her answer.

Suddenly, like a governor's last pardon, their waiter appeared and handed each a desert menu. Grant glared down at it, clearly annoyed by the interruption, but managed a smile. He looked at Sydney. "How about the chocolate mousse? I remember it was a favorite of yours. Or has that changed?"

Unable to put her thoughts into any coherent form, all she could do was nod.

"Two chocolate mousses," he said to the waiter.

Once desert was served, Grant directed his concentration back to her. "I'm hoping what I'm now seeing in those wonderful emerald orbs is your remembrance of the last time we made love." He took a spoonful of the satiny rich chocolate; let it slowly dissolve on his tongue. "I want you to relive every intimate detail of our nights. Not many forget that kind of passion. It's not easily put out of ordinary minds. And considering how your body responded earlier, whether or not you care to admit it, I'm guessing you've been reminiscing over some of the more shall we say memorable moments we shared. If that's true, then you had better resign yourself to the fact." He scooped out a second, more generous spoonful of the decadent chocolate.

"As long as I'm around—which I plan to be for a time—you are going to be reminded of those nights every moment we are in each other's company. You'll dream about them even." He smiled at her. A wicked, paradoxical smile, while his eyes turned



a dark smoky gray. “It’s all I’ll think about when I’m with you— you and our lovemaking—until we finally enjoy it again.”

Quietly, she ate the chocolate mousse, matching him spoonful for spoonful, all the while getting the sinking feeling that what he was saying was every bit true. By his coming back into her life like this, she was having to relive those pure moments of sensual delight when she had given herself as completely as any woman could give of herself to a man. Relive, if only in her mind, every last enticing carnal detail.

They were sexual soul mates, he had told her more than once during those two extraordinary nights, during which time his mentoring skills had strayed from the affairs of business to the affairs of erotic lovemaking.

Yes, soul mates who had sampled, uninhibitedly, the pleasures a man and woman could experience between each other.

Absently, she sipped her coffee, which helped cut into the sweetness of the mousse. But she knew the heat from the dark liquid was not the reason for the heat rising inside her. Carefully, she weighed her response. “Grant, I’m once again in your employ—although indirectly—I hope you’re not expecting me to go to bed with you. And I hope you’re not implying Farnsworth is in jeopardy of losing the account if I don’t. The only compliance you and I should be concerned with is with the SEC.”

Taken off guard by her blatant statement, his brows knitted in disgust. “I see you’ve chosen to turn the meaning of my words to suit your own misguided mind.” He threw down his napkin. “I think we’re finished!”

After a short discussion on who was to pay the bill—which he won—he took her arm and guided her out of the restaurant. Not about to make a scene, she went willingly enough. Earlier she had spotted several Farnsworth people ogling in their direction, sending her a *who-is-the-tall-handsome-blonde* look. Making a scene would surely have her become another tasty morsel on the tips of Monday morning’s wagging tongues. As the Mercedes sped back to her place, a sense of relief came. The evening was almost over. She had survived—almost. When they reached her front door, as she promised herself, she had her key ready. She started to enter ahead of him, but he grabbed her

and gently swung her around. When she looked up at him, she found herself filling inside with anticipation rather than fear as the outside porch light played shadows across his determined face.

No sooner did she protest than his mouth was capturing hers, and his strong sinewy arms were drawing her close. The heat from his body blended with hers. His invading tongue met little resistance. In one fleeting moment, every promise she'd ever made about not getting involved was rapidly dissolving.

~\*~

It was her own horrifying scream that woke Sydney. Something had walked over her. Something long and with sharp clawed feet.

*"Mom, remember, you have to push real hard on the latch else Augie will escape."*

Suddenly remembering Brian's words, Sydney pulled up and hugged the bedcover to her. Her nightgown felt damp. She reached out to the other side of the bed. Felt cool sheets and emptiness.

She'd been dreaming about him. Just as he'd predicted. Damn him. He had purposely planted that seed in her mind. A dream so real, even now she had to wonder if it was just that – a dream.

Again, she touched the other side of the bed, which was cold. No one had slept there recently. Yet how could it have been a dream? She could still feel his hands touching her. She strained to see through the darkness. Then remembered why she had woken. Whatever had crawled over her was no longer there or else had fallen to the floor. She reached over and groped for the light switch.

She saw nothing. No Grant. No crawly thing. But something had definitely been there.

Her mind swept back into the dream, unwilling to relinquish its hold. She felt breathless. Again reached out to feel the cold sheets, confirming the fact he had not been there.

Grant, she remembered, had left soon after his last cup of coffee. He hadn't tried anything further than the kiss at the door—a soul-searing gut-wrenching kiss that had left her wanting more. Dreaming for more.

She crouched on the bed, peered down at the carpeted floor, and saw nothing crawling around. She hung over the side, and peeked beneath the bed, and again thankful she saw nothing there.

Gaining a bit more courage, she left the bed, put on high boots from the closet which she figure offered more protection than mere slippers, and ventured into the other rooms.

She went into Brian's room.

The hamsters were busily burrowing into their shavings. Every now and then they peeked out at her, blinking their curiosity. She went over to Augie's cage. Everything appeared normal.

Seemed normal...except—

Except? Her fears confirmed; no Augie lay inside, no beady eyes peered out through the glass cage. Fear clutched at her. Okay, so Brian had warned her. But she thought she had pushed the latch in far enough. *Obviously not*, she ruefully mused.

Her eyes canvassed the room and she squelched the strong urge to jump on to one of the twin beds. She had an iguana loose in her apartment. Where iguanas went was anyone's guess. She thought of the crickets that she had yet to buy. Bait. Sure. Once she got those crickets, she'd have Augie back inside his cage for sure.

Boots still on, she walked back into the bedroom. It was only when she jumped back on to her own bed, did she dare pull them off.

Then she thought about that recent dream. Squinted at the time—*five a.m.* It was Sunday and she could sleep late. Except her body ached for something, and she knew it wasn't for food. What she needed to do was to take an exceptionally long shower, an exceptionally long *cold* shower.

## Chapter Six

Sydney settled behind her desk, slid her reading glasses on, and then glanced at the phone's LCD display, which gave the time. A steady rain pelted the window behind her, reminding her how she hated these gray mornings—especially when they fell on Monday. But she knew she shouldn't blame her depressed state of mind entirely on weather conditions.

"I made a fresh pot of coffee," Tamika announced through the doorway, breaking into Sydney's thoughts. She held a steaming carafe in one hand and two mugs dangled from the other. "You look like you could use something to get you started."

Sydney gazed up at the far-too-cheerful-for-that-time-of-the-morning face. "I look that bad?"

Tamika replied with an honest nod. "Those reports on your desk are part of the GS file. You might give them a quick review before I file them away. I set up an area in the front of one cabinet, figuring it'll get top priority for a while."

Sydney stared blankly at the pile placed before her. *Top priority, my foot*. She was tempted to tell Tamika to shove the entire thing into a banker box and send it off to Document Retention, along with its CEO. She didn't want to deal with GS now, especially its CEO.

Tamika poured coffee into one mug, placed it on the desk, then filled the other, and when she sat in a chair facing Sydney, mild curiosity crept into Sydney's mind. "Something on your mind, Tamika?"

"Uh, no, not really," her secretary responded, followed by a short contemplative pause while she nonchalantly sipped her coffee.

"And how did your weekend go?" Sydney felt almost compelled to ask.

"I didn't do all that much. Joe and I took in a flea market where he picked up an old beat up sideboard that he plans to refinish, and hopefully sell off for a profit." Tamika took several more slow sips of her coffee. "And *yours*?" she queried offhandedly, putting Sydney's brain on red alert.

"I've had better," Sydney replied, hoping that her reluctance to expand on her own weekend activities might give Tamika a subtle enough hint that she did not particularly want to go into any of it.

Tamika, not easily put off by these words, tilted her head slightly. "Really? I mean, seeing that you —"

"Seeing that I *what*?" Sydney encouraged, her fingers tightening around the mug.

"Mr. Miller...in the accounting department... told Janice, his secretary, who told Nancy, she brings up the mail, that he and his wife had dined at this expensive restaurant Saturday night and —"

"And?" Sydney again probed, sensing what this office smorgasbord was going to entail.

"That you and Mr. Sinclair had dinner together."

Sydney almost laughed out loud at her secretary's I-dearly-need-to-know-everything expression. The woman's dark pupils were actually dilated. It's a wonder Tamika's contact lenses didn't just pop out.

"If that was me," Tamika started, "I wouldn't have been able to eat one single bite of my food, even if it was the most expensive thing on the menu." Tamika then paused, seemingly reconsidering her statement. "Well, I might try a bite or two, but —"

"I see the grapevine is in good working order," Sydney interrupted. "Although I don't see anything unusual with my having dinner with a client. I do it all the time," she pointed out, irritated at having to take a somewhat defensive position.

"Yes, but when *that* client is Grant Sinclair that's what makes up those wonderful romances, the ones with the happy ever after endings. I literally devour them —"

"Then stick with them," Sydney advised, with obvious sarcasm. "Because that's the only place you're going to find those endings." She slowly sipped her coffee, ignoring the hot liquid as it painfully slid down her throat. "Maybe you ought to try sci-fi for a change," she added.

Tamika lowered her gaze.

"Look, if having dinner with a man causes this much of a fuss," Sydney went on, "then maybe I'd better schedule future business meals at the local Burger King or McDonald's. Maybe then tongues will less likely wag."

Tamika searched her face. "But you and Mr. Sinclair do make a great looking couple. You two belong together. Everyone says—"

"Everyone?"

"The support staff for one. They'd love to see the two of you get a thing going. *Today's Woman* says when people fall in love in the work environment, everyone benefits. That it does wonders for a company's morale."

*Right, and what about morals?* Sydney was tempted to add, but refrained. Momentarily, Sydney shut her eyes against Tamika's words.

"Good for company's morale, huh? I certainly hope Tibble hasn't gotten wind of this talk. He's always been adamant about *his* people dating Farnsworth's clientele. 'Not professional, conflict of interest, not to mention certain complications'," she added, mimicking his stern avuncular voice. In the past, she never had a problem following his dictates as they pretty much fell with her own.

"Sorry if I'm out of line," Tamika apologized. "I've been told that I'm an incorrigible matchmaker. I'll just slink back to my desk." When she reached the door, she turned back. "I'm told he's not married. So it looks like clear sailing." She gave a slight wink.

Sydney lowered her eyes to the pile of papers. "Close the door *quietly* on your way out, please!"

When the door clicked shut, she picked up the GS folder and tossed it to one side. Now if she could do the same with Sinclair, dismiss him the same way, even if

only in her mind, she'd feel a whole lot better. Ever since Saturday night, a steady uneasiness had been filling her inside, forcing her to face a somewhat alarming fact. That *she* might not be completely over the man.

And then that dream. A dream that had her reliving every intimate detail of the nights they had shared, reminding her of what she would again enjoy—if she dared. No, she couldn't deny that with him she had tasted the kind of passion most only talked about. Or dreamt about. Suddenly, along with that thought a vision of tangled limbs erupted, increasing the tentacles of fear that crawled inside her.

If eleven years hadn't been enough time to forget him and the magical ecstasy he had evoked, then how more powerful would these emotions grow now that he was back? Faint thunder rolled somewhere in the distance. She stared through the whipping wet sheet of rain. Through it an image surfaced. *It was Brian's face, regarding her with blameless gray eyes, then it mutated, slowly transforming into a second face. Grant's – judging her with the same – only this time imputing – gray eyes.*

A heavy feeling descended, settling somewhere inside the space between her chest and stomach area. Like an old friend dropping in unannounced. She quickly recognized it as guilt.

Ahead lay a long stormy summer.

~\*~

As with Monday, Wednesday arrived too soon, and along with it, Harold Greene. He'd stopped by Sydney's office to drop off more papers to be added to the GS package. On completion of his business, he then invited her to his house for the following Saturday night for a get together with friends.

Sydney agreed to go, but not without reluctance. When Harold gave her his address, she realized he didn't live too far from her – actually one town over, in the elite community of Avonshire.

By the time Saturday night rolled around, Sydney found herself actually looking forward to the party.

~\*~

Harold had said casual, Grant reminded himself as he tucked his knitted blue shirt into the waistband of a new pair of jeans. His first pair in a long while. He never much cared about going to these so-called *casual* affairs. And he never much cared for casual conversation, meaningless talk that usually led nowhere. Normally he would have made up some excuse not to attend. But tonight, his house seemed emptier and larger than usual. And more quiet. And suddenly he found he didn't want to be spending this Saturday night at home. Even his desk, littered with all sorts of financial data and stock reports, offered little enticement to stay home.

He'd been tempted to call Sydney during the week. But he felt things might be moving too fast for her. He didn't want to scare her off this time.

*Or was it he who was running scared?*

Quickly, he dismissed that last thought.

Although he had enjoyed their evening together the week before, he could tell she was still wary of him. But then, could he blame her? He'd come on to her like some dumbstruck schoolboy on a first date, unable to control his raging hormones. No wonder she was hesitant to ask him in for coffee. But he had behaved afterwards. After that kiss. Yet in the back of his mind, he knew with just enough encouragement on her part, he'd have stayed longer than the time it took him to finish that coffee.

At least by going to this thing at Harold's, he wasn't going to have to face another long night by himself. Not that he didn't have a choice. There were others he could call. Other women, who because of his well established financial and social position, would have been more than willing to come by and alleviate his loneliness. But none of them would have helped in filling up the emptiness inside. He grabbed a



set of keys hanging by the door. Then thought twice, and grabbed the other set instead. He wouldn't be taking the Mercedes tonight.

~\*~

Sydney selected a pair of white linen slacks and a light apple green jersey pullover to wear, and if the night turned cooler, a matching sweater jacket to throw over her shoulders. After all, Harold told her it was to be casual, she reminded herself as she drove her rented car slowly down the long street of manicured lawns.

Harold's house turned out to be one of the long rambling ranches; his stood some yards from the main road. It sat on high ground and fitted well with the surrounding homes, which were owned by other corporate executives or people in high-paying professions who could well afford the pricey neighborhood locale.

Although dusk has not yet settled and daylight still prevailed, a row of decorative lights illuminated the path along one side of the sweeping driveway she now pulled into. She parked next to a light colored Range Rover and climbed out.

Music blared from the back of the house. She recognized one song from the 80's. As she entered the foyer, Harold immediately greeted her.

His wide smile and mischievous eyes went well with the outrageously bright-colored Hawaiian shirt and baggy khakis and made his legs appear like pick-up sticks inside his oversized sneakers. A GQ man Harold was not.

"I'm glad you could make it," he greeted. "What can I get you? There's red and white wine, beer in the cooler. Something stronger?" He flashed a wide toothy grin. "I make a hell of a margarita."

"I don't usually drink beer," Sydney said, "but at times there's something about a hot summer night and a bottle of ice cold beer."

Harold smiled brightly. "Sure! One cold beer coming up."

Together they walked into the spacious house. They were halfway down a hall when, through a wide doorway, she caught a glimpse of one guest and let out a muffled cry. Harold had all he could do to keep himself from smacking into her back.

"I didn't think Grant was going to be here." A fight or flight response took hold as she stared at the unmistakable blonde head engaged in conversation with a rather attractive dark-haired woman who could have easily passed herself off as an ersatz Jaclyn Smith. Harold, ignorant of Sydney's growing panic, grabbed her hand and headed straight for the cozy twosome. The evening, Sydney silently moaned, had suddenly taken a nosedive.

"Well, well. Small world, isn't it?" Grant chortled, flashing them a dangerous smile.

Not trusting her voice, she merely nodded a greeting.

"Let me introduce you to Melinda Crandall," Grant offered.

"Her ad firm's representing GS's position on that PR situation," he added. "She'll issue press releases to the media, which should create a more positive image for our role in the community." He looked at Harold. "Seems those oil drums are not the only thing leaking out nasty stuff. The papers have picked up on it. Polluted wells don't do much for property value, it seems."

Melinda smiled a bright even smile. Sydney pressed her palm into the woman's outstretched hand, and gave a firm solid shake. There was no reason to harbor animosity toward this woman because of the man she was sitting next to. If anything, Sydney knew they probably had much in common, developing careers along with the ongoing struggle to make a place in male-dominated environments.

When she ventured a look Grant's way, she couldn't help notice in the tiny flecks of his steel-gray orbs, his obvious admiration for Ms. Crandall. The revelation produced a tender pang of envy.

"I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about, so I'll just mosey along and see who else is here," Sydney told them. Grant stiffened, and then smiled.

Harold chimed in. "Yes, I'm sure you already know some of the folks. Remember Madge from Payroll? She moved out here with us."

Sydney swerved around. "Why, yes. I haven't seen her in years."

"She's my wife now," Harold said, beaming.

"Really? I knew Madge had a thing for you. But I didn't know it went the other way. Let's go find her," she suggested, taking Harold's arm and practically propelling him across the floor away from Grant and his companion.

"She's not here," Harold struggled to explain.

"Not here?"

"Her mother took ill last night. She flew out to Duluth."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"She didn't want me canceling the party since everything was already made. Unfortunately, our housekeeper had to take time off today. So here I am. Playing dual roles of host and hostess." Suddenly, he gave her a helpless 'little boy' look. "I'd almost rather be addressing a hostile jury about now."

"What? Are we all thumbs in the kitchen, Harold? C'mon, let's see what we can do to remedy that situation," Sydney offered, grabbing the opportunity to keep herself busy and, at the same time, maintain a distance between certain of his guests.

And once in the kitchen, at least she was grateful that she didn't feel all that self-conscious among the array of over-priced gourmet utensils and curious gadgets. Although Madge and the housekeeper had done most of the preliminaries, she was relieved to see a few things still needed attending to.

Some moments later, preoccupied with her newfound duties, Sydney heard Harold's voice call out. "Yo, Sydney. Planet Earth calls. I didn't intend for you to spend the entire night playing Martha Stewart." He appeared in the doorway. "The party's going on out here."

With reluctance, she turned from the deviled eggs over which she had just sprinkled paprika. "Guess I lost track of time."

She glanced around the kitchen to make sure everything was out.

Harold cocked his head to one side. "You okay?"

She looked at him, managed a smile. "Sure. Why?"

"You seem out of sorts... jittery. Like you don't plan to come out of this kitchen any time soon. It's because Grant's here, isn't it? I had to invite him."

"Now why would his being here bother me?" she asked, as if she hadn't a clue as to what he was talking about.

"First, by that look he was giving you when you first walked in. Secondly, I pretty much know why you left GS, and you two have a few, should we say, *unresolved* issues?"

His eyes averted as he picked up a carrot stick and nonchalantly dipped it into a nearby creamy dip of sour cream and garlic. "All those years in law school weren't for naught. I've got eyes. Ears. My specialty is putting two and two together, which I admit sometimes doesn't always add up to four."

Sydney felt her throat constrict. She grabbed for a glass, groped for the faucet, filled it with water, took several long sips.

Some of it spilled on to her jersey. "Damn." She glared down at the dark forming spot.

"Grant acted like a first class cad back then," Harold began, grabbing for a paper towel. As he was about to dab it against the stain, he suddenly realized its position and handed her the towel. "He shouldn't have treated you that way. I know you two spent the weekend together before the news came out about his engagement." He leaned over and whispered, "The man never told me until the announcement formally came out. I was tempted to say *no* when he asked me to be best man at his wedding."

Again, the urge to flee tugged at her. Instead, she remained rooted in place, sipped more water, and then switched back to beer, all the while feeling she'd somehow fallen into a time warp. Harold was not talking yesterday, last week, or last year. Then, some lawyers were known for elephant memories.

"You didn't have to quit your job because of some office indiscretion. That sort of thing goes on all the time. The whole thing would have blown over."

*Blown over? When? After I took maternity leave? When people counted months on their fingers after my baby was born, and looked at me with questions dripping from their eyes. Or when Grant realized my condition might have been a result of our one indiscre –*

“You can’t still be hung up on the guy!” Harold said candidly, breaking the momentum of her thoughts.

He made no mention of Brian, and for that, she heaved an inner sigh, thankful he did not know the entire story.

“Me? Hung up on him?” She snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous. Okay, so we had a fling, but seriously, you can’t think I’d allow myself to carry a torch for him all these years.”

Harold’s eyes narrowed. “People carry torches way after their expiration date.”

She stabbed at a delicate pink shrimp, piercing its flesh. A quirky smile followed his words, sending a sliver of suspicion through her mind. Had Harold once carried a torch for her?

Dark bushy brows rose into sharp peaks on a face turning various shades of red. She wasn’t going there. Quickly, she ate the shrimp. “We better get the rest of this stuff out to your guests or you’ll have them passing out from hunger.”

Harold smiled, but then it faded. “Grant was a fool to let you go. I’m sure he knows it, although he may never admit to it. But now that you’re back –”

“Back? Whoa! My relationship with your boss is different. Grant dictated my life with a pretty strong hand, if you remember. Our alliance was one of unequal power, with all the drawbacks that come with a boss-subordinate relationship.” Suddenly, she eyed the platter of deviled eggs, picked one and sampled it. “Basically, I used him as a crutch.”

Harold drew closer. “A crutch?”

“I had to wean myself off of that man. I’ve had to watch myself with Tibble too, trying not to ask his advice without first testing my own waters. Unfortunately, Tibble hovers over me like an overprotective uncle. I’m thinking of changing my voice mail number and forgetting to tell him.”

Harold laughed as he produced a bottle of chilled California wine. He looked at her, smiled and said, "Chill but don't kill."

She watched as he ceremoniously uncorked the bottle.

"Got to let it breathe first," he mumbled, putting it to one side. "Would you consider coming back?"

A second deviled egg slipped from her grasp, but she managed to retrieve it before it hit the tiled floor. "Coming back?"

"To GS Enterprises," Harold clarified.

She took several swigs of beer, which provided enough time to contemplate his words. "I'm not sure I follow."

Realizing her ignorance, he let out a mild expletive. "Grant hasn't made you an offer?" He paused to check her reaction.

"Okay, maybe I'm jumping the gun. I thought maybe last weekend he might've said something."

Sydney tried to recall the conversations of that night. "He did ask questions about how I was doing at Farnsworth."

Harold stood with a tray of food in his hands, a perplexed look on his face. "I'll be right back. Let me get this stuff out there before I get nominated host with the least. Madge would never let me live it down if she found out I starved our guests."

Sydney watched him disappear. Everything on the tray looked delicious, and the sounds coming from her stomach agreed. She was suddenly famished. She grabbed and sampled a bacon-wrapped scallop. Then a cracker topped with cream cheese and chives.

After a moment, Harold returned empty-handed. "Would you consider coming back? It's a great opportunity, especially for a—"

"Woman?" she finished.

He grinned and lifted the bottle of wine. Poured a small amount into a glass. Sipped it, and nodded approval. Then offered to pour her a glass. She shook her head and lifted the almost empty bottle of beer.

"Have you forgotten, Harold? I walked out on him. I'm the one who left without saying *sayonara*. Why would he want to take another chance on me doing that again? The only reason I'm working with you people now is because of my position at Farnsworth. For lack of a better term, you're essentially stuck with me."

She felt strange talking about Grant with him just sitting in the next room. Yet she knew single mothers were seldom presented the offer Harold was mentioning. This would be her chance to grab onto the brass ring, maybe for the last time. In her mind's eye, she envisioned herself climbing on a carousel horse, stretching out her arm, grabbing for the elusive gold ring, only to watch it slip by.

"I'm losing you again," Harold commented lightly.

Sydney returned a chagrined look. "I'm sorry, but you had my mind going there." She worried the slippery beer bottle between her fingers. "If word ever leaked out at Farnsworth that Grant would propose such an offer. If Tibble suspected I'd consider leaving the firm—" She made a horizontal slashing motion across her throat. "They'd hang me from the office rafters, right from that grapevine which grows so well in corporate climates. And don't you think Tibble wouldn't have me cleaning out my desk lickety-split."

"I hear what you're saying, but if Grant should make the offer, I'd give it serious thought." Harold grinned, a wide toothy grin.

She contemplated his words. "Years have a way of changing us." With a toothpick, she literally attacked one of the Swedish meatballs swimming in rich creamy sauce.

"Looks like everything is under control," he said, detecting her reluctance to talk further on the subject of possible new employment. "I put on some great music. Let's join the others."

Suddenly, he gave her a quick hug. "And thanks for your help. I'd still be in here trying to figure out what goes with what."

She smiled as anxiety filled her, and took a deep breath, then finished her beer and grabbed another out of the cooler. When she spotted a group of familiar and

unfamiliar faces, she went straight toward them. The idea of Grant at the same party no longer bothered her as much with everyone now chatting, mingling, and catching up with the latest news.

"How about it?" Harold remarked, putting on more music.

"Disco from the seventies?" she said.

"Sure, it's been a while, but do you want to give it a try?" he asked, imparting a pitiful please-don't-turn-me-down look.

The look forced her to smile, and reciprocate with one that said I'm-not-so-sure-I-want-to-do-this. "I've never been much of a dancer. As long as you tell me when to twirl, swirl, or whatever, I think we'll be okay with this."

She couldn't recall the last time she'd danced within the circle of a man's arms. Cub scouts, school tag sales, bake sales, hiking with Brian afforded little time for honing such social skills.

"I'm warning you," she declared. "It has been awhile since I've taken to a dance floor. There should be this warning label stuck to my forehead. Dancing with Sydney Morgan may be hazardous to the feet. I take no responsibility for toes."

Harold gave a robust laugh. "I'll take my chances. What's the worst that could happen? Break a few metatarsals? So I'll hobble for a while. Might get sympathy from the next jury I need to face."

"But forewarned is forewarned," she added. "Little League leaves little time to practice the latest dance steps—"

She no sooner spoke the words than she caught awareness developing in her dance partner's brown eyes.

"It never occurred to me you have a kid," he confessed. "I mean I never considered—" He glanced at her left hand. "Seeing as there's no... Grant told me you were still single."

"I'm not married. But I do have a son," she answered candidly.

Harold stood there for a moment, relatively speechless, hesitant about pursuing the subject of her marital status. A fast number started to play.



"Hey, we better get out there," she urged, dragging him out on to the patio floor. A stunned look remained as he slowly moved into the disco rhythm. Although the dance steps were completely foreign, she managed to 'twirl' when appropriate, letting her arms and hands go in whatever direction. Out of the corner of one eye, she noticed Grant and Melinda were seated at a nearby table.

Suddenly, the evening was not moving fast enough, and the seemingly unending music was not helping in any way. Through a series of dizzying turns and twirls, she would catch Grant's cold hard stare. A few times, he had the audacity to wink.

As Harold spun her around, her thoughts pirouetted in similar fashion, and she wondered about Harold's words and his suggestion she return to GS, which rekindled further suspicion in her mind regarding the IPO. Recognizing the closing notes of the song, relief filled her.

Now was her chance to make an excuse to leave. Make a hasty escape from Grant's probing eyes—eyes now devoted to a certain Ms. Melinda Crandall. But before she could get Harold off the patio, another song started up, a slow one, an old timer from the sixties.

"Yes, of course," Harold muttered.

Harold wasn't looking at her. When she turned, Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts floated out of sight, replaced by a soft knitted blue and stoned-washed denim.

Reflexively, her body responded to the hard feel of him. The hysteria of delight pushed inside her as his warm breath fanned her neck. His lips, purposely or accidentally, grazed a delicate earlobe, opening new pathways for heated memories.

"Mmm, Shalimar," he exhaled, softly. "I wonder if it affects Harold the same way it's affecting me." He held her firmly, preventing her from creating space between them. One muscled thigh deliberately pressed into a savored spot. Its devastating effect had her practically clinging to him, had her almost sliding to the ground.

"I could ask why you didn't call," she hissed, looking up at him, clear challenge in her eyes.

"I meant to."

She nodded, giving him a doubtful glance.

He smiled. "I know I said a few things Saturday night I shouldn't have. I was out of line. I think it had something to do with walking into your living room." She tilted her head.

"Seeing that photograph. Realizing, suddenly, you have been living your own life. A life that I haven't been a part of."

In the fluttering half-light of the tiki torches, she studied his face. His deadpanned eyes caused a seizure of goose bumps to race up her arms. Brian's, she remembered, reacted in similar fashion whenever he needed her to listen.

"You mean my son's picture," she queried with caution lest she give away more than she wanted. She could've easily said nephew, but suddenly wanted no additional lies floating like stray debris in her life.

"Your son? I was hoping you'd say a nephew."

She suppressed a smile.

His eyes locked with hers and in their fathomless depth, she sensed more questions coming. "I looked at that picture, and found myself getting angry. It forced me to face a part of my life that has been lacking. I've never thought much about children, especially after the divorce. But looking at that photograph, I found myself asking why I was doing all of this anyway?"

His words produced a quickening inside. She thought about the hamburger she had craved earlier, and how it might look splattered across his spotless blue shirt. "What are you trying to say?" she whispered.

"I'm thankful Samantha and I produced no children. Although at one time she thought—" He suddenly stopped. "She wanted them in the beginning. But later I managed to convince her we'd probably make their lives miserable. I told her because of our lifestyle, our kids would probably grow up neurotic. We're both perfectionists. And she had this thing about white. White upholstery. White carpeting—"

His words made Sydney think about the nebulous stains in her own apartment. The brown one on Brian's carpet, which wouldn't come out no matter what she used on

it. The red stain on the sofa cushion caused by spilled pizza sauce, which she camouflaged with a knitted throw.

"Your son's picture showed the inadequacies in my own life. I have no wife. I have no children. I have a townhouse filled with stuff I seldom have time to enjoy. I realized, when I die, all I've created dies with me. There's no one to leave any legacy. Sure GS will survive, but I'll be leaving behind one of those pompous portraits decorating the walls outside corporate boardrooms."

She couldn't help but smile.

"Yeah, you know the ones I'm talking about. Eyes that follow you, a gold plate beneath each face. Mine will read *Grant Sinclair, Founder of GS Enterprises*. That's it. I'll be remembered by a damn painting. Presents a bleak picture, doesn't it?"

She started to say something.

"You're probably thinking I'm going through some mid-life crisis. Except I keep having these thoughts, like the boy in that photo could've been mine. I keep thinking, if you hadn't left that night... that boy could've been ours." He touched her cheek. She could feel a heated flush rise where his fingers grazed her skin.

"Grant, I'm sorry if Brian's picture caused you pain but —"

"So that's his name?" he interrupted, and then smiled. The pit of her stomach churned and she could feel his chest muscles tightening against the tips of her fingers. She repressed the impulse to reveal to him the whole truth about that boy in the picture.

"Driving home from your place last week, I kept reminding myself how foolish I had acted. I pictured this ashtray coming at me again. I wanted to call you afterward, but I kept putting it off and the longer I waited, the more difficult it was to pick up the phone." His lips nudged against her hair. "I'm having an awful damn time with this. I can whip up deals that would astound the best financial wizard. But I've always been lousy at making things right in my relationships." He tilted her chin up and brushed her lips with his mouth in feathery strokes. "I know I'm going to sound like some broken record, but I'll say it. I'm sorry."

His lips stroked her temple in soft strokes. She responded by arching against him as the heat inside her continued to rise. She felt herself drowning in a liquid pool of fire.

"I can't get you out of my system. Or out of my mind," he murmured, drawing her even closer.

Sydney knew she had to force some lucidity into her thoughts. "I don't think you really have it all worked out where I fit in, Grant." She gave a wry smile. They stood, squared off to each other. She kept her voice purposely low so others wouldn't hear. "I'm the one to say I'm sorry... sorry for walking out on you. I promise it'll never happen again, at least not from your bed — because I don't plan to get into your bed any time soon."

She took a few steps from him. He grabbed her wrist, not caring about the stares coming their way. "Never is a very long time." Pain spread up her arm and she clenched her teeth. The pain must've been evident in her eyes, for he eased on his grip.

"Look, I was dancing with Harold." She wrenched herself free to search for him. But when she saw him sitting with Melinda, looking as cozy and intimate as two people could look, she knew rescue by him was not forthcoming.

"By the look of those two, it might be a long night," Grant commented.

She was thankful for the darkness enveloping them. Grant could not see her embarrassment. She sat down at a nearby unoccupied table. Moments later, Grant joined her carrying two filled wineglasses. She suddenly felt a sense of defeat. The man was not going to let her go. She wanted to cry. Cry out her frustration. In silence they sat, listening to the never-ending music.

Every so often she'd venture a glance Harold's way, wondering about poor Madge. Wondering if perhaps Madge was really nursing a sickly mother. After a time, she felt a warm touch pressing into her right hand.

Grant's voice whispered through the night air. "Syd, let me take you home." She turned slightly.

"We need to talk more about this," he told her.

"I drove myself here. I was planning to drive myself home." She could not keep the sarcasm from her voice.

"Then I'll follow you. I'll explain to Harold that you and I need to talk about business matters."

She gave him a *Harold's-no-fool* look, but was actually grateful for the opportunity to leave. Except she wasn't going to lie to Harold. She didn't need more lies filling up her life, clogging it up like a storm drain that would eventually overflow.

"Harold knows more than he lets on."

~\*~

As she and Grant walked through the summer night air, a light mist fell. In spite of these warm breezes, her body trembled. Grant, noticing, put his arm around her protectively, drawing her into his warmth. Tired, with little fight left, she did not pull away. When she gazed up at him, she took hope from the deep look of concern in his eyes. She could also see tenderness there—a tenderness that had been previously missing. Suddenly, he was bending his head, and she felt his lips moved over hers in a gentle caress.

"Believe me when I say I've never stopped wanting you, Syd," he murmured. "For a long time, I wondered if our first night was just a dream. I thought my mind had created a fantasy of us. Night after night, you'd be there in that dream. I'd wake up and find that's all it was—a damn fantasy." His hand caressed her back in long languid strokes.

Sydney realized Grant, by his own admission, had exposed a certain vulnerable part of himself; she knew if she pulled away, she could easily hurt him. Yet, she also knew there was a better way to hurt him. Tell him she had intentionally deprived him not only the knowledge of his son, but his son's life as well.

A sudden feeling of dread grabbed her. A dark part of her past—that shadow part—struggled to come to the surface. All hell could break loose if she dare let out this

secret now. One thing she'd learned scaling up that corporate ladder—timing was everything.

Nonetheless, the truth lay there like the cracked asphalt they now stepped over.

*Grant should be told. Brian's his son.*

She trembled inside. Bit her lower lip, to keep it from trembling. She expected to see the Mercedes, and was surprised when they headed toward the Range Rover she parked next to earlier. Grant released her hand and walked over to it. After a moment, she saw his body go rigid. Then he was bending over, inspecting it. Several sharp expletives followed. One hand went to the back of his neck. He exhaled several more expletives as he slowly circled the vehicle liked it was parked in a showroom.

She walked over to him. In the moon's pale light, she saw the pained expression on his face, and followed the object of his stare. All four tires were flat. Upon closer inspection, she could make out dark slices. While they'd been enjoying the festivities inside Harold's, the Rover had been cut down in silent battle.

"Tell Harold to call the police!" he ordered in a voice filled with frustrated rage.

"Who would do this?" Sydney asked, frightened, dumbfounded.

"Obviously, not everyone is pleased with GS's role in the community."

## Chapter Seven

Grant drove her home in a rented Mazda, which in and of itself was somewhat of a paradox. Despite the fact she did not want to be driving back alone, not after what had just happened; now whoever was out to get him would find out where *she* lived. Indirectly, she had become a part of GS Enterprises. A deep gnawing fear settled inside her as she brought the filled coffee cups out to the living room.

When she noticed Grant had undone several of the top buttons of his shirt that exposed soft tufts of hair beneath, a Tamika-like remark floated through her mind.

*What woman could resist that?*

With unsteady hands, she placed the cups onto the coffee table, and then sat down. When he slid closer, she gave him a warning stare.

"Remember, you promised you'd behave."

He silenced her with a gentle press of his forefinger against her lips.

"You did promise," she reminded him again, and moved slightly away.

"I might've said I *could* behave...not that I would."

"Grant!" she cautioned, raising her hand to put up a feeble barrier.

"Hey, can I help it if you turn me into a sex fiend?" he kidded.

Kidding or not, she sensed serious intent behind his words. He picked up his cup, carefully sipped the still steaming liquid. In the ensuing silence, she wondered if he might not be sulking like some schoolboy after being scolded. His face held the same expression Brian's would get when he couldn't get his own way.

Lines of fatigue surrounded his eyes, and she could only guess at the hours he'd been putting in on this latest project. Her fingers curled at the thought of caressing them away. Until she realized his eyes were no longer directed on her, but were fixed elsewhere in the room, on Brian's photo.

Suddenly an emotion surfaced, one she dare not put a name to. But she knew it was the feeling of remorse. Remorse over what might have been if things had gone right years before.

"Tibble speaks well of you," Grant suddenly remarked, pulling his gaze away from the photo. "But from what I'm guessing, it's going to be a while before you'll be making what you're actually worth."

She stiffened. "And how do you know I'm not doing that now?"

He threw out a figure. She snorted. What was he doing? Taunting her with that ridiculous amount?

"Get real, Grant. Who makes that kind of money today?"

He grinned. His silence gave her his answer. "You're wasting time with that bunch, Syd. Although I bet you they occasionally dangle a juicy promotion, but when it comes time to deliver..."

She suddenly wished her landlord would get the air-conditioner repaired. The stuffiness in the room was making it hard to breathe.

"Excuse me, but I need fresh air," she mumbled, then stood up and headed for the porch. Grant followed.

The light breezes offered little relief from the prevailing mugginess. She leaned against the wood railing, hugged her arms around her, and inhaled the scented night air. A filmy mist settled on her skin. In the dim yellow light, she focused on his shadowy form. She would say he was badly in need of a haircut. But she, still remembering the silkiness of its texture, how it glided so easily between her fingers, appreciated the length. A poignant lump rose in her throat, accompanied by a dull ache that formed in her heart.



"You make a good point," Sydney conceded. "But so what if this 'baby' hasn't come as long a way as she had once hoped. I've learned to accept things the way they are." She gave a defeated snort.

Grant reached out and stroked her chin with his thumb. "The Sydney Morgan I once knew would've been in my office forcing me to see the error of my ways, reminding me a company prospers because of the quality of people it hires, and it rewards them properly for it."

Unable to think clearly with him staring at her like that, she turned and directed her gaze into the enveloping darkness. In the distance, she could see arcing lights zigzag across the black sky.

Damn him for reminding her of the passion she had once held for such things. "Years and events change people."

Grant stepped behind her and placed one hand on each shoulder. "I don't like hearing this defeatist attitude. A spark has obviously gone out somewhere—a spark that once fueled my own success. You were an important catalyst in making GS what it is today."

She tilted her head. "So? What's your point?" She noticed he hadn't mentioned what Harold had confided to her earlier. So far, he was making no *generous* offer, or salary to match. In spite of these disturbing thoughts, she was finding it difficult to ignore the warmth building between them. She liked the closeness of him. Enjoyed inhaling that wildly intoxicating scent of his aftershave—a subtle, yet potent reminder of what it might be like to have this man do all those wonderful things a man can do to a woman.

The image was not unlike a match being held against the side of a candlewick. And she was starting to feel like that wax, melting, losing form, become as malleable.

Grant, sensing her reluctance to move away, took his cue and gently pulled her against him, then nuzzled his chin against one side of her face. "I lost a vital part of my team once because of some crazy misunderstanding," he whispered.

"Grant—"

"Tell me honestly. Are you are getting the same challenge at Farnsworth that you enjoyed with me? I would think handling small account portfolios couldn't produce the same rush of adrenaline as making major company decisions."

Her body stiffened.

"Why did Tibble feel the need to come to that meeting?" She did not respond. She could not.

"Was it because he didn't think you could handle the presentation yourself? Did he doubt your capabilities? How can he know what they are if he doesn't test them? Or was it because Tibble wanted the exposure for himself? Wanted the credit for landing a lucrative account?"

*The drill sergeant was in fine form tonight.*

Grant turned her to face him. The air grew heavier. She could not see, but sensed dark clouds hanging heavy in the starless sky.

Another storm was brewing.

"Can I help it if some are caught up in the dark ages, believing women are so delicate, so fragile they would swoon under corporate strain?"

He laughed. "Honey, let me say, I've seen men crumple under that type of pressure. And what about your son?"

Unable to respond, she stared at him.

His hands tightened around her waist, sensing she might pull away. "Shouldn't his needs be considered? There's college to think about, unless of course his father's helping to take care of that cost."

This was the perfect opportunity to tell him about Brian, she thought. Go for it, her mind urged, else you lose courage.

"Of course I'm assuming you were married to his father," he added, his fingers digging slightly into her waist, "and are now separated? Divorced?"

*The drill sergeant was in top form tonight.*

"Actually...neither," she whispered.

His fingers relaxed their hold. "Neither?" he echoed.

"Uh... no, actually I've never been married. Therefore, I've never had to go through a separation or a divorce."

"But you said he's your son."

"Yes." She gave a funny laugh. "You're aware women don't need to get married in order to produce offspring." She tried to pull away, but his hands remained firm against her hips. In the soft glow, she searched his face and saw only confusion. At first, she tried to guess he simply didn't realize what she had just told him. Then saw the subtle awareness form in his eyes. He released her fully, and walked over to the railing, then crossed his arms as if to erect a barrier between them. As if not wanting to understand her words.

"The fact is you have a son; and shouldn't you take him into account when you make this decision about whether or not to join us?"

It was suddenly obvious that he was determined not to pursue a line of questioning concerning her unmarried status.

"Joining you?" she asked, coyly.

"C'mon, Syd. Don't play innocent. You know what this whole spiel's been about, women in management, climbing corporate ladders... blah, blah, blah. Harold must've mentioned something during your little kitchen *tête-à-tête* earlier."

"Yes," she admitted, "he did. But it all sounded so iffy, I didn't take him too seriously. Then is it true? You're making me an offer?"

"Would you consider coming back?"

"I'm not sure."

Both of his brows lifted. "Not sure?" He uncrossed his arms.

"You haven't told me anything about the position. I have no idea what you're offering. For all I know, I might find myself distributing mail from your mailroom."

Grant gave a twisted half smile. Then laughed out loud, picturing her words in his mind. "I assure you, we'd placed you at a higher level."

"Comforting."

"Seriously, I want you back on our team."

"Seriously, I'd like to consider it once I know exactly *what* you're planning to do with me."

"I was thinking of a vice presidency, which would give you and your son a future. How old did you say he was?"

Alarms sounded inside her brain. Grant would only have to count backwards. She hated playing cat and mouse games. "He's ten...almost. His birthday's in August."

Grant's eyes widened. Some indiscernible emotion flickered across his face. "Isn't that a coincidence...?"

"Coincidence?"

"Samantha and I were married in August."

An evoked image of her perusing through the newspaper and coming upon that page stormed her mind. "I know," she confessed dully. A sudden chill, produced not by the cooling night air, went through her. She rubbed her arms, turned to go back inside. Grant reached out and grabbed her by the elbow.

"Wait! Who did you say the boy's father was?"

Anxiety mounting, she found herself needing to rush back into the apartment, grab Brian's picture, and make a run for it. She managed to wrench herself from his grasp, and could feel the heat of his breath on the back of her neck when he followed her back inside.

Once inside she swept Brian's photograph off the table and pressed it to her chest. She sat in a nearby chair. When she looked up at Grant, she saw the same confusion, the same pain she was feeling. For one silent moment, he stood motionless, as if thunderstruck, regarding her with dark curiosity, seemingly waiting for her to explain it all to him. Every last detail. Tell him what she herself knew would only add more to his pain.

"After I left GS, I found out that I was pregnant," she started, her voice weak but thankfully steady. Grant slowly sank into the chair opposite hers.

"Look, I know we had taken precautions, but hey — things happen. I also know I had choices. And I struggled with those choices. In the end, I knew for me there was only one right decision."

Only his eyes gave her any clue as to what was going on inside him. His brows were drawn down like hoods over their sockets. The muscles below had tightened, making the eyes appear dark and foreboding. As if, in his mind, he was on the fringe of something she did not want to put words to.

Pulling out whatever inner strength she had left, she stood on shaky legs, crossed the room and stared vacantly through the screen. The small flower garden she had planted earlier that spring was now overgrown with goldenrod and ragweed, signaling her that her hay fever would certainly flourish for sure this fall.

An invisible light rain was falling. Sporadic flashes of light lit the distant sky. No thunder yet. Several moths fluttered around the yellow porch globe, producing an irregular pattern on the ceiling. Grant still hadn't said anything, but she could feel his eyes impaling the back of her skull. When she turned, she noticed he was buttoning his shirt, as if needing to do something with his hands.

"Isn't this so out of character for you? Grant Sinclair at a loss for words?" Her pathetic attempt to inject humor into the moment fell short of its goal.

"Are you telling me you left my company because you were pregnant? And the baby was mine? Why in the hell didn't you come to me in the beginning? Why didn't you say something back then! Instead of running off like some dog with its tail between its legs." His left hand withdrew into a fist of white knuckles.

"What good would that have done?" she spat back. "Tell you so you could convince me to get rid of it? Offer me money for an abortion? Then get me the hell out of town?" She clutched Brian's photo to keep her body from shaking. *Somewhere deep in her mind she wondered if he would've gone that route. Then something inside told her... probably not.*

"Better yet, would you have called off your wedding plans? Have your bride-to-be discover you cheated on her?"

Her body tensed. She had dealt with this anger before, through pages and pages of letters to him. Gut-wrenching letters expressing not only that anger, but also her deep frustration and hurt, that things might've gone differently if she hadn't taken the cowardly way by running off like that. They'd been letters she'd ceremoniously burned, and burned along with them all her well-guarded secrets.

But she wanted no more secrets, no more lies. Grant paced back and forth, seemingly caught up in his newly created torment. After a time, he exhaled a long breath of air, as if purging himself of her words.

"Well, I asked for answers, and I certainly got them. Truthfully, I don't know what I would have done if you had come to me right from the start. You damn well never gave me the chance!" He let out a sharp expletive, and then plowed his hand through his hair. "I better get going."

"Yes, we're both *sooo* good at running off," she hissed.

He turned. "Truth I'll always handle, no matter the pain. Deception, I have a more difficult time dealing with. All these years you could have somehow let me know about my son. But not a damn word. All these years..." His voice trailed off, as if the aftermath of her words was now taking effect. He disappeared into another room, leaving her to struggle with her inner chaos.

Sydney had learned to accept and live with all her what-if's a long time ago. What if she had gone back and told him? What if he hadn't married Samantha? What if he had married her instead?

Suddenly, Grant reappeared.

"There's a strange life form lurking in your bathroom," he croaked.

She walked over to the door, peered inside. Glancing upward, she spotted Augie hanging off the shower rod, blinking down at them in his wide-eyed innocence. She inhaled relief. At least he hadn't gone AWOL. Since his coloring blended perfectly with the green floral printed background, Grant probably hadn't noticed him at first when he walked in. She wanted to laugh, but had to stifle the laughter considering the moment.

"Augie, there you are!"

“Augie?”

She turned to Grant. “Yes, I’ve been looking for him. He’d gotten out of his cage the other day and—”

“I hope you keep a better eye on your son than you do on that, that lizard,” he responded in disgust. “By the way, where is Brian?” he asked, his eyes furtively searching the room.

A look had come into his eyes. A look not often seen by her or, she would guess, by others. And it made her wonder if the prospect of meeting Brian wasn’t causing him some amount of trepidation.

“He’s not here, Grant. He’s spending the summer with his grandparents.”

His brows knitted together. His shoulders seemed to sag in quiet relief. “His grandparents?”

“Yes, with the way my workload has been, I thought it’d be better if—”

“You shipped him out? What? To get him out of the way so you could climb corporate ladders? Look, I don’t have time for this. I’ll have Alexis get back to you with more details about that position... *if you’re still interested*,” he added. He made his way toward the outer door.

His sudden unwillingness to stay and discuss what she had just told him left her plainly dumbstruck. Mutely, she could only follow him to door, and watch as he disappeared into the shrouding fog. She noticed her phantom landlord had finally mowed the front lawn, the smooth ground cover now a sharp contrast to the precarious sky. Suddenly, she remembered something and called out to him. But he merely kept walking, ignoring the rain, ignoring her words, and ignoring the fact that this time he essentially was the one doing the running.

Moments later, curled into one corner of her sofa, her knees drawn up to her chin, clutching Brian’s picture, she grabbed the knitted throw and threw it over her, then tried to sort out what had just transpired. No longer concealed by the throw, her eyes settled on the red stain.

The stain had faded somewhat after countless attempts to eradicate it, but enough still remained to cause some irritation. Even her mother's unfailing remedies had been hard pressed to do their magic here. And like that stain, the exposed truth was leaving behind just enough contamination.

Grant, by his sudden retreat, had given her no opportunity to tell him the rest of her secret. Then again, why hit him with everything at once? Grant would certainly figure that one out if it should happen that he ever wanted to meet his son. Her stomach churned at the prospect.

What exactly was she going to see in his eyes when he saw Brian's malformed hand? More importantly, and what frightened her even more, what would Brian see in his father's eyes? A shudder passed through her. He was always the consummate perfectionist. A man who expected nothing less than that from every part of his life.

And now one of those parts would include a son, a not so perfect son. With Brian's photo resting in her lap, the knitted throw tucked around her legs, her knees to her chin, she wrapped her arms tightly around them and allowed the tears to come.

~\*~

Grant walked into his townhouse. He fished into his pocket for the keys to toss back on to the stand, and then realized they were still inside the Rover. It'd been damn stupid of him to go out into that storm. Damn stupid. With bolts of lightning streaking around him. He could've gotten himself fried. He'd been able to find a convenience store and from there had called a cab. That's when he noticed she didn't live in the best of neighborhoods. And it bothered him. Bothered him greatly.

Sure, he could've gone back to her place. But he needed time to regroup. And no way was he about to go back into her apartment with that poor excuse of a Godzilla slinking about. How could she allow her son to have a damn *lizard*, of all things?

He could've called Harold to come and pick him up. But there would've been questions. Plus, he needed to be alone with his thoughts. He crossed the room to the



wet bar. With one hand, he picked up a glass. With the other, drew out the crystal stopper on a decanter of pricey scotch. He poured a short drink. Gulped it down. Poured another, filling the glass a fraction more than before.

He could drink the entire damn bottle and it still wouldn't block out her words.

*Grant, Brian is your son. Brian is your son.*

He shook his head to block the truth, trying at the same time to block out the agony of her words repeating inside his mind. He refilled his glass. Positioned it to his lips.

*I have a son. His name's Brian.*

He gulped down his drink, returning the now empty glass alongside the decanter. Brian wasn't a bad name. Yet, was it one he'd have chosen had he been given the choice? And if he had been given that choice, what name would he have decided?

Unlike his own, Brian wasn't a strong name. He'd always liked the name Garth, strong, sensitive. Garth Sinclair. Yeah, he liked the sound of Garth Sinclair.

He poured another drink, thought some more on it. *Or Arthur Sinclair, II?*

Except he personally never cared for the short version. *Art. Artie.* It made him picture a housepainter he'd once hired.

Grant reached for the decanter, but seeing the half-filled bottle, decided he'd had enough. Drinking more was not going to obliterate what now lay before him like an overturned gravestone. Yeah, it would have been nice if he could've named him.

He said the name again—aloud.

"Brian."

"Brian Morgan."

*No!*

"Brian Sinclair."

He said it again. Absorbed it internally. Absorbed it into parts of his mind, his heart.

He swallowed hard several times, to dispel the mass forming in his throat. His focus drifted to the expensive furnishings and priceless pieces of art. Brian was going

on ten. He imagined a ten-year-old boy inside this room of museum pieces. Boys his age were quite active.

Restlessly, he walked around the room, to rein in some of his anger so he could think clearer. Suddenly, he felt as if something was sorely out of place. Like a painting hanging crooked. A book placed upside down inside a wall shelf. Something was not quite right in the room.

Then he realized what it was—the insufferable quiet. A quiet that threatened to envelop him, cloak him in absolute aloneness.

But he'd always been a loner. Arthur Sinclair had found little time to spend with his son. Louise Sinclair spent most of hers managing an interior decorating business.

Grant's childhood memories offered little except in the way of boarding schools, private universities—all located miles enough away to necessitate air travel on both ends. He hated the loneliness of those years, but had learned to embrace it into his life.

His heart pounded heavily against his chest wall. Almost ten years ago, a son had been born to him. He thought of his father, dead now; they had been strangers most of their lives. So many times he had needed his dad at his high school and college football games. Only on rare occasions had his father been able to find the time to fly back from an overseas trip to watch him play. Most times a seat remained empty in those bleachers, reminding him where his father should be sitting, watching, cheering him on.

How many times had he found himself looking up into the crowd, hoping against hope that he'd spot that familiar tall figure? Arthur Sinclair would wear a bright orange hat—a hunter's hat—to the infrequent games he was able to make, so his son could easily pick him from the crowd. But seldom did Arthur Sinclair's son ever spot that bright orange.

Grant settled wearily into an overstuffed chair that had once belonged to the senior Sinclair. Bent over, he rested his elbows between his knees, and then clasped his hands together. He'd managed to go on and win many of those victories.

Nonetheless, they'd been the ones that had ended up leaving huge gaping holes inside him that would never be filled. He felt it coming, welling up inside like an inflating balloon.

Syd had had a choice. She had chosen to keep her baby — *his baby*. For that reason, he felt grateful. Except it didn't stop or alleviate the terrible ache growing inside. His chest felt tight, so tight it might explode if he didn't release some of the pain.

*Grown men don't cry.* A father's — his father's — words of wisdom to a son.

But he damn sure wanted to cry.

## Chapter Eight

"Good morning, Sydney!" Irene Babson greeted, cheerfully.

"Tamika called in and said she'd be a little late."

"Damn! Of all mornings," Sydney responded, exposing an irritation that made Irene slink back behind her monitor screen.

*Not your cool collected self, are we this morning?*

After Grant had stormed out early Sunday morning, she'd been simmering inside like an overdue volcano, on the verge of spewing its ashes. Poor Augie had enough sense to crawl back into his cage, figuring it was safer in case she decided to heave things around. The hamsters had dug deep piles of shavings, and burrowed themselves into their sanctuary.

She could have done the same. Dug a hole and burrowed into it.

She'd been tempted to call Grant. Let him know that running away wasn't going to help the situation. They still had to work together on the IPO project. He'd been the one to push and shove, busting the dam.

*Drill sergeant!*

He'd well earned his title.

"There are donuts in the kitchen," Irene told her in a cautious tone.

"Maybe I could use something sweet, huh?" Sydney half-joked. Irene responded with a careful nod.

Sydney then made a quick detour to the corporate kitchen.

She would need plenty of coffee considering the amount of sleep she'd been getting.

As she filled her mug, she thought how she had purposely not revealed Brian's father's identity to anyone, not even her parents. Right after leaving Chicago she'd wanted to leave that dark secret behind, along with her shaded past. And she'd almost succeeded until Grant had to go and move his damn operations into her state. It was bad enough to have a man follow you, but to have an entire company?

She absently sipped her coffee, and then remembered the Range Rover. Shook her head in disgust, picturing the slashed tires. Then imagined some deviate soul lurking outside her office building. Because of her association with GS, could she be their next target? After all, Farnsworth was another cog in GS's wheel—a wheel someone wanted to break in order to stop the machinery.

These frightening thoughts dried up her saliva, and she had to gulp down more coffee. Suddenly she knew she needed to be with Brian. Last night she'd walked around his room. Touched his things. She'd found some drawings he'd done. One of his father; its anatomical dimensions were somewhat out of kilter, displaying an oversized head perched on top of a stick-like figure that was taller than either the crayon-drawn house or surrounding trees. But she knew as far as Brian was concerned, those were the correct dimensions, for they aptly fit the super-hero image in his mind.

Suddenly, an instant replay of Grant's encounter with the elusive reptile produced an irrepressible giggle. She suppressed outright laughter when several co-workers walked in. When they left, she found herself fighting back not only the giggles, but tears as well. Mid-summer was a slower period for Farnsworth, what with vacations and all. And she had suggested to Grant the actual filing wait until fall, which meant GS was set for a while. And she did promise Brian she would try to make it down. Plus they were almost into August.

But leaving still wasn't getting her out of the woods, not by a long shot.

Grant knew about Brian. But how was she going to tell Brian about Grant without looking like she was pulling a *second* father out of thin air? And this one very much alive! She put down the coffee mug as a slow wave of nausea began to hit.

~\*~

The phone was ringing off the hook inside her office, reminding her she had forgotten to put it on voice mail. She stared at the LCD screen, recognized Tibble's extension, and wrinkled her nose.

"Morning, Sydney! Have a minute? Let's talk!"

As she hurried toward his office, she could sense a familiar black cloud in close pursuit.

When she walked in, his eyes focused directly on her this time. Although his facial expression revealed little, his desk was uncharacteristically clean. All signaled a warning. He asked her to close the door.

She hated closed doors.

*You can be as nervous as hell...*

As if settling into a church pew, she sat in the nearest chair. Tibble cleared his throat. His thick brows ran in one continuous line across his forehead.

"Sydney, you've been with us for —" He looked at her.

"Five...almost six years," she finished.

"Yes, and I'm sure I don't have to say you've been a great asset to this firm."

*Did he use the correct tense? Been? Not you are.*

"Thank you." Uneasiness followed.

He studied her. Picked up a gold pen, held it between his stumpy fingers. The give-away-nothing smile set off additional alarm peals.

"Your work has been exemplary. If anyone merits a promotion, you would be most deserving."

This time *she* cleared her throat. "Thanks, but I haven't asked —"

“Presently, I’m afraid we aren’t in a position to do that. Although with time —”

“What are you getting at?”

Blankly, he stared at her. “Sydney, we want our employees to stay, especially when we take so much effort to train them. I’ve always considered myself as something of a mentor, and possibly that someday you’d fill my —”

She crossed her right leg over the left knee, and it pumped up and down like a piston, exhibiting increasing impatience. She could tell he’d been rehearsing this little spiel and as usual was determined to deliver it from start to finish.

“Whenever we learn one of our own is dissatisfied here, we assume he... or she is looking toward better prospects. People at your level are very difficult, very difficult to replace. Takes a long time to find someone with similar qualifica —”

Unable to hear more, she bolted out of her chair, positioned her hands on the edge of his desk. “What is this *really* about? What makes you think I intend to leave?” She had her suspicions.

From beneath Tibble’s biting shirt collar, a shade of red inched upward, causing her to worry if the man was going to suffer a coronary. She’d taken CPR but was in no inclination to put it to good use if she didn’t have to.

With anxious eyes, Tibble’s barreled chest deflated as he let out a whoosh of air. He laced his fingers together in an attempt to gain some composure. “Sinclair knows damn well we could never come close to matching his offer.”

Feeling her jaw line sag, she slowly retreated back into her chair. “Grant’s offer! He only just—how did you even find out about that?” The grapevine, she mused, had far-reaching tentacles.

Tibble shifted uneasily. “You’d be a complete fool not to accept, Morgan.” His voice lowered to a whisper as he made a valiant effort to lean his barreled shape over the desk. Then he pointed a finger at her. “If Sinclair proposed that same deal to me, I’d be out of here before you could say *jackrabbit*.” He leaned back, pulled out a side drawer and took out an oval-shaped box.

Out of which he drew a cigar. “I don’t actually smoke these anymore.”

Sydney's lips curled in instant disgust.

"You do realize," he began, sniffing the cigar as if it were a precious treasure from the Orient, "it'll be quite a few more years before you reach the same level Grant is offering."

"It may be difficult for you to believe, but I haven't accepted any offer from that man." Her remark caused him to lift one skeptical brow.

"It's true!" she blurted, wondering if perhaps she was trying to convince herself of that fact.

Tibble's silence, as he fidgeted with the cigar, set off additional alarms.

"There's something else, isn't there?"

"I've already notified personnel to contact headhunters to make a preliminary scan of the area."

She clutched the arms of her chair. "You can't mean for my job?"

He could not look at her directly this time, but kept his focus on the cigar. "Damn it, Sydney, cut the innocence!" He pointed one end at her. "You know how the game's played. We cover our ass... behinds. We don't get caught empty-handed. If you go with GS, we want someone to step right in. We don't want to lose the account because there's no one here to do the work."

Again, she was being accused of desertion. Sensing whatever more she had to say would prove moot, she stood. "Fine then. Thanks for the warning. I'll let you know my decision as soon as I make one."

Tibble simply nodded. He looked at his cigar as if he might possibly light it, and then returned it to the box. He then slipped off his glasses and proceeded to clean the lenses. She waited for him to say something else... something that would indicate that her job was not in jeopardy. But instead, he merely folded them and put them and the cigar box away, basically signaling to her the end of their conversation.

Moments later, when she entered her own office, she could not dismiss the feeling of choking panic. Grant had gone ahead and done what he had set out to do.



Ruin her career at Farnsworth. Ruin her life. Leave her few options. Manipulate her life as he had done years before.

With his wealth and power, who knew what else the man was capable of, knowing damn well that Farnsworth could not outright fire her without just cause? He also knew the bit of information Tibble had just thrown at her, namely his lucrative offer, might eventually bring her career at Farnsworth to a grinding halt. Feeling stunned by this revelation, she could only stare at the opposite wall. She needed time to think. Time to clear her mind. Time to plan out her next course of action.

When she heard Tamika's throaty low-pitched voice— failing to keep hysteria out of her own voice, feeling like a drowning woman— she called out to her.

"First thing I need you to do is to call the airlines and book me on tomorrow's earliest flight to Sarasota. Also, ask them if iguanas are allowed on board," she added as an afterthought, remembering reading somewhere about certain restrictions on those things. She could get someone to take care of the hamsters.

But Brian missed Augie and he had strongly hinted the last time they had spoken on the phone about her bringing the iguana down. She didn't want to disappoint him. She couldn't disappoint him now.

Tamika's face held an obvious look of surprise.

"I'm taking some vacation time," Sydney quickly explained.

"I promised Brian I'd try to get down there. Things are slow. GS is set for the time being, and I simply need to get away for a while."

"You don't need to explain. There shouldn't be any problem getting you on a flight." Tamika studied her. "Is everything okay?"

She could only nod. "Any messages while I was in Tibble's office?"

"I picked these up from Irene's desk." Tamika shuffled through several pink memo slips and slowly handed them to her.

"Forcier and Smith called regarding their accounts. Alexis called but left no message. Your answering machine's been repaired and can be picked up at any time, and—"

“Whoa, go back one. Alexis called?”

Tamika failed to stifle a giggle. “Yes. Can you imagine if that woman ever came here to work! Why, all those wet-behind-the-ears trainees from downstairs would find all sorts of excuses to get to this floor. I wonder if Sinclair gets any work done?”

When Sydney did not respond, Tamika, realizing the implication of her words, quickly added, “Oops, not an appropriate remark. Sorry. I’m sure she’s quite good at her job. It’s just, with that flaming red hair... and the fact she’s exceptionally gorgeous.”

“Are there any other messages?” Not that she was looking for one from Grant, but considering what had transpired between them over the weekend...

“No. That’s it!”

*It was the calm before the storm.* She felt it in her bones.

“Fine, then please get Forcier on the line. We don’t keep our clients waiting. Time means money. Especially in this game.”

As soon as Tamika left, unable to contain her curiosity over the reason for Alexis’s call, she phoned GS’s office. When she was told Alexis was not in, she left her number, crumpled the message and flung it at the wastebasket, missing it. If it were urgent, the woman would call back.

By noon, the skies had cleared and Sydney, deciding to spend her lunch hour on the plaza, sat on a bench situated next to a stone fountain where an occasional wayward spray of water offered welcomed relief from the hot sun.

She closed her eyes, pictured herself kicking off her shoes, slipping her toes into the fine wet squishy sand, and listening to sounds of waves rhythmically beating against the shore. She saw herself walking along a sun-baked beach, holding Brian’s hand as they searched for one-of-a-kind seashells. And the best part of this daydream was she would be doing all of this with her son.

Before retiring, Sydney placed her packed suitcase near the outside door, wanting a quick start. Later, once in bed, she could only toss and turn until realizing sleep was not forthcoming. She slid out of bed, went into the bathroom and rummaged through the medicine cabinet for something that might help her sleep. Finding nothing except for aspirin, she closed the mirrored door, and jumped at the sight of her sleep-deprived eyes staring back, eyes that harbored ill-begotten secrets—secrets that might now be revealed to the world.

Would Grant actually do that? Let everyone know about what she had told him? That he was Brian's father? Let the world know the truth? She placed her hands on the edge of the sink. Shut her eyes. Bent her head. Rephrased the question in her mind.

Would he do that to *his* son?

A scream rose deep from her gut, catching inside her throat. Suddenly, the world she had so carefully built around her and Brian was crumbling, shattering into fragments of confusion and misunderstanding. Tears threatened to spill. The tears were not for her. She'd cried those long ago. But for a little boy who'd lost years with his father. She lifted her head, and ventured a look back into eyes that now appeared vacant.

Brian would have good reason to hate her now. She'd not only lied to him, but had essentially betrayed him with that lie. Betrayal was betrayal, no matter how you looked at it.

Her hands trembled and she covered her face.

## Chapter Nine

Sydney walked inside the terminal, and relief soon followed when she spotted frantic arms waving. Waving back, she quickened her steps. As Brian broke loose from his grandfather's grasp and ran toward her, she immediately bent down and threw her arms around him. Full of chatter and smiles at first but realizing this wasn't exactly the manly thing to do, he quickly withdrew.

"Where's Augie?" he asked.

"Honey, commercial airliners don't allow reptiles on board."

"Who's taking care of him?" he cried. "Tommy's mother won't let him back in their house after he got out last time."

"Tamika."

"Tamika? No way! What does she know about iguanas?"

"I gave her a couple of your books. Besides, her roommate once kept snakes—"

"That's not the same."

Brian, she could see, was clearly upset.

"Hi, honey," Irma Morgan, a doughy version of her daughter, greeted her. "Is something wrong, Brian?"

"Mom didn't bring Augie." He was looking down at his sneakers as if to conceal his disappointment.

A brief look of relief washed over her mother's face. "I'm sure there's a good reason."

"I couldn't get him on the plane," Sydney explained.

"Well it's good that *you* were able to come down at all," her mother said. "Isn't that right, Brian?"

Brian glanced up, catching the meaning behind his grandmother's words. "Yeah. I mean, I'm glad you came, Mom."

"We were worried you might not make it," her father interrupted. "You sounded tired when you called the other night. That company you're working for should be more understand—"

"I had no problem getting the time off," Sydney responded as if to cut him off, desperately hoping that he was not going off on one of his tangents. Frank Morgan missed nothing when it came to his only daughter's well being, she mused, readjusting her sunglasses, thankful that neither could see the dark circles they concealed.

Moments later, inside the back seat of her parents' late model Cadillac, seemingly forgetting Augie's absence, Brian chattered incessantly on, telling her all the things he'd done since his arrival. His chattering did not cease even when they pulled into the carport adjacent to an oversized condo situated on ocean front property.

"Wait until you see my room! You'll be able to hear the waves at night. There's a swimming pool and tennis courts, and a big game room with lots of video stuff, and ping pong, and—"

"Whoa!" her mother cried. "There will be time to show your mother all of that later. She might want to rest." Irma Morgan peered over half-framed glasses and threw a discerning look at her daughter. One Sydney recognized as her *I-hope-everything's-okay* look.

Brian, heeding his grandmother's words, slid quietly out of the back seat.

Sydney stared after her son and could see more now the similarities between him and Grant. Brian was not wearing his glove, but the prosthetic device. Although the hook on the end looked slightly bent.

"I ran over it with Gram's tricycle," Brian explained when she asked him. "Gramps tried to hammer it back into shape."

Sydney sighed, knowing the insurance wasn't going to pay for this one.

"Let me help pay for it," her father offered, reading the look on his daughter's face. "I know those things cost a pretty penny."

"That's okay, Dad. I'll figure something out," she could only respond, and ignored her father's shaking head.

"Did you remember to feed Augie his crickets?" Brian suddenly asked.

"Augie has been eating quite well," she answered, recalling the disappearing food she'd been leaving out for him during his self-imposed hiatus.

As the four walked into the condo, a flash of lightning streaked across the sky. The electrified air meant they would get the usual afternoon storms. Suddenly she got the feeling they were the same clouds that had been following her through most of the summer. Through the wide sweeping windows of her parents' condo, she stared out at the water where a thousand diamonds reflected off the surface.

"Wait until you see our sunsets," her mother suddenly commented, in a voice dripping with a touch more enthusiasm than required. "They'll put romance into anyone's heart."

Sheer instinct warned Sydney not to go there. "You two did the right thing to move down here," she said instead. "Once I get accustomed to this leisure time, it will be difficult going back."

She bit her lowered lip. *Wrong thing to say.*

"Oh, honey, stay as long as you want," her father quickly responded. "We certainly have the room, and—"

"Thanks, Dad." She glanced over at her mother. An optimistic brow lifted at the prospect of her considering making such a move. Neither one had ever felt easy about their only daughter living at opposite ends of the seaboard. They'd had their share of arguments over it, too. But this time, she was simply going to let their subtle enough hints roll over her the way water rolled over an oily surface.

As Sydney unpacked her suitcase, a vague restlessness began to settle inside her. She couldn't say why, especially now that family surrounded her.

"How are you doing?" her father's soft voice inquired, nudging her out of her reverie. He was standing outside her bedroom door.

"Okay, Dad." She could see he'd aged some since her last visit. He didn't appear as tall, and his shoulders were slightly more hunched over. His once thick black hair, which had steadily been fading over the years, was now entirely gray. But at least he looked healthy and relaxed. He walked into the room and sat on a boudoir stool that made her wonder if it could hold his weight.

"Your mother went to a great deal of trouble redecorating this room. Enjoyed every moment, too. Does it look familiar?"

The walls had been sponge painted in subtle shades of pale lavender and teal green—similar to colors in her childhood room—demonstrating that her mother took no stock in the words '*you can never go home again*'. A nuance of entrapment tugged at her.

"Brian's turning into one terrific kid," her father began. "Who ever taught him how to hit a ball like that? He had me take him up to the school's ball field. You should've seen those kids, their tongues hanging out, and eyes bulging out of their sockets. He actually hit several over the fence. One of the coaches came over and asked if he was planning to go to school here."

She ignored the inflection at the end of that sentence, which seemed to expect an answer. "You know Brian, when he sets his mind on doing something. He did tell you he's already on a great team back home?"

Her father placed a palm on top of either thigh. "The boy holds back a lot though."

Sydney deliberately turned and hung several dresses in a nearby closet. "Really."

"He gets moody at times."

She listened with forced patience. "Brian's a quiet boy. But if you're wondering about role models," knowing where he was heading, "he's got his male teachers, and his coach, and some of my male friends also take an interest in him." Although lately there hadn't been any of those male friends lurking about, but she wasn't about to relay

that bit of info, arming him with more ammunition. "And he does have you." She flashed one of those I'm-trying-to-make-a-point-here smiles. She was in no mood to get caught up into the same old song and dance. If she were on the phone with him right now, she could easily make her usual someone's-at-the-door excuse and end the conversation when it got this far. Unfortunately, no doorbells were going to ring now.

"Isn't natural, a woman being forced to raise a child by herself."

She closed the suitcase, slid it under the bed, walked over to him, and placed a hand on his shoulder, holding back the hug she really wanted to give.

"Dad, I do appreciate your concern. But Brian's not having a father hasn't impaired his emotional or psychological development in any way. So why not just enjoy him while he's here?" *And me, while you're at it.* She kept the last thought tucked inside.

Her father stood. "I guess we retirees have too much time on our hands. Too much time to fret about this stuff."

Suddenly, she noticed stiffening at his jaw line. "But hell, I get damn mad when I think of the man who shirked his responsibility to you and my grandson. You've carried this entire burden yourself. What with Brian's disabili —"

"He's physically challenged. Not disabled."

Her father suddenly regarded her. "Okay, call it what you want. Look, we just want to help. But you always keep refusing that help. And look at you. Worn out working a full-time job. I don't know how you've managed —"

"Single mothers do, every day," she interrupted. "We manage because we have no choice."

"And the fact you've had Brian believing his father's dead," he again interrupted, as if not hearing her. "Both your mother and I have always felt uncomfortable being part of that deceit —"

"Would you rather have Brian believe that his father did not want him?" she whispered. "Or have kids call him a bast —"



"Gram made brownies and a big pitcher of lemonade," a small voice yelled from one end of the hallway.

*Reprieve.* Sydney shot her father a look of warning, and then exhaled relief. "That's one offer I can't refuse," she quickly yelled back, practically running from the room.

She grabbed Brian's hand and made a beeline for the kitchen, all the while thinking how her father could always manage to revert her back to feeling like an eight year old.

~\*~

Later that night, as Sydney lay in bed, a cold empty feeling threatened to settle inside. Through the quiet darkness, her mind spun with several out-of-control scenarios, reminding her she still had a decision to make. Several times, she tried closing her eyes, hoping that sleep would overtake her so she could postpone that decision. And she was tired. Bone tired.

Thoughts cluttered her mind like incessant sounds of pesky mosquitoes. She needed a new car. New car meant car payments. She thought of the increase in her rent. She thought of the additional cost whenever Brian needed a new prosthesis.

And her already over-stretched budget, and no raise in sight, and possibly no job if there was another layoff. *Single mothers managed.* Sure they did. Could she continue on like this? Dare she mention to her parents those rumors about the layoffs? And who better to let go than someone already considering leaving the firm? Downsizing hadn't become a trend. It'd become a way of life for most companies, in order to survive.

Grant's offer was a lifesaver in disguise, a device thrown to her to keep her afloat.

He'd always been so good at these games of will. And better at winning. She left the bed and walked out onto the balcony. Despite the warm moist air, her thin nightgown offered little protection against the cooling Gulf breezes. Her eyes searched

through the darkness as if there she might find her answers. Except for an occasional streak of white light that created a canvas of deep purple and violet, not one single star pierced the developing cloud cover.

Grant's lucrative offer would solve all financial woes, but by accepting it, others would be created, one being she'd have to work with him on a day-to-day basis. But she had to make a decision soon, no wavering and no floundering. That was not her style.

She had to keep her life focused and moving forward. And since Brian's needs came first, she knew in her mind, she'd pretty much had made the decision. Yet, by accepting Grant's offer and with him knowing the truth, would he feel obligated to take on some of those responsibilities her father had referred to earlier?

Did she want that for Brian?

She would work for Grant. Take the lucrative salary. Earn every damn dollar. But she would not accept charity from that man. Nor would she accept him into that part of her life where he could influence those decisions only she could make. He gave up that right long ago when he married that other woman.

As she slid back beneath the covers, and her head sank back into the pillow, she made a mental note to phone Tibble in the morning to tell him to release those headhunters.

She closed her eyes. She'd made the decision. Sleep would now come.

## Chapter Ten

After a quick swim the following morning, Sydney found her mother puttering in the kitchen humming a Neil Diamond tune.

“Good morning, Sydney!” she greeted. “Out swimming already? I picked up some of that boysenberry syrup you used to inhale as a kid. How about whole wheat pancakes?” Her mother suddenly gave her a scrutinizing look. “You look a lot thinner than last time you were here. You’re not on another crazy diet? I don’t see where you could afford to lose more weight.”

Sydney felt breathless. No one could cover as much ground in one breath as her mother. “I’m not on any crazy diet. I exercise and it revs up the old metabolism. I don’t want these muscles turning into flab,” she added, pulling out a pitcher of orange juice from the refrigerator, at the same time acknowledging the cold hard truth for her increased activity and added stress – one man’s re-entry into her life.

“You remember Jonathan Benson, don’t you?”

One of those out-of-the blue questions Sydney knew could lead to just about *anything*. Things she particularly might not care to go into, at least not that early in the morning. “Name sounds familiar.” A flash of the past ensued. “Good Lord, didn’t I graduate high school with him?”

Her response produced an instant smile on her mother’s face.

“Yes. Jon’s down here visiting his parents,” enunciating Jon’s name.

“How nice,” Sydney replied with slight enthusiasm.

"Your father has suggested that they join us for lunch later at that cute oceanfront cafe."

Sydney did not want to respond, but the ensuing silence begged for one. "Mom, I hope Dad, the diehard matchmaker that he is, isn't trying to get something going here. He's convinced that his only daughter needs a man to take care of her, despite the fact that this 'only' daughter has been taking pretty good care of herself for a while now."

Irma Morgan nervously wiped her hands across her blue flowered apron before pouring the juice. "Go along with him," she urged. "You know how he feels about you and Brian." She ventured a glance Sydney's way. "Especially since you're so bent on not letting him help in other ways."

"It's not a question of let —"

"He wants to know you're happy."

Sydney released an exasperated sigh. Why did these conversations end up like this, with her on the defense?

"We know you're doing okay," her mother was quick to point out. "But are you truly happy? It's a question you should ask yourself every so often."

"It's not a matter of whether I'm happy. Besides, happiness isn't something you expect to find around the corner. And I don't have to read countless books to know a woman like me has to depend on herself to get through this life." She watched her mother pour more orange juice, wondering if Irma Morgan ever had to fix a loose washer on a dripping, sleep-disturbing faucet, or haggle with a smart-alecky auto body repairman over a suspiciously inflated invoice. She seriously doubted it.

It was too easy for the Irma Morgan's of the world to send out their troops—in her mother's case, Frank Morgan. She wasn't going to turn over any of her well-earned autonomy to any man in exchange for that kind of security.

"Good morning, folks," her father suddenly greeted, his booming voice easily shattering her thoughts. He was grinning widely. "So, what's the game plan for today?" He looked especially handsome when he smiled, she thought. And she hated to be the one to erase that smile.

"How about lunch later at that little cafe?" she found herself suggesting and moaned inwardly. "Mom mentioned something about inviting the Bensons along."

~\*~

Jonathan Benson drove a silver Jaguar. It was Friday night and, thanks to her father's not so subtle hints several days before, Sydney now sat in the passenger side. How had her father put it? *Go out with Jon for old time's sake?*

As the sleek car crossed the causeway into St. Armand Key, Sydney made mental notes. Some would consider Jonathan tall, dark and handsome, and he did draw his share of female stares at the restaurant they'd just left. And yes, they also shared somewhat of a brief history between them, and she did feel relatively comfortable in his presence.

Yet *she* was still ready to call it a night. But he'd insisted they stop for a drink at one of the local pubs. When she called her father on the mobile to let them know where she was in case they needed her, her father's too cheerful sounding voice evoked in her images of him patting himself on the back. After all, wasn't it obvious, at least to him, that his daughter was having a great time due to his manipulations?

Jon seemed to know his way around pretty well as they were soon sitting off to one side of a postage-sized dance floor. As they waited for their drinks to be served, Sydney immediately picked up on a familiar tune. Catching interest on her face, Jon asked if she wanted to dance. She thought of her last disastrous efforts with Harold.

"If you don't mind two left feet?"

Jon chuckled. "I wouldn't mind three. Did I tell you how sensational you look in that dress? I've always liked black on a woman."

Sydney returned a faint smile, at the same time wondered what had ever possessed her to buy it. She and her mother had gone shopping, and her mother had practically begged her to try the *slip of a thing* on. Slip of a thing it was, with a hemline

that fell inches above her kneecaps and a neckline that seemed to plunge to dangerous depths, making her now feel somewhat vulnerable to eager male eyes.

She'd always preferred ankle length skirts that moved with ease and grace. Basically, they made her feel safe. It had been only on some strange impulse that she had gone ahead and purchased this dress. But after having consumed several whiskey sours, Sydney's concerns dissipated. With no other familiar face in the room outside of Jon's, no gaping eyes and, above all, no potentially loose-wagging tongues, she was not going to worry about anyone giving a detailed account of her actions during the office coffee breaks.

She and Jon danced several dances; then, on the last twirl during one song, expecting to meet Jon's dark brown eyes, instead found herself facing a pair of familiar icy gray orbs.

"Now what are the chances of us meeting like this?" the voice boomed above the deafening music. The rich resonance yanked her into immediate cold sobriety—at least as far as her mind was concerned. The rest of her fell limp into Grant Sinclair's waiting arms.

"You tell me!" she retorted. "I'd like to play those numbers the next time I buy a lottery ticket." She could barely get the words out before his arms were encircling her waist, drawing her close to him, too damn close for her liking. She let out a muffled expletive before asking, "What are you doing down here?"

"Trying to have as good a time as you obviously are," he quipped. "Umm, you feel delightful. What's wrong with that man you're with? If I were him, I'd make sure we'd be spending the night alone where I could have you all to myself. Certainly not in this crowded place." His lips boldly touched and teased one earlobe.

Despite the shivers that raced through her, she was sober enough to know *exactly* what might happen if they *were* alone. Grant was deliberately trying to stir up emotions—emotions that could produce sweet warmth inside her. Nervously, she glanced over at Jon, hoping that he might have enough gumption to cut back in. But he appeared to be nursing not only his drink, but also a deflated ego.

"Poor soul. He was quite accommodating on that last spin. He probably figured he had no choice when I told him I was your new boss."

"You told him *what*? Why, I only called Tibble the other morning to tell him —"

"You of all people should know how news travels." One brow along with one corner of his mouth lifted into slight amusement. "Tibble called me right after he spoke to you, assuring me that there'd be no hard feelings on his part. Now how did he put it? He couldn't blame me for taking away his best man."

"Terrific. But that doesn't answer my question."

"Which is —?"

"Why are you here? And how did you find me?"

"I'm here checking on GS holdings."

"Yeah, right. Remember? I worked... or used to work for the firm underwriting your IPO. And I don't recall seeing anything on those papers that would indicate GS has or is planning to acquire holdings in this state. Don't tell me you're pulling out of Connecticut because of a few protestors. You realize you're not going to be able to sell that property before it can be cleaned up. You may very well be stuck with it for years to come. So I'd suggest you stay put. Face the music, because frankly you've got no place to run."

His eyes darkened at her words. "I have no intentions of pulling out. I'm opening a branch office here in St. Armand Key."

She snorted.

He frowned. "In fact, renovation has already begun. Tomorrow morning I'm going over to check it out."

She let out another snort.

He swung her around until they came to a full stop, landing back next to her table. "Sorry, old chap," Grant apologized to Jon.

"I didn't mean to take up your lady's time. It's all strictly business, you know. Right, Syd?"

"Wouldn't have it any other way," she replied with unconcealed annoyance.

"I know it's Saturday tomorrow, but how about coming with me to look over that property I was mentioning?" Grant suddenly asked.

A thread of anticipation wound its way through her at the prospect. She knew the more she learned about the company's operations now, the better for her later. "Saturday's okay, I... guess. Where and what time shall I meet you?"

"Ten thirty." His gaze suddenly fell on Jon. "Or is that too early considering?"

Catching his drift, she quickly interjected a reply. "No, ten thirty is fine."

"Good. I'll pick you up."

"You mean come to the house?"

He nodded, smiled a faint knowing smile.

She felt Jon studying her.

"Yes, although I could meet you there. You don't know where I'm staying."

"Actually, I do. That's how I had managed to find you here. When Alexis returned your call the other day and found out that you'd left for Florida, being as thorough as she is, she asked Tamika for your parents' number in case we needed to get in touch with you. Tamika came through quite nicely." He seemed to hesitate. "I... uh... also had a nice chat with your mother earlier and... also with Brian, who actually answered the phone."

As if someone had slipped ice cubes down the front of her 'slip of a thing' dress, cold chills traveled through her. Suddenly, she took one of Grant's arms and pulled him to one side, out of Jon's hearing.

"And what did you tell them?" She fought the rising panic as their eyes locked for one indefinite moment. Desperate to know exactly what had transpired during that conversation, her grip tightened around his arm. His stony countenance offered not a clue.

"We chatted about baseball... fishing... stuff like that, before he handed the phone over to your mother. She asked more questions, and I simply told her who I was."



Sydney's panic surged up one more level, as her mother—the dedicated detective—would not hesitate to ask the right questions to get the right answers. “You told her who you were?”

Grant straightened, easily loosened her grip and pushed her hand away. Gave her a half grin. A smirk actually, that created a paradox to the cold dark expression his eyes held, revealing little except he basically knew exactly where she was coming from.

“Yes, I told her that I offered you a chance of a lifetime with my company.” As if enjoying her angst, he grinned at their cat and mouse game.

She could not hold back a sigh of relief. He could have easily divulged to them who he was. He could have easily destroyed the years of trust she'd built between them. Her relief, she knew, would be short-lived, because he could still let the proverbial cat out of the bag.

She felt his fingers slowly wrap themselves around the thin upper part of her arm. “As much as I was tempted, do you think I would tell my son over a damn phone line that I'm his father before his mother tells him?” He released her. Stepped back. “Give me more credit than that!” An indiscernible look flickered across his face. Then his eyes brightened. “Say, why not bring him along?” Purposely, she felt he had said this loud enough so that Jonathan could hear him pose the offer.

“Bring him along?” she echoed, unbelieving that he would dare make the suggestion considering.

“Sure. To meet a deadline, they've got a team working on weekends. He'll get a kick out of seeing the construction going on. Most boys like the sound of hammers and saws—right?”

“I don't know... I mean about him coming along.” An odd sensation twisted inside her stomach, alerting her to the fact that the whiskey sours she'd consumed earlier might no longer stay put. This wasn't just any man she was letting into her private life. This man was Brian's biological father. A faceless, nameless being who remained just that over time—the man who her father threatened to string from the

highest tree limb. And Florida did have a few tall trees from which to make good his threat, plus a few hungry gators.

"Brian may have other plans. He and his grandfather have been at it every day." She suddenly paused, wishing she hadn't seen that look. The look, which in different circumstances she may not have recognized, was unmistakably one of hurt and rejection.

"Fine," she conceded, wincing inside. "If they haven't made plans, I'm sure he'll enjoy coming along."

Grant, hearing the words, seemed to stand taller. He glanced over at Jon. "Take care of the little lady. She's soon to become a valuable asset to my company. Let's not keep her out too late. I like my employees bright and alert."

Jonathan frowned as he watched Grant disappear. Then he turned to Sydney. "Are you okay?"

She ignored the gentle press of his hand on her arm, and ventured a tenuous smile. "Frankly, I'm not sure."

~\*~

This was getting ridiculous, she thought. It was three in the morning. Dark night of the soul, as some called it. Dark night all right. And there she was, wide awake. With hands tucked behind her head, through the darkness she stared at the ceiling fan moving in slow hypnotic circles. Her insomnia had a name. Not a long multi-syllable name. Nothing complicated.

*Grant Sinclair.*

She'd come down there to clear her mind of him. Except he wasn't about to let that happen. Scenario after scenario played off in her mind, making her feel as though she was plummeting into an abyss of uncertainty and confusion. What exactly was Grant feeling now that he'd been told the truth?

More so, what was he planning to do about it? Grant always had a plan. No loose ends were ever left dangling in that man's life. And, the thought of her becoming a loose end, part of some plan, and having no clue what that plan might entail, was driving her absolutely nuts. He had to be feeling anger. Some anger, even resentment.

Would he punish her in some devious way because she had caused him to miss those years with Brian? Then again, did he even care? Or was it a matter of pride? Since he had fathered no children with Samantha, would he want to make his claim on Brian knowing that in his lifetime he had at least been able to father one child?

Or would he respect her wishes if she decided that Brian should never be told? Or would he decide that for himself? She'd been a coward not telling Tibble she had once worked for Sinclair. Now she was finding herself that same coward in not telling Grant about Brian's hand.

Brian's condition did own a multi-syllable name.

*Brachydactylia.*

*An abnormal shortness of fingers caused by a genetic disorder* were words her pediatrician had used to explain the deformity.

*Brachydactylia.*

Over the years she wondered exactly where that defective gene had originated. How had it been passed down? Had it been through her mother's side, or father's? Or perhaps neither. The possibility that it had originated from Grant's genealogy made her realize she had no clue about parts of Brian's physical familial history. It brought home the fact that one-half of her son did not belong to her—but to a man who could easily end up breaking his son's heart.

~\*~

Grant walked into the posh hotel room and threw his keys on to the bureau. He immediately walked over to the wide sweeping window and stared out across the dark waters. He could still walk away from this, and without much repercussion. Because it

was damn obvious, she did not want him in their lives. But Brian had a right to know. Didn't every child have that right?

Yet, when he'd suggested bringing Brian along tomorrow, whether or not it was his imagination, he thought he spotted a fleeting look of what some might call terror in those lovely green eyes. And gut feeling made him suspect that she hadn't told him everything. She was holding something back. And it made him not only curious, but for some strange reason, afraid.

And what if Brian, after having met him, did not want him as a father? That was a possibility. Ten-year-old boys had definite opinions about what a father should be. And what experience did he have in raising a kid? He knew the answer; absolutely none.

The thoughts produced waves of queasiness inside him. Grant knew he was marching straight into foreign territory. He tried to swallow and found that he couldn't. The possibility that his own son would reject him had left his throat bone dry.

## Chapter Eleven

Sydney watched the shadows deepen. She slid out of bed, slipped on a terrycloth robe, and padded down to the kitchen. She fixed a cup of chamomile tea, a slice of whole-wheat toast, a poached egg, and with her plate walked out on to the patio and sat at the glass top wrought-iron table. She inhaled the rising steam from her tea. Absently stared through the dawn light and listened as waves broke against the shore. Rising. Falling. So like her own emotions.

It'd been a while since she'd watched a sunrise —

"Hi, Mom!"

She twisted around. "You're up early," she remarked. Brian was dressed in red swim trunks. Over one shoulder hung a white oversized towel.

"Gramps and I are going for our early bird swim." A mischievous grin swept over his freckled face; a face that appeared so much like his father's, if not for the freckles.

"You and Gramps have plans for later today when you two get back from that swim?" she asked, hoping he'd say yes.

"Nah. Gramps said you and I should do something since you're here for a little while."

Option gone. "Today I'm looking over some property with Mr. Sinclair. You can come, but I don't know how much fun that's going to be."

"Isn't he the guy who called the other day? Gee, Mom, did you lose your job?"

"No. I'm accepting a much better position with his company," she tried to explain.

"Mr. Sinclair told me that he did a lot of fishing when he was a kid. Maybe I could go fishing with him some time?"

"I don't know about that. He and I are merely looking over some of his property."

"Are we going to have to move again? Would that mean I have to leave the Phillies?" His face suddenly crumpled. "They need me for next year. And how are we going to get Augie down here? You said they won't let him on planes." His eyes slowly filled with tears.

"Brian, you worry too much about things that haven't happened yet."

Nonetheless, his questions held enough concern. She'd assumed she would be working in the Danbury area, requiring only an extra commute. Pulling Brian out of school wasn't part of the picture.

Her father suddenly appeared. "You all set, Brian?"

"Yeah, Gramps."

Frank Morgan nodded, and then turned to Sydney. "Before I forget, Jonathan's parents are putting on a small get-together out at their place Saturday night. Edith next door said she'd watch Brian."

Sydney tightened the sash of her robe, moved into the kitchen and placed her dishes into the dishwasher. "I can make it. But you have to know one thing, Dad; it's not that I'm against socializing but the only thing Jonathan and I share is we can rattle off names of who's who from our high school yearbook." She ventured a wary glance his way.

"You won't mind if he picks us up? He knows I'm having mechanical problems with the Caddy."

She eyed him suspiciously.

"Mom's going out with Mr. Sinclair today," Brian blurted suddenly. "Maybe she'd rather go to the party with him instead."

She let out a faint groan. *Out of the mouths of babes.*

Her father stood motionless, and then started to scratch a tiny bald spot at the crown of his head. "Sinclair. Sinclair," he echoed.

"Look, you two had better get going or that swim won't be so early."

"Didn't you work for him some years back?"

She nodded as she eased Brian out of the kitchen, hoping that his grandfather would follow suit.

"In Chicago?" he continued, refreshing his memory. "You were doing pretty well there, if I remember. Never understood why you up and left." He gave her a look that petitioned for clarification.

"I was young and restless, Dad," wincing at the way her words were sounding like a well-known soap opera. "Plus when I got pregnant with Brian, companies weren't as flexible with single mothers as they are now. I needed to work for a company willing to give me that flex time."

The look in her father's eyes signaled his struggle to make sense of her words. Not one to be easily brushed off, he asked, "So now you've decided to work for him again?"

Sydney turned from the sink, and then braced herself by placing both hands behind her on the countertop. "I don't have a choice. Farnsworth found out Grant made me an offer they could never match. They probably already have headhunters looking for my replacement, because they figure I'll never settle for what they're paying me. So I'm pretty much boxed up and ready to be shipped out."

"They asked you to leave?"

"Not yet. But something tells me if I wait around I might end up on the next list of layoffs, and end up losing my benefits."

"Your mother and I would help if that should hap—"

"Dad—"

"I know. I know." He raised his hand. "You'll manage. Sydney, I don't know where your stubbornness comes from."

She gave a halfhearted smile. "Acorns don't fall far from their trees."

Her father grimaced.

"C'mon, Gramps," Brian pleaded, tugging at his grandfather's hand.

"I'm coming. I'm coming."

As she watched them leave, she suddenly knew what poor Chicken Little might've felt like while waiting for the sky to fall.

~\*~

As the bewitching hour approached, Sydney felt like a nervous schoolgirl venturing out on a first date. She'd already made several outfit changes before deciding on a pale lavender skirt, matching ribbed T-shirt, and beige sandals. This was a simple luncheon meeting—not an *actual* date, she reminded herself. It would be no different than other client meetings.

*Don't fool yourself.*

This time Brian was coming along.

She heard the faint sound of a doorbell and it made her hands trembled as she fumbled to put on the rest of her makeup. She could hear a mixture of voices, both of them male. In spite of the confident image staring back at her, her heart beat wildly. She touched the hollow at the base of her throat to slow the rapid pulse.

*You can be as nervous as hell, but just DON'T show it!*

She hoped the words still held their potent magic.

~\*~

When Sydney saw Grant sitting in her parents' living room in that rattan chair, so at ease with himself and his surroundings, it made her wonder if anything ever really fazed him. Ever pushed him even slightly out of kilter. He was wearing impeccable white slacks and a pale yellow Polo shirt. She could tell he'd been out in the



sun already by a few sunlit streaks in his hair. He was also developing a nice tan. Suddenly, she visualized him wearing a pair of ultra brief swim trunks instead of those white slacks.

When Grant spotted her, he put down his drink—a purple concoction made up by her father, of fruit juices, perhaps even some vodka, and God knew what else. He gave her a broad smile and his eyes widened in approval. Yet, did she detect a slight imperceptible twitching at one side of his mouth? Was it possible that he was as nervous as she was?

Strangely enough, the thought slightly lessened her anxiety. “Hi, Sydney. Grant and I have already introduced ourselves,” her father broke in. “Before I forget to mention it, your mother’s gone shopping and said she’d pick up those things you’d asked her to get.” He turned to Grant. “Irma offers her apology for not being here to meet you. Hopefully, she will get that chance before you leave.”

Grant nodded, at the same time keeping his focus on Sydney. “Did you have a good flight down?” Sydney asked.

“We hit some turbulence, but actually not as bad as I thought it was going to be, considering the weather.” His eyes caught and held hers.

~\*~

Grant wanted to believe that Sydney was happy to see him sitting there in her family’s home. Ever since getting up that morning, a series of unending doubts had plagued him. He hadn’t planned to force himself into her life like this. But knowing what he knew now, neither could he stay away. But sitting there, the doubts mounted. He understood why she was determined to maintain a certain distance between them. That she, in all probability, did not fully trust him. Nonetheless, he searched her face for any telltale sign that would let him know that if he persisted long enough, hard enough, maybe the relationship did have a chance.

And it wasn’t just him and her anymore.

A third party was now involved. And for that reason, and maybe that reason alone, he'd been determined not to back away. There was much he wanted to say to Sydney. At times, he felt as if he would bust if he didn't get it all out soon. But in his frustration, Grant knew he needed to still hold back some. And then, when it was safe enough, maybe then he would risk exposing to her his soul.

~\*~

"So you've expanded your operation into the Sun Coast area," Frank Morgan commented, unaware of the spell he'd just broken. "You think that's wise, what with this slow economy? You don't think the market's getting saturated with all this telecommunications stuff?"

"GS is in good shape," Grant assured.

Sydney knew the last thing on Grant's mind was the economy. As her father chatted about the Dow Jones, how it might eventually start heading toward a *bear* market, she could see Grant's eyes searching the room for a glimpse of Brian.

"Once Sydney's on board, I'm sure we will do even better," Grant added.

She shifted her position as well as her focus. "I hope I can live up to those words, now that there's no turning back."

Grant raised one brow. "Turning back? You mean as far as changing your mind?"

She kept her voice calm. "Yes. But hey, everything's coming out the way you planned. I had no choice but to accept your offer. Even Tibble said I'd be a fool not to."

"Be careful or your father's going to think I coerced, maybe seduced you into taking this position." He chuckled. "C'mon, admit it. You wanted it as much as I wanted you to have it."

His double innuendoes produced warmth inside her, knowing what he just said could've easily referred to the job... or their brief sexual encounter years before.

Suddenly, Grant's attention seemed diverted. Sydney turned toward the doorway. How long he'd been standing there, she couldn't say, but she guessed Brian had been watching them for a while. Assessing them. Studying them. His young eyes drifted first to her, where he smiled, then over to his grandfather, until finally settling on Grant.

"Hi, Brian," his grandfather greeted. "C'mon in and meet Mr. Sinclair."

Sydney clasped her hands together. Her palms felt damp. Her thumb nervously twisted the tiny opal ring gracing her right hand. A gift Brian had worked one entire autumn raking leaves to earn enough money to buy.

A full, wonderful smile crossed Grant's face. The smile reached his eyes, and demonstrated a genuine interest in the boy who just entered the room. Brian walked over to Grant. "Hi, Mr. Sinclair. Maybe before you leave, you think we could go fishing on that boat you were telling me about?"

Brian's remark threw Grant slightly off guard. He turned to Sydney and gave her a what-do-I-tell-him look. She merely smiled.

Grant turned back to Brian. "Sure, I wouldn't mind going before I leave."

"Mom, can I?"

The idea of them spending more time than necessary together, possibly a whole day, did not yet set well. It was apparent they were taking an instant liking to each other. Ultimately, the more shared moments they spent together, the more chance for stronger bonding. She had not yet reconciled herself to the fact that she even wanted it to happen. As it now stood, their own relationship was solely employer and employee.

"I'll have to think about it," she responded, ignoring his frown. He immediately sat on a nearby ottoman next to Grant's chair.

"So you're the young gentleman I spoke to the other day?"

Brian looked up. "Yes, sir."

Sydney couldn't help notice the awkward way Brian was sitting. Her heart lurched, realizing why. He'd been holding his right arm behind him to conceal it from Grant, as if first needing acceptance. Pangs of guilt washed over her. Why didn't she tell

Grant about Brian's hand before it came to this? But she knew the answer. She never thought or wanted to believe it was going to come this far.

"Mr. Sinclair, are we going to have to move down here? Will I have to leave all my friends in Connecticut?" Brian looked at him expectantly.

Concern crossed Grant's face. "I know what you're saying. When I was a kid, my parents moved from one place to the next. I'd no sooner make friends, than I'd have to say good-bye. And sometimes those good-byes were difficult."

Sydney's interest heightened at his recollection of his childhood. During the years they had worked together, he hadn't related to her that part of his past. Suddenly, she noticed Grant's smile fading. Without realizing it, Brian, having become immersed in his words, had pulled his right arm to the front. Attached was the prosthesis.

Grant's eyes became transfixed on the foreign-looking device. She waited for the predictable expression of shock, which sometimes would be followed by one of repugnance. Instead, he turned to her. Neither expression appeared. Only confusion, and the knitting of Grant's brows that reflected his concern, alerting her that the *drill sergeant* would expect a full explanation later.

"I think what's happening to your Mom will be a good move." Suddenly, he slapped the top of one knee. "You know, I skipped breakfast, so how about lunch? If it's okay with your Mom, you choose the place."

"I can?" Brian looked over at Sydney.

"Frank, would you care to join us?"

Her father wore a perplexed look. She had noticed something in his eyes, an awareness that hadn't been there before. Had he made the connection now that he was seeing Brian and Grant together — side by side?

"I'd love to, but some other time," her father answered. "I got this tennis match scheduled and I don't like eating heavy beforehand."

"I'm glad we had the chance to meet," Grant said. "I've got a Jeep parked right outside —"

Brian let out a squeal. "A Jeep!"

Suddenly, his right arm swung out, hitting the glass beside Grant's chair, knocking the contents across the white slacks. In horror, she watched as the purple stain spread. Grant sucked in his breath as ice cubes and liquid floated down certain parts of his anatomy.

Brian's face crumpled.

"Hey, I think I got some shorts that'll fit you," her father quickly piped in. "I'm sure Irma can get that stain out. There's not a stain she hasn't tackled yet without success."

Grant and her father disappeared into the next room.

"Brian, it's okay. Accidents happen."

"Now he thinks I'm just a clumsy kid. Gee, Mom, maybe you guys should go ahead without me."

Ah, one of those pivotal moments, she thought. This was her chance to leave him behind and he would never have to see Grant again. And never find out. But her wishful thinking became short-lived.

"No Brian," she found herself saying instead. "I think Grant was looking forward to having you come along, too."

~\*~

As they walked toward the parked Jeep, Sydney was unable to keep her eyes off the yellow-and-green madras shorts that Grant was now wearing. Shorts that did not go at all well with the shoes, and would look far better on someone twenty years his senior. Shorts that were probably a birthday present to her father who somehow had managed to hide them in the back of his closet since the early 70's.

The cool facade of a corporate CEO had cleverly been torn apart by polyester.

"This thing's great for driving along beaches, especially at night," Grant said as he easily maneuvered the vehicle through the heavy afternoon traffic toward Brian's restaurant of choice — an all-you-can-eat buffet.

"What made you decide to open a branch office here?" she had to ask.

"Why not here?" he answered. "Besides, I can see you making a go of this operation. It's a good market down—"

"Whoa! Go back one notch." She kept her voice purposely low so Brian could not hear from the backseat. "I don't recall that as part of the original conversation. Were you planning all along to send me down? Uproot me? Uproot Brian? What exactly are you trying to pull?" She crossed her arms. "Not a bad way to get rid of a couple of problems?"

"I'm not pulling anything," he retorted in a low steady voice that made her cringe. "I thought since you're already here, you'd look things over, give me feedback, maybe consider taking over this branch."

He was offering her a challenge. Remembering how well she like tasty seafood, he was dangling a tasty bit of prime lobster in front of her face, and enjoying watching her tongue hang out.

"There it is!" Brian yelled. "I hope you guys are hungry cause you can eat all the ice cream and cake you want."

"Sounds sinfully good, but I hope they're serving more than just dessert," Grant rejoined.

Sydney couldn't help but laugh, thinking that Grant's 'just dessert' would be his inability to try any romantic moves on her, particularly inside a restaurant that catered to shouting parents, screaming kids, and retirees seeking low-cost meals.

Her thoughts were soon confirmed once they were settled inside one of the spacious booths. Heaping amounts of food soon lay on his and Brian's plates; making her wonder if they'd somehow unofficially declared an eating contest between them.

"Mom, are you going to finish those fries?"

She shook her head.

Brian pushed her fries onto his plate, and then picked up the catsup bottle. Noticing that he was having a hard time getting the catsup out, Grant offered to help.

"No, I can do it!" Brian shouted.

Grant said nothing, and merely turned back to her. "Your father seems pretty knowledgeable about marketing strategies. I'm looking forward to discuss—"

*SPLAT!*

Grant stopped mid sentence. Slowly, he bent his head. Her eyes followed his. A sort of Rorschach-looking glob of bright red had replaced the emblem on his shirt.

"Oops, I guess I squeezed too hard," Brian mumbled.

Grant bit his lower lip, said nothing as he picked up the paper napkin and, dipping the corner of it into his water glass, with precise movements dabbed at the glob. When he'd gotten most of the red gook off, a flat orange stain remained.

"Besides grape, how good is your mother at removing catsup stains?"

Sydney giggled.

"I might have to borrow one of your father's shirts when I get back. I hope they're not all striped. I've never been regarded as a stripe and plaid kind of guy."

Sydney laughed out loud, picturing that combination on him. Brian, realizing what he'd done wasn't the end of the world, joined in their laughter.

Grant smiled an uneasy smile, realizing he'd become the butt of their humor.

"Sinclair? Grant Sinclair?"

Grant looked up. A tall, dark haired man had stopped at their table. Sydney couldn't help notice a slow redness easing up Grant's neck.

"T-Tom Martin. What brings you down to these parts?" Grant stuttered slightly, looking as if he wanted to duck under the table.

"Visiting the folks. My mother loves coming to these all-you-can eat places."

Grant turned to Sydney. "Tom heads R&D."

"Yes, I thought I recognized you from the meeting," Sydney said.

Tom Martin's eyeballs seemed to bulge as they remained focused on Grant. "I almost didn't recognize you. I don't recollect ever seeing you in shorts. Nice touch." His eyes traveled to the catsup stain. A smirk plagued one side of his mouth. "Well, nice meeting you folks. I better not keep Mom waiting. She's got bingo planned for us this afternoon."

Grant seemed to slink further back in his seat. "So much for corporate image," he muttered. "But then maybe it is time for a change." He winked at Brian. "Right, sport? What's a little catsup stain?"

Brian hesitated at first then, nodding, dug into his hot apple crisp that he'd topped off with gooey swirls of vanilla frozen yogurt, hot fudge sauce, and a thick sprinkling of nuts. Grant followed suit, and after a while, he threw his hands up as if in ultimate defeat. In a triumphant gesture, Brian slurped up the last dollop of ice cream on his plate.

"You win! You win!" Grant announced, pronouncing Brian as the victor. "It's a good thing these shorts are one size larger than I normally wear. "

Sydney had to admit, if only to herself, she was enjoying the luncheon, and for a brief moment ignored the anxiety that still floated inside her as she allowed herself to pretend that, at least for the moment, they were an actual *family*.

Brian and Grant had developed a rapport. How short-lived that rapport would be when Brian discovered the truth about the man sitting across from him was anybody's guess.



## Chapter Twelve

"I'm guessing you like what you see so far," Grant murmured. "This particular office isn't finished as far as wall coloring and carpeting. I wanted to leave that choice up to you," he said as he lightly touched her hair, lifting a small lock and letting it slip between his fingers. "I didn't want to take a chance on choosing colors you wouldn't like," he crooned while his thumb stroked her temple in a gentle caress.

"You've deliberately made it impossible to refuse," she said, inwardly smiling, unable to pull her eyes away from the sweeping panoramic view offered by the floor-to-ceiling windows that surrounded the corner office, remembering how only the top executives at Farnsworth got these offices.

The constant clamor of hammers, drills, and saws made conversation difficult. But it signaled to her the workers were hell bent to meet whatever deadline Grant had set for them. Struggling to dismiss the effect his touch had on her, she turned to him. "Then am I correct in saying that Brian hadn't been far off the mark about us relocating? That, by my acceptance of your offer, I am going to have to move from Connecticut? I'm going to be up front on this. But this almost makes me somewhat suspicious if this hasn't something to do with that SEC report. Harold had intimated at one point that certain information be purposely or, as he put it, *inadvertently* left out. And with me out of the way, Tibble can file according to *your* directions. And you'd still have me under your thumb so if I did talk, you could squash me like one of those pesky mosquitoes." She inhaled deeply. "Because you know damn well I need this job."

Grant merely stared at her as the deafening sound of a buzz saw hampered his effort to reply.

She moved to the next window. The idea of redecorating the office was not at all unpleasant. She easily pictured a light oak desk with plenty of workspace and drawers. White or eggshell walls covered with her favorite prints. Small things actually—not something one should base a decision to take a position with any company. Still she would be able to choose any color. Any shade.

Except gray.

“You’re wrong about that report,” Grant said finally when the clamor let up. “In the beginning I thought maybe you might leave off certain information that would have investors backing off. But since then you’ve changed my mind.”

“I... changed... your mind?”

“The night you told me about Brian. I suddenly didn’t want to do anything that would have him think less of me.”

Sydney took a moment to reflect on his words. “Even if Tibble may still be willing to comply in order to keep your account.”

Why was she giving him this option, to test him? Test his sincerity? Test his true motive?

Grant gave a weak smile. “At one time I believed as long as I kept the stockholders happy, did whatever was necessary to make the company successful, the end justified the means. I may not have been responsible for putting those toxic barrels into that ground, but I am responsible for what happens on the land now. It’s not something I’m willing to run away from anymore.” He suddenly cleared his throat. “So, what do you think of this office?”

“Think?” She knew he was changing the subject and that as far as he was concerned the IPO issue was a dead issue. Which in a way was good, since she was now able to focus on her other worries. One of them being when to tell Brian that he was going to be uprooted, separated from his friends, lose his status on the team that he’d worked so hard to earn. It meant a different school, new classmates, proving himself all

over again. Suddenly she remembered her father's word about one of the local school coaches; hopefully Brian would find another baseball team who'd be willing to take a chance on him. But the thought gave her little consolation for what was ahead.

"I'm hearing all sorts of wheels turning inside that head of yours." His hand brushed against the back of her neck, sending electric shock waves down her spine. Gently, he turned her to face him. "Tell me—how often do you think back to our last time together? When we'd made love in my apartment?" It was a question she did not expect with Brian roaming about. Warily, she glanced across the room.

"Brian can't hear us," Grant reassured, then touched her shoulder. "You do remember how it was between us? Do you ever wonder how good it could be if we allowed it to happen again?"

She hesitated to respond, and taking her silence as a form of consent, he drew her to him. "Ahhh, yes," he purred. "I can tell you remember."

Her pulse jumped at the sudden hard feel of him. A strange exhilaration followed, and it filled her with promises like forbidden fruit.

"Grant...I'd like to forget that part of my life." She bent her head; afraid he might see in her eyes a possible lie. Her mind urged her to resist. But her body was more than willing to sample some of that fruit.

He released her, took both hands and brought them to his lips. He turned one over and pressed a lingering kiss into the palm. "I don't ever want you to forget what we had once shared and created together." He then turned toward the window. "I do need you to take over this operation."

"Excuse me?" she responded, feeling as if she'd been dropped on top of an out-of-control merry-go-round.

Grant fixed his gaze on some obscure point of interest. "I don't mean to push all of this on to you so fast, but I need someone down here. These offices should be ready by the end of August, and the Board wants someone in place by then."

She gave him a twisted smile. "You've deliberately waved this carrot in front of me because you know it's too damn good for any half sane person to pass up."

Grant's face went grim.

"But you're correct on one count," she went on, ignoring the look he was giving. A look that said she could take it or leave it. "I am, or at least I'd like to think I am, the one person who can make this operation work."

Suddenly, she thought about her parents. No longer would there exist a thirteen-hundred-mile safety zone. No longer could she dismiss her father on the phone when he got up on his soapbox because most likely it would be him bringing it to her front door.

"It looks like your son's wandered off," Grant suddenly commented. "Stay here. I'll go look for him," he offered.

She nodded. He'd referred to Brian as her son, not *our* son. Was Grant, she wondered, having difficulty accepting Brian now that he had seen his hand? While she waited for him to return, she thought about him returning to Connecticut. Pictured Alexis waiting there for him. Imagined one morning opening up the newspaper and coming across a picture of him and his corporate sidekick marching down the ecclesiastical aisle. She pushed the disconcerting image from her mind and concentrated on the present. She needed to maintain her focus.

And she still had to wonder what else he was holding up his sleeve, or would pull out of his privately stocked Pandora's box?

"Hi, Mom!" Brian shouted, breaking her thoughts. "Boy, this is some neat place. You should see the stuff downstairs. There's going to be an exercise room with all sorts of weight equip—"

"Brian, I don't want you wandering off like that," Sydney shouted, knowing he was not the sole cause of her frustration.

"Your mother's right," Grant broke in. "There are weirdoes out there—"

"I can take care of myself!" Brian retorted, shooting Grant a look that clearly questioned his right to say anything to him that was of a corrective nature.

Grant's face grew solemn. Grant, Sydney knew, had just experienced his first taste of parenting.

~\*~

"I didn't think this was going to take all day," Grant apologized later as he pulled up in front of the condo.

"From the look on Brian's face," Sydney began, "I could tell he'd enjoyed himself. Especially that side trip to the ice cream place. I didn't think he had any room left." She gave a wicked smile then peered over at Grant's stomach. "Or you."

"I guess we can handle our own," Grant rejoined, looking back at the chocolate-fudge-spattered boy. "Right, sport?"

"Yeah," Brian's small voice returned. "I better get inside. Gramps said if we got back early enough, he'd take me miniature golfing." With those words, he quickly climbed out of the back and ran toward the house. Part way, he suddenly turned. "Mr. Sinclair, you won't forget to let me know when you go fishing, will you?"

Brian had the memory of an elephant, Sydney mused as she opened her door. "Thanks for a lovely day. We *both* enjoyed it."

"Brian's a good kid. But he must be a handful at times. Working full time and taking care of his needs."

She tightened her grip on the door handle. A myriad of responses swirled through her brain. She merely gave a weak smile.

"If you don't have plans for tonight, how about catching a light supper later?" he asked. "I'd like to see you again before I leave. I wanted to talk more about Brian." He paused, as if searching for words. "I don't see why you couldn't have told me about his hand before this. I won't deny it doesn't throw me for a loop." His fingers tightened around the steering wheel. "And you and I need to know where we're going from here."

She squinted at him. "You and I or just you, because I do know. My life has been in place for some time."

He stared at her, trying to assimilate her words. "You damn well know what I mean. I'm not letting this go. I'm not walking out of his life."

She detected a slight edge of warning to his voice. It seemed that Grant was determined that Brian know the truth. And in so many words, Grant was giving her a subtle directive. Either she told him or he might take that initiative. Oh yes, she thought. They needed to talk. She needed to convince him, because unless he was absolutely sure about becoming part of Brian's life, there was no reason for Brian to know anything.

"I need to shower and change first," she told him. "Why don't you come back in about an hour, say six-thirty?"

Grant looked down at himself. "Yeah. I guess I should do the same."

The stain on his shirt made her think of a man who had been wounded in battle—a battle where they both might eventually bear the scars.

~\*~

Grant gave a low whistle when Sydney opened the door to let him in for the second time that day. The pale blue sundress she wore went well with the tan she had so far acquired. "Umm, very nice."

Somewhat shyly, she met his gaze, and wondered if she would ever get accustomed to him looking at her like that—a look that made her feel like a Hershey Kiss melting beneath a sizzling sun.

"Bring along a bathing suit," he suggested. "I thought we might go for a swim later."

"You mean later at night?"

He grinned. "Sure. Why not?"

"Where?"

"Where else? The ocean."

Sydney could not remember ever swimming in the ocean at night. Private pools, yes. Surrounded by bright floodlights, but at night, with only the moon's reflection. And doing something like that with this man? Suddenly, her mind formed images of

them out there in those turbulent waves sans suits. No, he had said to bring one, she corrected. *Let's not get carried away.*

"Besides, isn't that why you came down? To unwind?" he asked.

She couldn't hold back a smile, and was tempted to tell him the truth. Outside of needing to be with Brian, the other reason had been to get away from him.

She went back to her room and quickly stuffed a swimsuit and other necessities into a canvas beach bag. Moments later, as they headed to one of the many eating establishments located along the waterfront, the air grew more humid and she was actually looking forward to taking that swim later. The man was too sexy for his own good, she thought, sitting across from him later. Several waitresses had been throwing those come hither looks his way all evening. Yet, could she blame them? Grant's tanned face—framed by his sun-bleached hair, with a couple of locks falling rakishly over his forehead—created a picture no healthy female could even try to ignore. His pale gray eyes could pierce any unsuspecting feminine soul. And she was sadly finding that the armor she had erected around herself was growing dangerously thin.

"Didn't you play the piano?" he suddenly asked.

His question produced a chill. She gave a nervous laugh. "I haven't played for years. I don't think I've touched a keyboard since Brian's birth. Besides, there's not enough time for things like that in my life right now."

He only nodded.

By the time the dessert arrived, Sydney felt calmer, more at ease with her surroundings and most of all with him.

"The more I looked at Brian today," Grant began to say as he scooped out a spoonful of his pistachio ice cream, "the more I saw pieces of myself in him. I really got a charge out of that."

A pregnant pause followed as she tried to concentrate on her frozen vanilla yogurt.

"So what exactly happened to his hand?"

From the casual manner in which he had asked, he could've been asking about the weather. Nonetheless, she felt a familiar defense rise, produced more, she had to guess, from inveterate habit than by any actual provocation. This was, after all, Brian's father asking the question, not some prying insufferable nosey outsider. *His* father needing to know. And not out of any morbid curiosity.

"The term the doctor used was *brachydactylia*."

"Brachy what? Sounds like a dinosaur's name." He smiled faintly, but his eyes held no humor.

"A paradox actually—a long medical term basically describing an abnormal shortening of fingers." She put down her spoon. Captured his gaze. Smiled weakly. "Every mother counts the number of toes and fingers of her newborn. I was not without exception, except at first in maternity they warned me before bringing me my baby." She gave a quirky smile. "Of course I didn't believe them—not *my* baby. When they finally brought him to me, bundled inside his hospital blanket, I immediately pulled it open to check for myself. When I got to the right hand, still I wouldn't believe it was true; I was convinced that eventually those tiniest of stubs would grow to normal size, and he would be like all the other babies in the nursery."

Suddenly, her eyes drifted up to the waitress who'd come over to refill their glasses. Thankful for this small respite, she waited for her to leave before continuing.

"His pediatrician attributed the condition to a congenital defect," she continued. "My gynecologist said it could have been caused by a viral infection during my early trimester. No one would, or could, give a definitive answer. Who knows, maybe it was caused by the drinking water. After a while," she went on, ignoring the way Grant's face had suddenly paled at her latest remark, "I stopped asking, figuring what good would it do. And once I let go of the child I had hoped for, it freed me to give him the love he needed." Absently, she poured milk into her coffee, watched the swirling dark liquid lighten as she stirred it in monotonous circles. "I don't think Brian ever thought he was that much different from other kids; at least not in terms of not keeping up or accomplishing what he wanted."



Grant smiled. "I got that impression today." He took several sips of his coffee. His face grew pensive. "My father wanted to be a soldier, but they wouldn't let him enlist. On his left foot, a toe was missing. I think the big one. I guess he decided if he couldn't serve, he'd write about it."

"An undeveloped toe?"

Grant nodded. "Yeah." His voice sounded raspy. "That genetic spiel the doctor threw at you was probably on target."

She stared at him; words escaped her.

"He'd been covering the very end of the Vietnam Conflict when a stray bullet hit him." Grant hesitated, and then fixed his eyes onto his dish as he absently twirled a red swizzle stick; then bending it, it cracked. "Although he wasn't a soldier in a military sense, he'd died as one."

Suddenly she reached out, placing her hand on top of his. A comfortable silence ensued.

"I know Brian would want to hear about his grandfather," she said, mentally figuring out how she was going to broach *that* subject before telling him about his own father.

Suddenly, she was searching through her memory. "His first word was ball. He walked at an early age, and couldn't wait to start school when the time came to go."

They ordered a second dessert, during which she went on to tell him about the time Brian hit his first home run, sending everyone into a state of shock—including his coach, who'd been dead set against drafting him on to the team in the first place. And how she'd had a heck of a time helping him get a set of wheels to fit a homemade wooden sports car, which eventually took first place in a Pinewood Derby Cub Scout competition.

Grant listened and absorbed every word, every detail. When he asked more questions, she racked her brain to remember those details of Brian's first nine years. Details that would allow Grant to pull into his mind and heart his son's memorable moments.

"I appreciate your telling me this," Grant said when she finished. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for him." Suddenly, he gave a wide beaming smile. "But I'm here now."

"Wait, Grant. Let's not rush into anything." She could not hold back the sound of uncertainty in her voice.

As if a shadow had crossed over, his eyes darken. "I only assume you are going to tell him about me, especially after today."

"Grant, you've got to understand; telling him might cause *his* world to break down. Don't you think he's going to start to wonder why you never came around? He might think you had rejected him. You didn't want him because you were ashamed of him. I need more time to think this through. How am I going to explain you to him without hurting him in some way?" She felt renewed panic set in. "Brian's too young to understand the kind of mistakes grown-ups make. But not too young to understand that I was unmarried at the time when I delivered him. Besides, as far as Brian's concerned, he has a father."

"You said there was no one else."

"I told him his father had died before he was born. So he thinks the guy in the photo on my desk —"

"Photo? Desk?"

"My desk at work. He thinks that's his father."

"Who's this guy?"

"No one. I mean, I don't know who he is."

"How could you not know?" The tapping sound he was making on the side of his bowl grated on her senses.

"I took the picture out of a K-Mart frame. I pretended —"

The tapping stopped. "You gave him a make believe father, a fantasy? You lied to your own son — my son — about me?"

"I wanted him to have a father, even if it was just a memory of one. I needed him to feel he was never rejected by you." She stirred the frozen yogurt until it became a

liquid, wishing suddenly she could do the same to herself, change herself into another form, and even disappear.

"How in the hell did you manage to pull that off all these years? I mean, didn't people ever ask about his father? Didn't he ask, considering your last name?"

Sydney gave an uneasy laugh. "Ever hear of coincidences? Then having his father die before his birth left little history of our own relationship. And I always noticed after telling people that his father was dead there'd be this sympathetic look, then I could easily change the subject. Apparently, no one likes hearing too long about dead relatives."

Unbelieving, Grant stared at her as if he were looking at a complete stranger.

"What?" she asked, needing to know what was going on inside his head now that he knew.

"I'm trying to reconcile in my mind this other facet of you."

She pushed her yogurt soup away. "Look, try to understand; if and when I do tell him about you, he's simply never going to trust me again."

Grant raised one brow.

"He'll have that same look you saw on my face when I heard you that morning on the phone talking to Ms. Kyle," she reminded him. "That look of betrayal."

"You had him believing I was dead all these years?"

He was not going to let go, she realized. "Essentially, yes. Because I never —"

"Thought I'd come back into your life." He shook his head. "So basically it's not that you're so much afraid that Brian will find out about me as his finding out that you had lied to him about me?"

No one ever escaped the past, she thought ruefully. Sooner or later, it always caught up.

"So are you or are you not going to tell him?"

*A clear ultimatum!*

"Why can't it just be between us for the time being? My purpose for telling you wasn't to make you feel obligated to us in any way." She hated it when her voice cracked.

"Damn it, Sydney! How do you expect me to react? What did you think I would do? Say hey thanks for the scrapbook memories, then walk away? I know about that pride of yours. It's why you ran away from me in the first place. I know I'm the last person you would ask anything from." He let out a quick breath of air. Took in another. "But this is my son we're talking about."

"Yes, but can you accept him fully as your son, without reservation? If you can, I'll tell him, but in my own time."

"If you're talking about his hand; that I might in some way hurt him because of his hand... Syd, the way he's dealt with it is one reason I want the world to know he is my son." Grant's voice was low, a bit unsteady. Suddenly, he pulled his napkin from his lap and threw it on the table. "Maybe the problem here isn't my accepting Brian but you accepting the fact that you won't have him all to yourself. Maybe you're afraid to let me in; because I'm getting the feeling you're about ready to slam that door in my face." He looked up and summoned their waitress.

Everything was happening too fast and she was having a damn difficult time keeping up. Grant had to understand she couldn't just spring a father on Brian. She'd essentially have to kill off the first one... again.

As they made their way out of the restaurant into the hot humid air, Grant turned to her. "By the way, when was the last time you went skinny dipping with a ghost?"

## Chapter Thirteen

Sydney inhaled the pungent salty air, staring up at the countless stars gracing the midnight sky. As the Jeep bounced along the coastal waters, where moonlit whitecaps curled and broke, the words *skinny-dipping* played in her mind. A thread of anticipation wound itself through her.

Although it had been some years since he had seen her *butt naked*, the idea of it again both tantalized and frightened her. Unable to refrain from toying with the idea, her mind created some heady possibilities.

Grant slowed to a stop and jumped out. "Follow me!"

"We're not trespassing?" she commented as she gathered her things together.

"No. Once the closing goes through, I'll own this property."

"Now why doesn't *that* surprise me?" she rejoined as she removed her sandals, and stumbled behind him on the dark cool sands. Several ghost crabs materialized in front of her then skittered away. She followed him up a gradual incline, then up a flight of weathered-beaten stairs that eventually led to a wooden terrace. Passing through a pair of sliding glass doors, she eventually found herself inside a room casually decorated with oatmeal pillows scattered across a plush beige sectional. It made her feel they could easily be arranged to accommodate the most imaginative of minds.

"Grant, your entire back yard is the ocean."

"Yeah. It was one reason I told the real estate agent to go ahead on the closing."

She gave a throaty laugh. A cynical smile curved her mouth. "Right. And the other is so you could swim naked."

He shot her a wicked look. "That actually was the *main* selling point."

She bit her lower lip, refrained from asking if the real estate agent was perhaps female, since she was more than willing to try out that selling point herself.

"Actually, I wanted a place where I could escape from the other world I've created. When I mentioned to Harold that I was buying this place, he immediately asked where to send the fax. I told him not to bother. And I gave Alexis strict orders for my pager. Emergencies only."

Sydney's eyes narrowed, not believing what she was hearing. "Grant Sinclair, choosing not to be in constant touch with his people? You, who pride yourself on total availability, are now going incommunicado?" Had he turned into some alien?

"People change."

"Not this drastically!" She viewed again their surroundings. Thought of the possibilities this private world afforded them. Her heart raced at a few spawned images.

"Seeing as you haven't made up your mind about the skinny dipping, why don't you go change into your swimsuit?" he said. "Bedrooms are down the hall. Yell if you need help." He threw her a naughty glance.

She picked up her bag, threw him an exasperated look. "I'll manage."

While changing into her suit, she couldn't prevent fantasies from entering her mind on how the rest of the evening might go. So far, he'd kept his promise about behaving, which left her somewhat relieved, yet didn't prevent a tinge of disappointment from developing. Whether or not she could attribute it to her imagination, it seemed ever since Grant had found out about Brian, he'd acted differently toward her. Did he now see her solely as the mother of his son? No longer the mistress who'd once shared his bed? If that were so, had his sexual interest in her waned? That possibility left her quite ambivalent.

When she joined him again, she noticed he'd opened a carafe of red wine. Two crystal goblets sat on the countertop, as if waiting. Grant had also changed into swim

trunks that were rather snug fitting. And white, no less. Leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination, particularly hers.

Surreptitiously, she studied him as he moved about the close confines of the kitchen. Suddenly, somewhere in her mind stirred an image—the soft feel of his matted fur buffing against her bare skin.

An image produced from reality?

Or remnants left from her dream?

Inwardly she smiled as she climbed up on to one of the counter stools. He turned around. Then let out a low whistle. As his eyes raked boldly over her form, she felt a strange tingle race up her spine. At the same time relief washed over her erroneous assumption that he was no longer physically attracted to her.

“You and your Dad seem to have a pretty good relationship going,” Grant remarked as he poured wine into her glass.

“Is that the impression you received?” she replied, shaking her head. “You couldn’t tell how he still regards me as his little girl?”

Grant contemplated her words.

“He’s always had a difficult time with my single-motherhood status,” she explained. “He refuses to believe I don’t need a man’s help in taking care of myself or Brian.”

Slowly, Grant lifted his gaze. “You say you don’t *need* a man to take care of you. Do you think that statement holds entirely true now?”

Catching his drift, she felt her heat rise several more degrees. No longer was he looking at her face. His eyes had moved elsewhere, and the tips of her breasts grew taut. When he reached over and touched her face, she did not pull away. When he moved his hand lightly along the graceful slope of her neck, stopping to rest on one shoulder, she remained virtually motionless. When he slowly pushed the thin strap down, she covered his hand with hers, essentially stopping him in order to maintain control.

Realizing their impasse, he withdrew, and then lifted his glass to her.

"To us. To our son, to GS, to your new life. To mine." He gulped down his wine.

She tilted her head, confused. "Your new life?" She picked up her glass, took a cautious sip.

"I'm moving down here."

"You're doing w-what?" she sputtered, almost choking.

"Then this is not a vacation getaway?"

He put a finger to her lips. "I had a feeling that might be your reaction."

Mesmerized by his words, she did not react when a blatant finger pushed beneath the same strap, drawing it further down her arm. Before she could protest, he moved to the other side to gather her to him. A faint whimper escaped her throat. Not in actual protest, but in acknowledgment that all along she had wanted to feel him against her again. Her fingers spread across his bare chest, curling slightly into the matted fur.

His lips came down on hers, capturing them, encouraging her to open up to him. Not unwillingly, she allowed him full entry into her sweetness. As he crushed her to him, his hands, strong and warm, moved sensuously along her gentle curves. She gasped when she felt the hard need of him through the thin fabric of his trunks.

He placed gentle kisses on her bare shoulder, along her neck, her jaw line, before recapturing her lips.

Her arms moved upward, encircling his neck. She pulled herself fully up against the entire length of him. No warnings came for him to stop; no pulling away. Instead, she sank against him. Felt her blood run hot as she allowed herself to become absorbed into him. She knew this was where she belonged, had always belonged—in this man's arms. Barriers torn, restraints undone, an unspoken permission had been granted as each explored the other. Waves of desire engulfed them, and she couldn't stop herself from trembling despite the fire he now ignited inside her.

"Follow me," he murmured. "I want to show you something."

She hesitated.

"Trust me, Syd. This one time, trust me."



She moved toward him, and silently he led her to one of the bedrooms. Inside, on the floor laid a board covered with a mat. "I'm going to give you a massage."

"A *what*?"

"You're tense. Please, do what I say. Lie down on your stomach," he urged.

She gave him a doubtful look.

"Trust me."

"Where have I heard that before?" she remarked, with slight cynicism. Nonetheless, she stretched herself out face down onto the mat.

When he began to undo the top of her suit, she started to have second thoughts, but then quickly reminded herself that the man doing this was not just any man. She had once been his confidante; had born him a son. These thoughts ultimately gave her the required permission to indulge, if for one more time, and allowed her to relax.

She trusted him when he removed her top, freeing her breasts. The dark rosebud nipples immediately contracted in the cool night air.

She trusted him when he deliberately tugged at her panties, which offered slight resistance.

She trusted him. He shook a few drops of musk-scented oil into his palms and rubbed them together. Then, beginning at her back, he spread the intoxicating oils, his hands working long languid strokes over her compliant flesh. Every now and then, her eyelids would flicker open as she struggled to remain alert. But after a while, his touch, hot and flowing, allowed her the luxury of floating. Allowed her to let go, yield to the rhythm of his caresses.

Somewhere deep inside came soft moans of pleasure as he kneaded the small of her back, moving bravely over her buttocks, then the back of her thighs, her calves. An immeasurable sense of well being filled her, pushing her to levels of pure elation.

When he was done, he told her to turn over on to her back. At first, she didn't move, but then realizing who this man was, knowing they had once made love, had created something wonderful between them, all qualms vanished.

"How does this feel?" he whispered as he started at her upper shoulders.

“Delicious,” she murmured.

Although Grant was still wearing swim trunks, despite her so-called sophistication, Syd could not keep from blushing. She tried to sit up. But he immediately knelt down to her, and then captured one very receptive nipple. She positioned her hands on either side of his shoulders, arched against him as the unbearable aching built inside. Her fingers dug into his flesh as he alternately suckled each nipple. Then he was kissing the small valley between her breasts, the rounded smooth plane of her stomach. As he moved lower, she gasped, realizing his intentions. Trust him, her mind urged.

Immobilized by his touch, she drew in heavy breaths as she allowed him to do that unfamiliar act. Her body surrendered completely as it entered through that proscribed doorway of consummate intimacy—an intimacy that united all polarities—male and female, sexual and spiritual. She shut her eyes as the rhythmic squeezing inside began, and then deepened. She felt the need to bear down, as if in childbirth.

Her whole body convulsed in response to his relentless pursuit of pleasure. A succession of spasms came. She cried out his name, her voice sounding distant, remote, as if she had left her body and had become its own witness to her passion.

When she became aware of him looking up at her, it was a look that revealed his own pure joy at pleasuring her in that wondrous way.

She whispered. “You’re the only man who has ever done that to me.”

He pulled away, and then stood. Silently, he offered her his hand. Pulled her up. This confused her. So far their lovemaking had been one-sided, only she receiving its ultimate rewards. He demanded nothing in return.

“Follow me,” he said.

“Where?” Then she understood. “You mean out there, in the ocean?” She grinned. “You are a determined man, aren’t you?”

He gave a low growl. “We are the only two people in the world at this moment.” He removed his trunks and before she could respond, he was gathering her up into his arms. Seconds later, they were making their descent toward the waiting surf.

A soft, mellow glow of moonlight revealed their naked bodies to each other.

After walking a short distance across the sand, he waded until they were waist high in the water, and when he put her down, suddenly, she felt an awesome sense of freedom because of her *au natural* state. Without a moment's hesitation, they both dove fully into the frothy waters.

When she surfaced, she found herself pressed close against his wet slick body. The warm current caressed them. She gasped when she felt his legs separating hers.

"Not so bad, is it?" he murmured.

As her legs wrapped around his waist, and her fingers dug into the flesh of his shoulders, she could only nod. With the lapping water threatening to throw them off balance, she clung to him. She felt herself become breathless. For a split moment, she glanced warily toward the shore.

"This is our world," he reminded, turning her to face him. "Like the sign says back there. No one allowed."

Wet flesh against wet flesh, her legs boldly tightened themselves around his waist else they be separated by the current. His lips captured hers, hungrily. She tasted the saltiness. He kissed her again and again. He was in complete control now. She knew it. He knew it.

"This is the Sydney Morgan I remember." She looked at him. His eyes had taken on the color of dark waters.

"Really?" She could feel tension running through them. Could feel him seeking her.

"How often I've dreamt of us like this," he went on. "It can always be this way," he growled, his voice racked with frustrated desire.

She listened to his words—words that filled her with such wanting, tears stung her eyes. In the roaring darkness of the forbidden Gulf's heartbeat, she wanted very much to believe him this time.

Like a self-imposed cocoon, darkness encased them, giving them their required privacy.

He pushed into her with one deep hard thrust. She forced herself to relax in order to take all of him, completely. Yes, he was right, she thought as all control of her senses was swept away. The passion between them would always be there, ready to carry them to heights of immeasurable pleasure. It was one thing she could never deny. The thrusts came slow at first, then quickened; and Syd, unbelieving that she could come again, felt herself losing control as spasms consumed her. She felt him shudder with his own release. The night carried their cries. Declared their passion.

Afterward, he carried her back onto the shore where they lay on the soft blanket of sand. She on her back, he on his stomach, his arm thrown leisurely across her abdomen. For a long while, no words passed between them. Occasionally, he'd nuzzle his face into the small hollow of her neck. Or tease a delicate earlobe.

"We'll be covered with sand when we get up from here," she commented, peering up at the black canopy of sky.

"No problem," he murmured. "We'll shower *together* later."

"Together, huh?" she murmured. "Has anyone ever said to you that you have an insatiable appetite?"

"Only for certain delicacies," he rejoined, stroking her right earlobe again with his tongue. Gently, he brushed a stray piece of wet hair from her face and placed a wet kiss on her nose, then on her cheek, down along her chin. He lifted his head and stared down at her for what seemed like a too-long moment. Except for his mouth, which held a mere hint of a smile, she sensed rather than felt the seriousness enclosing around him.

"You must know how much I enjoy making love to you. Your body responds so completely to mine, telling me how perfectly in tune we are together. And it's always been that way with us, from that very first time when we made love. It's probably why I've never been able to get you out of my system," he confessed.

She stroked his damp hair, boldly playing with it, twisting a few strands around her finger. She knew what he was saying. For eleven years, she had tried forgetting him. Like a potent virus, he'd remained inside her, relatively dormant until now.

"I don't know if I dare say this," she began, "but no man has ever made me feel the way you make me feel." She giggled.

"Sounds cliché, huh? But it's true. That's probably why there've been so few in my life."

Grant had actually been her first, she mused, thinking that it was probably her own naiveté that had gotten her into trouble in the first place. But no longer was she that naive young woman. She knew exactly what she was doing. Falling in love with a man who could again easily break her heart. She shivered at the still possible disquieting prospect.

He touched her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

She struggled to sit up. "Wrong?" She tried brushing the wet sand from her legs but without good result. The more she brushed, the more the wet sand stuck to the palms of her hands. Much like the stubborn chatter going on inside her mind.

"There was a time when you'd share everything with me," he reminded her.

"Grant, that was so long ago."

"I know. But time doesn't have to change that. You've got this worried look on your face suddenly. I want to know why."

"You want to know why. Do you always have to know everything about a person?"

"No, I don't always have to know. But it helps. I thought we were friends. And now lovers."

The word *lovers* left a bad taste in her mouth, much like biting into bitter tasting fruit. Its acrid taste coated her mouth. She sensed something giving way inside. Something most women gave away too easily – their independence and control.

He sat up, drew up one knee and draped an arm over it. "I don't want to be your boss, or your mentor. I want us as equals. I want to share my life with you."

She turned and looked at him. "What are you saying?" In the moonlight, she could see the paleness in his eyes. A trace of fear entered her. "What are you getting at?"

His eyes bore into her. "I know I'm jumping the gun, believing I have you back."

Unable to sit still, she struggled to her feet. Suddenly, she didn't want to hear what he had to say. Didn't need to hear it now. She tried to move away but he grabbed her hand, preventing her escape.

"Damn, Syd, don't go running away from me again." He gave a wry smile. "If I asked you to marry me, what would your answer be right now?"

"Marry you?" Unbelieving, she shook her head. "You're going too fast." Her knees were shaking and she didn't think that it was because of cool breezes drifting off the ocean. This was sudden insanity. "What are you doing, Grant? Testing me in some strange way? Playing with my emotions? You know damn well if you had asked me that eleven years ago, I wouldn't have hesitated to give you my answer. But now too much has changed!"

Grant stood and suddenly she felt all too self-conscious, too vulnerable, standing before him naked.

"A part of me that didn't exist back then—a part of me is telling me to take my time. Not rush into anything. It's that part of me that for a long time has had a say in how my life now runs." She moved away, just out of reach. "And frankly, at the moment marriage is not in my game plan." She headed for the steps.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm cold," she shouted, stomping onward, ignoring the sharp expletives that were breaking through the quiet dark.

Seconds later, when he caught up with her, she was already inside.

"I'm going to take that shower now," she said. "Alone!"

"It's down the hall, to the right," he replied, somewhat curtly. She marched down the hall, not daring to look back, afraid of what she would see in his eyes.

The night was ending badly, she thought as she stepped beneath the full pulsating streams of hot water. Her body ached. Mostly, she knew, from the recent lovemaking. But also from the mind games he was now playing. It was no longer a question of whether she loved him or not. A big part of her would always love him.

Would always feel for him those feelings a woman feels toward a man she'd been intimate with.

The question now remaining was whether she was willing to trust him with not only the rest of her life, but Brian's as well. After what he had just told her, about his moving down there; the man was becoming totally unpredictable, unstable, and unreliable. She couldn't risk having that kind of instability in her life. She couldn't risk bringing it into Brian's. He'd found it easy enough to move from Chicago to Connecticut, from Connecticut to here.

Where next would he go when he was tired of playing the part of father and husband?

She turned off the faucet, groped for the thick terry towel hanging on the hook. Except her hand found only empty space. Suddenly, she had the strange feeling she was being watched. Through blurred vision, she saw his naked form leaning up against the doorjamb. Startled, she backed into the stall. But with no place to go, he reached her easily and pulled her against him.

Sensing that this was not the same man she had left moments before, she grew frightened. His previous gentleness had all but disappeared, replaced by something else. Something that was not quite what one could call ugly but came very close. She struggled to free her wrists, but he held them firmly, as though to prove to her his strength, and his control.

"Grant, stop. Not like this."

He broke off her words by covering her mouth with his, crushing them beneath his. Slowly, his grasp lessened as he kissed her, more in desperation than in sheer arrogance. Like a traitor, her body responded to this assault.

"Damn you," she cursed softly, succumbing to a passion that soon engulfed them.

He was relentless in his lovemaking this time. Again and again, he drove her to immeasurable heights of ecstasy, pulling back at times, forcing her to beg for ultimate release.

And when finally wondrous spasms of pleasure came and took control, she realized that it could always be like this between them—always.

~\*~

A shadow moved across the wall. Sensing, more than seeing, her eyelids flickered open for a moment then fell shut as she sank back into a deep, exhausted sleep. But Grant was still awake, sitting in the chair at the opposite end of the room, watching the ebb and flow of her breathing until it grew even.

She was back in his life. He had to keep thinking along those lines. It made him feel good knowing it. He enjoyed watching her sleep, especially now that she was in his bed. It downright felt right to him. She belonged there, with him. Had always belonged there with him. He drew in a long breath of air, and then released it. He was tired. Bone tired. It'd been a long time since he'd made love like that to a woman. But he knew well the reason why. Because he had been waiting a long time for her.

Waiting for the woman who now lay in his bed. It had been a long day, but a good one. Spending it not only with her but also with his son. The thought made him feel complete, like a healing finally happening—a healing that could eventually help heal and fade some of the scars.

One particularly painful scar remained.

Telling Brian the truth. And with that, a certain fear remained. How would Brian accept that truth? The boy could end up hating him. Hating him for not being there all those years. Hate him for depriving him of the love a father gives a son. For the moment, he pushed the fear aside.

He left the chair and padded over to her, quietly so as to not disturb her, and then lay down next to her, stretching himself fully against her warm silky back. He wrapped one arm gently around her waist, and his hand reached up and cupped one soft full breast. He nestled his face into the back of her neck, inhaled deeply, fully, drawing in that wonderful vanilla scent. He was ready for her again, but quickly



pushed the thought from his mind lest he be forced to get up and take another cold shower.

Slowly, he exhaled, closed his eyes, and as he allowed himself to settle into her, one thought plagued his mind.

His son's hand, how it had occurred. Genetics, perhaps, or something else, something external. He thought of those polluted wells on land surrounding his company. Pollution caused by what was under his land. He knew that it would all eventually be remedied. Still, it made him swallow hard and he was unable to dispel the painful lump forming inside his throat. Nor prevent the feeling of guilt that now engulfed him. Grant sighed and finally shut his eyes, drawing comfort from the warm sleeping form nestled against him.

## Chapter Fourteen

Sydney stirred as the enticing aroma of fresh brewed coffee assaulted her nostrils, making her lift one eyelid. Then she bolted to an upright position, causing the sheet to slide down the front of her, revealing her naked body. She pushed back her hair, which hung in disarray around her face. She struggled to orient herself to her location. Peered across the room at her tank top and skirt draped neatly over a straight-back chair.

Good Lord, she realized, it was morning. She was still at Grant's.

Immediately, she slipped off the bed, padded over to her clothes, scooped them up, and held them against her. All the while keeping her focus on the open door, she hurriedly got dressed.

Never mind the fact she was well into her thirties. Her parents were probably going out of their ever-loving minds. All they knew was she had left their place the day before with a virtual stranger – a man named Grant Sinclair.

She caught a reflection of herself in the mirror. Another stranger stared back. She stared at the woman in the mirror. No cosmetic could put that radiance on anyone's face. Her lips held more color than usual, although she wore no lipstick. Drawing a comb from her canvas bag, she tugged it through her defiant locks. It wasn't just the sex in and of itself, although the sex was good between them.

No, it was something else. They had re-established a connection. She heard his voice. Tossed the comb into the bag.

"Yes, it'll be okay. Don't worry. I know what I'm doing."

Cautiously, she pushed the door farther open.

"When you get down here, we'll talk about it. But I need you here now!"

Grant was talking to someone on the phone. A sense of *déjà vu* swept through her. Noiselessly, she padded down the hall.

When she entered the kitchen area, she spotted the sheets of newspapers scattered across the table, demonstrating he'd been up a while. Since she never heard the phone ring, she had to assume he had made the call. His cutoff jeans and dark blue tank top made him look roguishly handsome, especially with his hair tousled like that. Barefooted like that made him appear vulnerable. Although she knew better than to apply the term *vulnerable* to a man like him, especially after last night.

When he realized she was standing there, he darted a look her way. "I'll talk to you later," he mumbled into the receiver, then quickly hung up.

She stared at him for a moment and wondered about the cause of that look of wariness on his face. Although curious to know the identity of the voice on the other end, she was not about to ask.

"I phoned your parents last night," he told her then sat back down at the table and returned his attention to the sprawled newspaper. "I told your father you would be spending the night here."

She let out a whoosh of air at his words, much like being slapped on the back. "Boy, I bet that went over well. I can see those veins popping out of his forehead now."

Grant nonchalantly flipped a page of the newspaper.

"Remember, you're no longer his 'little' girl. You don't need to answer to anyone." He slid a sidelong glance her way, deliberately trapping her into its challenge.

She averted his gaze. "That's not the point." She concentrated on the plate of over-done toast. "He's old fashioned. He's never easily accepted the fact that his adult daughter might actually ever spend an entire night with a total stranger."

"Stranger? To whom?" He crooked an infamous wicked grin her way, and then crooned, "I'm no stranger, at least to you."

Her eyes briefly rolled upward. She sat down, and palmed her chin. "They're not going to feel comfortable about this. And neither will I, having to face them now." She reached over for a slice of toast.

He closed the paper, folding it back along the previous folds. "I was tempted not to tell you. Let you fret a while. But don't worry, Syd. I told them you'd eaten something which hadn't agreed with you and it was better you stayed here until you felt better."

"Then essentially you lied to them?"

Grinning, he pushed the paper aside and turned to look at her fully. "What would you have had me tell them? Their daughter is zonked out for an unspecified amount of time after having consumed a bit too much wine? Or would you rather have had me tell them you were exhausted from spending a whole night having sex with this *stranger*?" He threw a conspiratorial grin. "I think we'll stick with the one about the tainted food."

She let out a weighty sigh. "At least it won't have my father marching over here brandishing a shotgun." She gave a little smirk. "He's been dying to use one on the man who'd gotten his only daughter pregnant."

Grant made no response, purposely ignoring her last statement.

"I hope I didn't put you out any, using your bed and all," she said, taking a bite out of the toast, wincing at the charcoal flavor.

"Whew! You were zonked. Let's say the way your body fits against mine would make cold nights a thing of the past, and that vanilla scent of your perfume. I'm not about to have those sheets washed any time soon."

She almost choked on the toast. "But I saw you leave the room. Are you telling me we slept the whole night together in the same bed?"

"I could lie and say no. But then I wouldn't be able to tell you how easily I could get accustomed to waking up every morning, seeing you lying beside me."

She looked at him as if he had become that stranger she had just referred to. "That's going to present a problem since before long you'll be back in Connecticut and

I'll be here. It'll be difficult to remain steady bed partners, won't it?" she added, slathering globs of butter over a burnt piece of toast.

"Aren't you forgetting? I'm moving down soon."

She darted him a wary look. "Well, don't be counting on me to keep your bed warm, especially with Brian around. I don't want him thinking his mother sleeps around."

A hurt look flickered across Grant's face, but quickly dissipated. "Then let's make the most of it while I'm here. Stay with me until I leave. I'll be around until next weekend. I'm flying back the following Monday."

She snorted. "You are incorrigible. That sounds like a straight proposition to me. I came down here to be with my son, *and* to visit my parents, remember? Besides, I've got plans for next Saturday night, which would leave an awkward gap in your plans for the weekend."

"It was a suggestion."

She tried to take another bite out of the toast, but even after smearing a larger than normal glob of jelly on top of the butter, she found it difficult to swallow. She put the unfinished toast down on to her plate. "No, it wasn't *just* a suggestion. I made a big mistake coming here and a bigger one staying the night. I'm in your employ, or soon will be, and I shouldn't be here with you like this. It's unethical. It's compromising. If anything, I'm sure it's totally unprofes—"

"Syd, what's happening between us is not going to affect your work, if that's what you're worrying about." He picked up the coffeepot and filled her cup.

"Isn't it? There's a name for it. It's called an *illicit affair* or *my affair with the boss* or *your affair with an employee*. Sex between people like us in the workplace is enough food for gossip; you'll have to bring in several more water coolers to accommodate all those thirsty drinkers."

Her *let's-pull-no-punches* words made her wince inside, but there was no escaping their truth. She picked up her cup and stared into the pooling liquid. "Damn, I

promised I wouldn't do this to myself." She couldn't meet his gaze and his silence prompted her to clarify.

"Although you can be exasperating at times, I do think something still exists between us. Especially after last night." She took a tentative sip of her coffee. "I'm so good at giving advice, but I don't seem to do too well at taking my own. I've always told others not to mix business with pleasure." She repeated the last few words, more to herself.

"I'm not looking to have an affair, Syd, with you, with anyone. Last night I asked you to marry me, remember? But your reaction clearly demonstrated that's not what you're looking for, at least yet. Maybe somewhere in that mind of yours you're having serious doubts. Doubts about what kind of father I'll make for Brian. Maybe that's why you're holding back."

She regarded him with grave concern.

"And from what I'm reading in your eyes, I'm guessing that I've hit a tender nerve. I understand your reservation about all of this. And it's true that I haven't been around kids much. Basically, my *children* have been my employees."

His words made her realize that the prospect of his becoming a parent was causing him some growing anxiety. Still, he had asked her to marry him. Although he hadn't outright said anything to her about love, or needing her. What purpose his proposal had been based on, she could only guess. Another obligation to be met? She wasn't about to ask since he'd only deny it. Besides, she had her pride.

"Grant, we should take this slow. I'm not saying you wouldn't be a good father. From the way I see it, some men aren't meant for the parenting thing."

"And you're saying I fall within those parameters?"

Her stomach tightened. "I don't want Brian hurt again— especially when you discover you no longer want the role."

His tilted head prompted her to expand on her words.

"I almost got married, about a year and a half ago. His name was Donald... Donald Barnett. He seemed perfect in the beginning: considerate, caring, intelligent and

sensitive. He owned a chain of sporting-goods stores. He seemed to have enough good qualities about him to negate whatever doubts I had that it couldn't work."

She broke off another piece of toast, and held it. "At first I didn't notice that whenever we went out, Brian was not asked to come along. Donald would show up, spend some time with him. But we never went out as a threesome. He'd usually drop Brian off at a sitter's house or one of my friend's."

She paused to refill her cup and to sort through her thoughts. She couldn't believe she was coming out with all this old stuff. But if it would help Grant understand where she was coming from; why she had to be careful about letting others into her and Brian's life...

"Brian asked Donald to attend a father/son banquet. Donald promised he'd go. But when the night of the banquet came around, Donald phoned and said something about getting stuck in a business meeting. The first couple of times, I'd shrug it off. These things happen. But after several more, I was forced to confront him. I came right out and asked if he might be having a problem accepting Brian because of his hand. I don't know why I expected him to say no, it didn't matter." She put the untouched toast back down. "I didn't hear from him for a long time afterward. Then one day a friend called to let me know Donald had gotten engaged. By then the only feeling I had left for him was pity... pity for the woman who was fool enough to marry the man."

Grant pushed his cup away. The newspaper sailed to the floor. "So, you think I'm going to follow suit?" His eyes locked with hers. She shivered as their color dimmed. "But aren't you forgetting something?" he went on, his voice low, restrained, close to the edge. "Brian is my flesh and blood. There's the difference. He's my son. Not this Barnett jerk's. You don't seem to want to accept the fact that I am here now and, as Brian's father, part of me lives inside of him. And parts of him live inside of me." His hand trembled as he picked up the coffeepot then, changing his mind, put it down. "Did you ever consider that possibly you're the only who may be having a problem with all of this? And until you get straightened out whatever is going on inside of that head of yours, you are right about us. We have no future together as a family. Until you

can let me know with no uncertainty that you want me in that boy's life, I will not force myself on you, or him. I'm letting you carry the whole ball of wax now." He looked down at his watch. "It's getting late. I better get you back to your folks."

She felt a familiar constricting inside her chest. Apprehensively, she looked at Grant. He was forcing her hand. A hand she could very well lose. And by losing it, lose the chance of her son knowing a father's love.

By the same token, by letting Grant in, she was also going to risk hurting the relationship she already had with Brian, when he realized she had deliberately cheated him out of that love.



## Chapter Fifteen

When the front door suddenly opened, Brian was standing there. He looked up at her, his face unsmiling, his eyes filling with curiosity. Then he looked past her, at Grant coming up the front walk.

"Boy, Gramps is not too happy with you guys. He thought you two had gotten lost or something."

"Sorry, sport," Grant responded first. "Hey, maybe I can make it up to you both. Let's go do some fishing tomorrow morning. We'll get up early and —"

Sydney nudged Grant and darted him a look of warning. At any moment, she knew, he could be called back to Connecticut. Already she could see disappointment on Brian's face when the fishing trip had to be canceled.

Grant bent down to Brian's height. "If it's okay with your Mom."

The question was more of an afterthought, she knew. What choice did she have? Refuse? Become the world's worst ogre, especially with her not being able to bring Augie down. *Dish out major disappointment number two?* Grant, perhaps unknowingly, was still manipulating them, breaking his promise to her of not forcing himself into their lives, using Brian as his pawn.

Predictably, Brian turned to her, his large eyes imploring her to say yes.

"I guess we could go," she began.

Brian's eyes quickly narrowed. "Uh... this is a guy thing, Mom. Right, Mr. Sinclair? I mean it's not that we don't want you coming along, but remember the last time you took me fishing at Mill Woods Pond?" He looked at Grant. "Mom almost

threw up trying to get that worm on a hook." He looked back at her. "You probably won't enjoy yourself anyway, Mom." His eyes slid back over to Grant for added reinforcement.

"Who won't enjoy himself?" Sydney's father asked, suddenly appearing from an adjoining room. Grant nodded a greeting and repeated his offer to include him into the spur-of-the-moment fishing trip.

"Sounds good. It's been a while since I've done some ocean fishing. Pick us up whenever you're ready. Earlier the better."

Sydney felt as if she had been shoved into the back seat of a movie theater, forced to watch some black-and-white rerun— rerun of her son's life, because it was apparent she would be experiencing this trip secondhand.

Her father turned to her. "Before I forget, Jon called this morning. He's concerned about that bout with food poisoning. You are okay now?"

"I'm fine, Dad," she responded, ignoring the twitching at one corner of Grant's mouth that signaled his amusement over having to cover for her.

"Anyone care for a cold drink?" she quickly asked, determined to divert the conversation.

"Nothing for me," Grant replied. "I have appointments with several subcontractors this morning who are not too happy, being that it's a Sunday. Also, my assistant is flying in this afternoon—"

"Alexis is coming down?" Sydney pushed away the queasy feeling inside her stomach, guessing it had been Alexis on the phone earlier.

"Yes."

"I see." His all too brief reply produced a bitter taste in her mouth.

"She's organizing our directors' meeting convening here in the fall," he explained. "I thought it best if she personally checked out the local accommodations."

How convenient, Sydney thought bemusedly, and repressed the urge to ask what accommodations Alexis was going to make for herself, recalling his newly purchased beachfront home with its spacious rooms, bedrooms in particular.

“How about you and this Alexis person joining us at the Benson’s for a small get together Saturday night?” her father suddenly asked. “I know they’d be delighted to have you.”

Her stomach tightened one notch at this strange turn of events.

“Thanks. I’m sure Alexis will love to come. And it’ll give me a chance to get to know more people in the area.” He glanced over at Sydney with one peaked brow. “One being Sydney’s friend, Jon.”

Unwilling to make a comeback with her father standing there, she forced a stiff smile. “Yes, won’t that be nice.”

~\*~

As Grant made his way back to his place, he kept thinking about what he had just done. What in the hell did he know about ocean fishing? Suddenly, he pictured his father standing there, suitcases in hand, a cab waiting at curbside, and shouting back to him his well-rehearsed promises. The next time he was home, they’d go fishing. The next time he was home, they’d get in some hunting. Next time a Red Sox game. Or a Celtics game. The next time...

Except, as next times came and went, and his father kept getting assigned special projects, the promises he’d make remained as such— empty heartfelt promises, not necessarily broken, as they all promised a future event— an event that never occurred, at least for him. He’d enjoyed seeing the look of anticipation coming over Brian’s face. One he’d probably manifested countless times when his own father made all those promises.

But damn if he was going to break his. He’d get that boat, at whatever the cost. And all the damn fishing gear they needed. And he’d pump that tackle shop owner until he knew all there was to know about ocean fishing. They didn’t call him the drill sergeant for nothing.

Nonetheless, he pushed down the feeling of nausea at the sudden image of sticking any kind of bait on to any type of hook.

~\*~

The week flew by too fast for Sydney's liking. Soon it was Saturday night and the Benson's party. For the occasion, she selected an uncharacteristically short, cool cotton sundress in a soft beige-and-white flowered print. The neckline was just low enough to reveal a hint of fullness at her breasts but not enough to attract gaping male eyes. An intricately carved locket hung off a delicate gold chain, and rested just at the hollow of her throat. Her sunlit hair, pinned up and swept to one side, added a soft alluring touch. When Jon picked her and her parents up, his eyes instantly filled with admiration.

As the four climbed into the Lincoln Town car, a tangerine sun settled toward the horizon. Before the last burst of orange faded she spotted, through a grove of swaying fronds, house lights emanating from a sprawling brick ranch. Several yards from the house, she knew, flowed the Braden River where moored cabin cruisers evidenced the fact several of the Benson's guests had arrived via the waterways.

With her arm linked through the crook of Jon's, they walked into a red and gray flagstone foyer. She couldn't help notice framed oils positioned on surrounding white stucco walls, each bearing the initials *J.B.* in its right hand corner.

"Yes, they are *all* mine," Jon said, confirming her suspicion.

Each painting depicted a scalloped twisting shoreline, and seagulls descending over turbulent waves, against an ever-changing sky. Although all were similar in content, each had been done in a different hue to display the particular time of day they'd been created. One showed cheerful morning light, another the harsh brightness of midday, and the last a dimming, lowering dusk, its murky colors providing a striking contrast to the other two. Also in each, a lone figure walked a secluded beach.

"Jon, these are quite good."

“Good, yes. Exceptional?” He shook his head. “Good enough to hang in what my mother calls her *private* gallery.” He chuckled. “She’s always been my best fan. Although I’ve sold a few over the years, I don’t see myself relying on my artistic talent to provide a comfortable enough living. Nor am I about to starve to discover if there’s a Picasso or Monet lurking inside me.”

Sydney regarded him with interest, and the thought occurred to her that if Grant had been the one to create these paintings he would face the challenge head on, risk all to find out just how good an artist he actually was. In the end, whether he succeeded or not, he would have the satisfaction of knowing he had tried.

“And now, my dear Sydney, we move into what mother calls the blue room.”

Sheer pale blue drapes floated down from ceiling to floor, covering one entire wall. Through the gossamer material, she spotted a sprinkle of lights drifting in from the river. The floor had also been covered in a matching blue shade of Italian mosaic tiles. A traditional sofa covered in blue print chintz fabric and matching chairs complemented the dark mahogany wood that decorated each piece of furniture.

“It’s beautiful... and entirely in blue.”

She glanced to her right and spotted a glossy baby grand. Gently, she pulled her arm free and walked over to it. Her fingers caressed the flat ivory surfaces of several keys. She stretched the fingers of her right hand and struck a few notes. Ventured into a few chords—first in major, then minor key and noted with some satisfaction that they had kept the piano well tuned.

“Play for us!” Jon urged.

She looked up into his entreating dark pupils. “No, I couldn’t. I haven’t played in years. I don’t even own a piano.”

Brian had never even heard her play, she suddenly realized. It was one of the things she’d given up because of her busy schedule.

“We’d love to hear you play,” a voice chimed in.

Startled, Sydney half-turned to see Katherine Benson coming toward them.

"Maybe another time," Sydney promised, hoping that by then she'd have forgotten the tentative promise.

"Your mother confided to me you once studied music in college," Katherine remarked.

"I did take a few courses in my freshman year," Sydney corrected, recalling her first year at the Conservatory, "before changing over to more practical pursuits. Although at times I do regret giving it up, I quickly remind myself there's more of a demand for financial analysts compared to *female* concert pianists." She winced inside, thinking about Jon's words and his own sell-out on a life promising little in way of instant monetary gains.

"I admire you young women today," Katherine Benson commented. "It wasn't long ago when women worried more on who would take care of them than on what careers they should pursue. Oh, I see more of our guests arriving. Please excuse me."

Sydney nodded and looked at Jon, who had suddenly developed an ear-to-ear grin.

"What do you find so amusing?"

"You," he answered.

"Me?"

"Yes. You're so *cute* when you get serious about women's issues."

She felt her smile slip.

"Admit it, Sydney. A lot of women prefer to be taken care of by *someone*. Many women aren't as financially secure. Jobs just aren't out there anymore with all of this downsizing—"

"And your point?" she asked, hoping to end the conversation on a subject for which she suddenly had no appetite.

Jon gave her a look she wished she hadn't seen. "I wouldn't mind taking care of you. Putting you on my own special pedestal. Fulfilling your every whim and desire."

She held back a groan and gave a twisted smile. "That pedestal gets mighty small."

Jon tentatively touched the back of her hand. "Needing someone is part of sharing a life."

"I'm already sharing my life with someone — my son." She thought of Grant, and the now very remote possibility of her sharing a life with him. Because, by allowing that, she knew she could lose a large part of herself in the process. Not wishing to pursue the conversation further, she directed her gaze to another part of the room. Relief filled her at the sight of a familiar face weaving her way.

"Sydney!" her mother shouted. "You must go out on the patio and look at the view," she urged. "It is utterly magnificent."

More than happy to comply with the request, thereby ending the discourse with the misguided soul standing beside her, this time she willingly accepted her mother's suggestion. A myriad of unfamiliar voices greeted them as the three made their way to the patio. Although Sydney recognized no one, Jon did not fail to introduce her and her mother to each and every guest.

When a waitress carrying a tray of crystal glasses filled with sparkling champagne passed by, she took one glass off the tray. When the same waitress and tray slid by again moments later, she took another glass. And true to his word, Jon stayed by her side. As he promised, she noted with rueful amusement, he was determined to take care of her.

She noticed a section of the room had been designated for dancing. Her eyes scanned the area and suddenly she realized she was looking for *him*. As far as she knew, neither Grant nor Alexis had as yet shown their faces. At one point, she excused herself from Jon's company for the powder room. Once inside, as she sat down on a tapestry-covered bench situated in front of a large gilded mirror, questions tumbled from her mind.

*What if he doesn't show up? What if he decided she and her family were not in his best interest?* Although Grant, as he had promised, had come over early that Monday morning to take Brian and her father fishing, he had not spoken or called since. As if to purposely shut her out, close her off from that part of Brian's life that he could

personally share. And possibly, to get back at her for the years she had denied him the same access.

Brian, on the other hand, had spent most of the week chatting about his fishing venture. How he was hoping to go out again before Grant left. Brian even made her cook up the two small fish he'd managed to catch that day, and had eaten both as if they were his last meal. To outsiders, not such a big deal, but Brian hated fish. Except these were ones he'd caught with Grant's help. And that had made all the difference.

"How nice to see you again."

Sydney's gaze slowly lifted to the sultry low voice and to the tall stately figure standing behind her. Her comb slipped from her hand. As she retrieved it, the redheaded woman sat down next to her.

"I do hate flying," Alexis began, "but making the trip down in the company's plane isn't bad, except I still can't understand why he had me bring along that ungodly creature."

"Ungodly creature?"

Alexis drew open her purse and rummaged through it.

"Some kind of reptile. Grant had your secretary bring it to the plane. Oh, Tamika says hi and to give her a call when you have a chance." She took out her compact, stroked a faint color of blush over cheeks and chin. "Besides, I had to come. Grant practically begged me to. Poor boy's lost without me, it seems." Her heavily made-up eyes slithered across Sydney's mirrored face.

"May I ask, what did you do with that ungodly creature?"

"Why, I left it with Grant, of course." She reached back into the tiny purse and drew out several lipstick cases, selected one, pulled off its gold cap. "I hear congratulations are in order." She stroked her lips with a vivid shade of unadulterated red.

Sydney gave her a puzzled look.

"You're going to be working for GS Enterprises. Grant told me you're going to manage the new office here. How nice; you'll be down *here* with your family." Her



lavender eyes remained focused ahead as she dipped into her purse and drew out a comb, which she then easily slipped through her long flowing tresses.

"Personally, I couldn't stand to be away from all the action. And I'm sure, after a few months of living here Grant will feel the same and come back to corporate where he belongs. You know how he *needs* to be right smack in the middle of things, especially now with all the excitement caused by those dreadful protestors, who by the way might not be around much longer. The EPA guys are coming in to assess everything. I guess Grant wants to get the whole mess cleaned up as soon as possible. He's been quite adamant about getting the whole thing resolved." She wrinkled her nose. "Grant hates loose ends."

Sydney managed a weak smile as the small plastic comb in her palm snapped. *Had she been right then? Was she simply one of those loose ends and thereby the reason why he was sending her south? And had he lied to her about living here?*

Alexis rose and headed for the door. "I'd better get back before he wonders what's happened to me."

Sydney stared at her dress. Shorter than most would dare. And like the lipstick, the same audacious color. The filmy material fell seductively in all the right places. Places where she wondered if there was anything beneath. Remembering the massage Grant had given her days before, an image of those hands stroking over dubious places pervaded her mind.

Alexis disappeared, and she turned back to the mirror. Drew in several long breaths. Okay, so he was here, with Alexis dangling off one arm no less. No use putting it off, she thought ruefully, and re-applied her own pale pink lip gloss, all the while ignoring the queasy feeling settling in her stomach at the prospect of seeing the two of them together.

When she returned to the group, she gave a sigh of relief when she recognized the back of Jon's head. He was standing near the Steinway. Like an oasis in the desert, she headed toward him but when halfway there, faltered.

Out of the shadows, a tall man emerged, wearing a pale blue shirt, tan Dockers, and casual boat shoes. She had to wonder if Grant had been one of the guests to come in off the river.

"Ah, there you are," Jon greeted. "Grant was just asking your whereabouts." Jon immediately moved a possessive arm around her waist— a maneuver that clearly defined its intentions to the man with the icy gray eyes. With concealed annoyance, she pulled slightly away. The two men faced each other as if in a stalemate.

"It's a shame to waste that music," Grant suddenly remarked. Then he turned to the woman standing behind him. "Alexis, would you care to dance?"

Sydney arched both brows.

"I thought you'd never ask," Alexis drawled, her voice dripped like honey off the end of a wooden spoon.

As the two blending figures slid away, Jon turned to her and commented, "That's some assistant!" His eyeballs looked as though they were about to explode out of their sockets.

From a newly retrieved glass, she quickly gulped several fast sips of champagne. "You know what your problem is, Jon? You simply haven't been out enough."

Jon, unsure on how to take her remark, responded with a nervous laugh. "Hey, how about playing us that tune now!"

She shrugged. Her mind had become fogged from all the champagne she'd consumed, which had been way over her limit. Thankfully she wasn't driving. Except either the room was swaying or her alcohol-affected equilibrium was playing tricks.

But she knew if Jon continued his prodding about her playing, she might be tempted to tickle the old ivories—as her father would put it—if only to distract herself from the intimate scene playing its own private prelude out on the Benson's patio.

"C'mon. Puhleeze! Puhleeze! I'll get down on my knees if that'll convince you." Jon then lowered himself to the hard tile.

One hand flew to her mouth to stifle a giggle. “Oh for crying out loud, I hate to see a grown man beg. I’ll give it a try as long as you don’t make a face when I hit the wrong notes. Like I said, it’s been a while.”

Jon’s eyes lit up. His lips drew into a wide ingratiating smile. “Not one smirk will cross this face,” he promised. He stood back up and pulled her toward him. “Thanks,” he whispered into her ear, and gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sydney noticed Grant looking in their direction and realized their cozy intimate scene had not gone unnoticed. She took several more sips of the champagne, peered down at the keyboard. Its flashing white teeth mockingly smiled back.

Like riding a bicycle, she tried to convince herself. Once you learn, you never forget.

*Like sex?* A faint inner voice whispered teasingly. Then Syd quickly dismissed the thought. Stretched and flexed her fingers. Struck a few notes, a few chords. As her confidence rose, she pulled the bench out and sat down, returning her fingers to the keyboard. Later, she would only venture a guess as to why she had chosen this piece. A familiar tune—one she hadn’t played in many years.

A hush filled the room as couples, becoming drawn to the well-known melody, listened to a song that still brought an untold number of couples together— couples who still made it *their* own special song.

Oblivious to her surroundings as the sounds of her playing drifted throughout the room, she pushed away the uneasy feeling of *déjà vu*. The last time she had played this song? Hadn’t it been at a similar setting, a similar party, and a celebration? At one point, she glanced up from the keyboard, peered through the sea of enraptured faces, and connected with his gray orbs. The memory surfaced like a rising body breaking free, after having been weighted down in its watery grave.

Yes, it had been at his request that she had played the song. And years later, that same song would be a cruel reminder of that night—a Karen Carpenter song entitled “*We’ve Only Just Begun*.”

She'd never played it again. Never could. Never dare until now. Until her champagne-clouded memory allowed her the luxury.

But the cloud was now lifting, dissipating, drifting away like the wistful tentacles of a blinding fog. She struck the final chord. Lifted and withdrew her hands.

Daring to look at no one, she immediately rose from the bench, moved away from the piano. Away from her enraptured audience. Jon tried to follow.

"I'll be fine," she told him through her clenched teeth. "It's the champagne. I need fresh air. I need to be alone for a while."

She made her escape from the house and managed to find a quiet refuge at the edge of a secluded dock where she kicked off her sandals, and dangled her legs over the sides. She held back her tears as the accusing words spilled cruelly from her mind.

*If it hadn't been for your stubborn pride, your unrelenting anger, he would not have been denied a father. You have yourself to blame –*

"Are you all right?" The gentle male voice startled her. She half turned toward the shadowy figure coming toward her, thinking at first that it was Jon. She had to catch her breath when she saw instead that it was Grant.

"Yes, I'm okay. I needed fresh air." Unable to repress a hiccup, she winced.

Grant lowered himself next to her. They sat quietly, allowed the darkness to wrap around them. Then sensing her reluctance to begin, he spoke first. "Champagne does that sometimes."

She hiccupped again. "Does w-what?"

"Hiccups."

She did not respond, preferring to face the dark waters rather than his interrogating words. Grant touched her arm. She jerked away.

"You've been crying?"

She stiffened. "No. Well, yeah; a little. I tend to get weepy when I go past my quota of champagne."

She almost felt his sigh of resignation. "Syd, I want to help."

She brought her knees up to her chin. Wrapped her arms around them, reinforcing the wall she was determined to build between them. "I don't need your help. When I played that song just now, it simply brought up some bittersweet memories, that's" —*hiccup*— "all."

"I know what you're saying." He bent over and put a finger to her lips. "That song stirred up a few for me, too. Ones that have haunted me a long time."

*So, she thought, he had his own ghosts following him.*

"I only wish I had had the courage then to admit to myself that I was falling in love with you," he went on. "I wish I'd made it safer for you to come and tell me about Brian."

Floodlights from the house enabled her to study his profile. She noticed a familiar twitching at his jaw. "I was wrong to go through with that marriage. I was a coward, not willing to face the truth about myself, about Samantha, or my feelings for her. I was never *in love* with her."

Grant raked his hand through his hair. "I've always been in love with you."

She did not respond. Could not. Prevented by roiling emotions.

"I once mentioned something about extenuating circumstances?"

Through her numbness, she gave a short nod, and suddenly remembered that he never did expand on that statement.

"Samantha called that morning to tell me that she was pregnant." She felt a sudden shiver passed through.

"She said that the baby was mine."

Suddenly, she couldn't breathe, and was tempted to ask why Samantha had good reason to believe that it was his. Then, remembering Harold's words about Grant's sexual prowess, decided against asking. That too was water under the bridge. Best left there.

"I let myself believe that I cared enough about her to do the right thing."

"You told me you had no children."

"And here I am now, forcing myself back into your life. Barging in, manipulating—"

"What happened to the baby?" she asked, determined to know.

"Thinking that I could produce for myself an instant family—"

*"What happened to the baby?"*

He looked at her, covered her hand with his. "There was never any baby. Samantha made up a story; I would find out years later, when she finally confessed that in the beginning she hadn't miscarried."

A silence ensued. She was at a loss for words. A cruel thick spider's web had caught them all up, trapping them in secrets and lies, and almost destroying them.

"Syd, I really enjoyed myself with Brian and your father the other day. I wanted to call and tell you. But I thought I'd better lay low because I suddenly realized what you were trying to tell me the other night. I can't force myself into Brian's life. I can't just up and say, hey sport, guess what, I'm your long lost father, the one you thought dead. I'll confess there were moments on the boat when I wanted to tell him who I was. But whenever he'd look at me with those trusting eyes—I knew I'd only end up hurting him. And hurting you. And suddenly I was beginning to worry that he might think I had rejected him at birth."

Then silence. A silence broke only by the deafening bedlam of thoughts rushing through their minds. Both anger and pride had prevented life from taking a proper course.

"So I'm backing off," Grant suddenly said. "The rest is up to you. If you decide not to tell Brian, I'll respect that decision. Not that I'll be happy with it," he was sure to add. His eyes stared into the dark void. "Bittersweet memories die hard, don't they? A line from a poem, a familiar lyric from some overly sentimental song, can sure dredge up a lot of past hurt."

She couldn't see his eyes this time. She didn't need to. She knew they'd be as dark as the water running below them.

"I've failed a lot of people since you first played that song for me. And I'm not sure now how to go about making any of it right."

Sydney drew close. "I think you've just begun."

She could feel the walls tumbling around them. A healing, she knew, was also beginning.

Grant rose. "Jon's probably wondering where you are. I don't want him worrying and thinking that you've fallen into the river, or that I pushed you in," he said, half-jokingly.

"Jon's a friend. I want you to know that."

Through the darkness, she sensed more than saw relief enter his paling orbs. "It was difficult to tell, seeing as how he was not letting you out of his sight."

"Friends," she reiterated. "Same as you and Alexis?" His gaze locked with hers. Her heart pounded against her chest. As the unstoppable current flowed beside them, she felt herself drifting toward him. A slight wonderment escaped from him as his lips touched hers gently, tentatively. Lips wonderfully familiar to her, as intoxicating as any amount of champagne. She slipped her arms around his neck, and clung to him, wishing the kiss would go on forever.

Yes, she knew at once, she did love this man. Would always love him. And knew, as she had always known, she would never forget the passion they'd once shared, an unforgettable passion.

"SYDNEEEY!" Jon's voice shattered the cloaking darkness. "Are you out there?"

She and Grant regarded each other, as if to ask should they respond or remain hidden in the privately captured moment. Grant, unwilling to relinquish his hold, continued to kiss her.

"We better go in," she managed to say, more breathless with each kiss.

With great reluctance, he eased away. "I wish I could tell you this is the last time I'm willing to share you with any man. But I know I can't," he murmured. "I don't have that right. Still, I wanted you to know."

She held him tightly to her, and whispered, “No man will ever make me feel the way you’ve made me feel.” She pressed her warm lips against the sides of his face. Pressed her body against him. When she felt his hardness grow, she reveled in the knowledge she still had that power, that control over him. Slowly, she drew away, turned and headed toward the house, all the while smiling inside.

Grant, on the other hand, needed time to get *things* back to normal before joining the party. As the night wore on, Sydney found herself mentally rehearsing the words she’d use to tell Brian about Grant. No words came that wouldn’t cause confusion for a little boy who believed his father dead, no words came that wouldn’t also cause emotional pain.

But hadn’t Grant given her the option?

Brian never need know. She never need hurt him in that way. She could keep her secret, now *their* secret, forever buried. Locked away where no one would get hurt further by her past mistakes. She gave a short sigh of relief, knowing if only for the moment, that secret could lie buried in her soul.



## Chapter Sixteen

Sydney slipped a laced-trimmed lavender nightgown over her head. The hem fell gradually to her ankles. She turned to start pulling down the bedcovers, when she caught a reflection of herself in the dark glass.

*He's not here with you, is he? And you're wondering if he's with her. But hey, didn't Jon bring you home? And didn't Grant see you leave with him? So why shouldn't he be with Alexis? Why did you have to complicate things by falling in love with him? You didn't have to take this position with GS. You would have managed at Farnsworth. You should have let it go –*

"May I come in?" a thin voice queried from outside the room, startling her away from the glass.

"Hi, Mom. How come you're still up?"

"I saw your light was still on, dear; wondered the same. Everything all right? You're not sick? Sometimes drinking milk will coat –"

"Everything's fine, Mom," she responded a little sheepishly, knowing that her mother had seen her consume her share of the Benson's champagne.

"Did you enjoy yourself tonight?" her mother asked.

"Yes. I had a *nice* time."

*Okay, she thought, a small enough lie.*

"Nice time?" her mother echoed. "Nice times are church suppers, trips to museums," she said with an uncharacteristic tone of sarcasm in her voice. She appeared to want to say more, but instead sat down on the edge of the bed. "Jon seemed to enjoy himself," she added, rubbing across the comforter.

"That's nice," Syd answered. She was tired. *Some vacation*, she thought ruefully.

"Everyone remarked how you two made such a *lovely* couple. And Jon's mother was sooo pleased that you played the piano for her. And she's looking forward to hearing you play aga—"

"Mom! After tonight I'm not looking for any encores." She slipped her now aching body between the covers. Then winced at the hurt look coming over her mother's face. "There's simply no sense in pursuing something that's not going to happen."

"You mean there's no use pursuing a dead horse," her mother responded dryly.

Sydney smiled. "Mom. Not everyone falls in love, gets married, and then lives happily ever after. In fairy tales, maybe. But what are fairy tales? Just a bunch of well put together lies."

Her mother seemed to study the random floral pattern scattered across the bedspread. "That good-looking Mr. Sinclair seems nice." She looked directly at her daughter, as if to purposely hold her gaze. "Dad liked the way he treated Brian when they went fishing the other day. He asked Brian all sorts of questions about his hand. Seemed genuinely concerned and—"

"What sort of questions?" she interrupted, unable to conceal a defensive tone rising in her voice.

"Oh, not that he made any big issue of it. But from what your father tells me, Grant was trying to show Brian how to cast a line, and they had to figure out the best way he could do it without it getting tangled. Except it seems Grant got tangled in the line as much as Brian, and it made your father wonder if he had ever done any fishing." She shrugged. "Anyway, all Brian ever talks about is Mr. Sinclair and his boat, and going fishing with him again. I've never seen him so taken up with someone new like this."

Sydney felt her throat constrict preventing a response. Her silence pushed her mother to her feet. "Yes, I know it's late. We're all tired."

Her mother's face exhibited an enigmatic expression that Sydney knew was giving her the choice to either ignore or address. When her mother was half way out the door, she called out to her.

"Wait, Mom. I'm sensing you have something else to say. And if you don't, neither one of us is going to get much sleep."

Her mother hesitated, seemingly considering her daughter's words. She slowly turned. "Are you sure? I can wait until morning—"

"I can't."

Irma Morgan slowly came toward her. "You're Mr. Sinclair. I couldn't keep from staring at him." Suddenly, she released a giggle, and touched the side of her jaw. "That poor man must've thought I was trying to flirt with him." She shook her head, seemingly embarrassed by her statement. "Can you imagine? Me, married for God knows how long, and at my age? Flirting with a man practically young enough to be my son—"

"Mom!" Sydney cried in exasperation.

Irma Morgan's face turned crimson. "But I couldn't help myself. I don't mean the flirting. Heavens! But he looked so familiar. I kept thinking, now where have I seen this man before?" Her voice faltered and she returned to the edge of the bed. "I know you worked for him many years ago, but I don't think I ever had the chance to meet him back then. And I did miss meeting him the time he came here. So Lord only knows how I racked my brain trying to figure out where we could've met."

Her mother suddenly raised both hands, palms up. "Then it came." She dropped them into her lap. "It was his smile at first, and such a nice smile. But I think it was his eyes more than anything else. They reminded me so much of Brian. I'm surprised your father had never mentioned the similarity. But then men can be so *clueless* at times, can't they?" She attempted a smile, and returned her focus to the purple flowers. A pause followed, exaggerated by the cool air humming through an overhead vent.

"We went along with you about Brian's father and how he'd supposedly died in that motorcycle accident." Her mother slowly raised her head. Soft emerald eyes locked

with hers. "And I know you did it to protect Brian. But now I'm wondering if maybe *you* were the one who didn't want people thinking Brian was rejected by his father, and that's why you felt the need to make one up. I guess we simply went along with you because we didn't want Brian hurt either. After a while the lie just became part of our history."

Sydney inhaled deeply. Remembered a friend's sage advice back in junior high— don't underestimate mothers— when she'd played hooky with Penny Ramsey; and as she had done then, when she'd come home that night, she wanted to do now. Dive deep beneath the bedcovers.

"Does Grant know?"

Feeling every bit like that thirteen-year-old again, Sydney felt her face grow hot and she grappled for an answer. "Yes, Grant now knows he's Brian's father, but has only recently learned the truth. I told him just before coming down."

A look of relief and resignation came over her mother's face. "So now that he knows, what does *he* plan to do about it?"

"Do about it?" She felt the defensive wall going back up.

"Why nothing, because I don't expect him to do anything *about* it. I told Grant Sinclair he has no obligation to us. Brian and I have been doing just fine without his help."

A quick frown creased her mother's lips. "And he's simply going to walk away?" She crossed one hand over the other. Pressed them against her stomach as if to rein in some of her anger. "Somehow Grant Sinclair doesn't strike me as a man who would follow that course of action."

"It sounds like you're defending him? Defending the man who impregnated your daughter?"

Irma Morgan merely gave a couple of judicious blinks. "It does take two, dear."

"Okay, so it was my own stupidity and carelessness that got me into that situation. And my anger turned inward, it fueled my pride. And it was that lethal

combination that prevented me from confronting him right from the beginning. Plus my timing was off. He'd just gotten himself engaged to another woman."

Suddenly, Syd felt that same level of anger rising but knew it wasn't as much directed at him as at her. The same anger that had once prevented her from fighting for the man she'd always loved— would always love. It was the same anger that not only deprived Brian of a father, but also essentially carved an empty space into his heart.

"And what are you going to tell Brian?" Back and forth, her mother's hand rubbed across the bedcover, as if to smooth out each and every last wrinkle.

"I've been trying to figure that one out, but I can't seem to find the right words or the right moment." Drawing her knees up, she wrapped her arms around them. "I've kept the truth locked inside for so long, frankly, I don't know where to begin. What will happen when Brian finds out the man in the picture at home is not his real dad, that he's not even related to us in any shape or form, but a mere picture taken out of an inexpensive K-Mart frame? Once he realizes his father is not dead, that I've based our entire life on a damn lie—" She struggled to gulp in air. "He'll never trust what I tell him again. He may never trust anyone after this. I couldn't bear to have him hate me."

Worry lines deepened across her mother's forehead.

"And who could blame him?" Sydney went on, needing to release more of the raging waters behind that barrier that was ready to give way. "He may think he was a 'throwaway' kid whose father had simply taken off because of embarrassment. Embarrassed that he'd produced a son with one good hand."

A muffled sob sounded from outside the room. Icy fear stabbed at her. Sydney bolted from the bed. Both women reached the doorway simultaneously, bumping into each other in almost comical fashion.

Brian stood there, immobilized; dark frantic eyes held both horror and disbelief as he searched each of their faces for a sign that might renounce the words he'd just overheard.

"Mr. Sinclair is NOT my dad!" he suddenly screamed at them. "My dad is dead! YOU told me he died!" Sobs broke loose. Sydney reached out, but he flinched, backing away from her; then he turned and fled down the hall.

Thrown into a state of helpless panic, she looked at her mother. "I guess it's time to put away all secrets."

She could feel her heart dropping like a heavy weight into bottomless waters. She had never wanted to break her son's heart, but it seemed she had succeeded in doing just that. And her mind reeled with the painful fact. How was she ever going to make it right? How was she ever going to make it come out right for any of them again?

When she entered Brian's room, she sensed more than saw that he was not there. Not because of the empty bed, but the cold emptiness expanding inside her. Despite these feelings, her eyes probed into all the dark corners, hoping against hope that in one of them she would find his shadowy figure huddled there.

*Brian, please forgive me for denying you what you had wanted most in life.*

Halfway down the hall, she almost plowed into her father's royal blue robe in her frenzy to get to her son. Their eyes immediately locked and mirrored each other's anxiety.

"He's gone, Dad. Where could he have gone this time of night? He doesn't know his way down here." A flash of light filled the room, announcing an approaching storm. Storms came up fast in Hillsboro County, known as the lightning capital of the world.

"Sydney, calm down," her father gently commanded. "We'll contact the neighbors. Someone might've seen him. We'll have him back in no time." His attempted reassurance did little to make her feel better and she knew that he was harboring fear over what could happen to a little boy lost in a strange town.

In spite of the ungodly hour, Frank Morgan immediately got on the phone. Soon minutes dragged into an hour. Thunder rolled and boomed overhead as the storm raged. When two hours had passed and still no word, Sydney was forced to accept the fact that Brian had run away. And knowing made the pain all that worse.

She couldn't even begin to guess where he would go. Back home he had his favorite haunts: Tommy's house, Mr. Gunther's bicycle shop, and as a last resort, the back aisle of the children's section at their town library. After four hours with still no sign or word, and more storms moving in, she was tempted to go out herself and search. She kept seeing pictures of his face plastered on milk cartons, tacked to post office walls—each one with the word *MISSING* printed in dark bold letters above his innocent young head—reminding her if she even had a recent picture of him with her?

Feelings of helplessness pushed her into a chair at the kitchen table where she absently swirled a teabag through water that had long grown cold. She watched her father continue to make the calls. But each one brought no word, only the futility of the situation.

"Damn," her father grumbled at one point. "Why can't the police work faster? Thankfully they've gone ahead and notified the patrols in our area to search for him."

"It can't be difficult to spot a ten year—" Suddenly her eyes focused on the calendar beside the phone, notice the date. Tomorrow was Brian's birthday.

"I'm sure the police won't have a hard time spotting a boy walking aimlessly around in his pajamas, especially in this community of retirees," her mother offered in her own attempt to boost her daughter's sagging morale.

"I just noticed that his bike is missing, which means he's not walking and could be off to anywhere," Frank Morgan said.

"There hasn't been a moment since Brian's birth that I haven't known where he is," Sydney whispered. "Not having a clue now... it's terrifying."

Her father picked up the handset to make another call. "Honey, it's going to be okay. I'm sure Brian's fine. He's upset, sure. And probably a little wet now. But he's a smart boy. He won't do anything stupid."

Silent tears streamed down her face and she could only look at her father as she tried to swaddle herself with his words. When he punched in another set of numbers, Sydney didn't pay much attention. So far, the conversations had been pretty much the same.

"Yes, we've looked everywhere... No, he's not at the pool or tennis courts... What? Do you think he would know how to get there? Okay, it's worth a try... Are you sure you want to... Well, yes I guess you would, considering," her father said, venturing an oblique glance her way. "Why did he run away?" His face took on a pinch look. "I think Sydney will explain all of that to you when you get here."

From this latest conversation, she suddenly knew *who* was on the other end. Her father had called Grant. Had called the man who at one time he'd threatened to annihilate. A slow numbness crept over her. She wanted to run to the phone, grab the receiver, and tell him don't bother. At the same time, her mind rehearsed the words she would use to explain to Grant why Brian had seen the need to run away in the first place. That their son, after having learned his true relationship to Grant, now believed the very thing she had not wanted him to believe; that at birth he'd been rejected by his father, and that his father possibly did not want him even now.

Not only that, but the father he'd been worshipping all these years, and had pushed to superhero status—had been ripped from him, torn up like a piece of used cardboard, discarded with last week's trash.

Dawn's gray light was steadily seeping through the kitchen window, reminding them of their sleepless night. The phone kept ringing, concerned friends and neighbors, and Sydney kept going over in her mind the articles she had read over the years that warned parents no family was immune to the abhorrent acts of soulless beings who prey on helpless young victims.

Without fostering a neurosis about living in an unsafe world, she hoped she had done her part in warning Brian about overly friendly strangers and that he, in his present state of mind, would remember all she'd told him.

Suddenly, she heard her father's voice from the outer room. "Hello, Grant. Sydney's in the kitchen."

Her heart quickened. Relief followed when he came through the doorway. She searched his face for a sign as to what might be going on inside him.



But the color of his eyes was dark, and non-disclosing. She noticed he was holding something at arm's length—a cage.

Peeking down into it, Syd smiled when through the wire mesh a familiar pair of beady eyes stared back.

“Augie?” Then she remembered what Alexis had told her at the Bensons, which she had completely forgotten. Despite her present distraught state, the image of his redheaded assistant and the iguana as travel companions threatened to bring forth a snicker.

“Tamika said Tommy’s still taking care of the hamsters and she’d be more than willing to come down with them on the next flight.”

“How did you know Brian wanted him down?”

“Brian talked so much about him I feel like this lizard and I are old buddies. Uh, where should I put him?”

Grant, she could tell, was still not comfortable with this newfound friend. That would take some time. And time it seemed was all they had.

“I guess over there for now. I’ll take him up to Brian’s room later. Brian will be so hap—” She could feel her face crumple realizing Brian wasn’t going to be there to greet Augie.

Grant set the cage down, came toward her and drew her into his arms. She exhaled a long sigh of relief as his thumb caressed one cheek, and wiped away the moisture there.

“Brian’s gone. He’s out there somewhere. He’s so small. There are people who might hurt him. Take advantage of a lost lonely boy. He hates me so.” Her body trembled as her grief tried to find some release.

Grant continued to hold her close, as if to absorb some of the pain into himself.

Irma Morgan, having come from upstairs when she heard the doorbell, stood in the doorway. “Hello, Grant,” she addressed him shyly. She looked at them with uncertainty. She glanced over at Augie’s cage, gave a little sigh, then at her husband. “Maybe you should make those phone calls in the other room, Frank.”

When her father made no motion to leave, a *no-if-and-or-but* look came over Irma Morgan's face. There goes the reinforcements, Sydney thought bemusedly when they disappeared. She drew away from Grant and sat down, her hands gripping the edge of the table. "Brian overheard a conversation between my mother and me this morning."

"And."

"So now he knows about you."

He looked at her, puzzled. "Knows what?"

"My mother figured it out at the party that you're his father. We were discussing it."

"She figured it out at the party? No kidding." He straightened, seemingly not too upset by this revelation. "How?"

"She noticed the resemblance."

Grant's chest expanded. "No kidding," he repeated. "It's that obvious? I mean the fact that Brian looks so much like me that someone could make that connection."

She darted him an exasperated look. The man was actually fluffing his feathers like a proud peacock. She jumped at the sound of the shrilling kettle, which threatened to push her already shattered nerves over the edge.

"Let me get that," he offered.

She watched him pick up the kettle, pour water into her cup. The mundane task gave her time to pull her jumbled thoughts together.

"And that's why Brian ran off? Because he found out about me?" Despite his calm facade, she noticed his hand tremble slightly as he put the kettle down.

"Yes. I'm only guessing, mind you, but when you took him out on that fishing trip, the fact that you had never mentioned your relationship to him might have him now thinking you have no intention of acknowledging him as your son."

Grant sat down, massaged his forehead. "That's got to be rough on the little guy, him thinking that way. Actually, there were moments when I had wanted to say something. But knowing your position..." He stopped—his voice thick with emotion. Her heart was racing and she felt as if she were being pulled into a maelstrom of

emotions that would eventually engulf her. But this time she was not alone. Grant was being pulled right along with her, forced to face the consequence of their shared past.

"We can't let him think that," he said. "He needs to know I would never reject him for whatever reason." She tightened the sash of her robe, feeling as if they were volleying their guilt back and forth like ping-pong balls.

"He's got to know if I had known about him, I would have done everything in my power to be there." He spread his large hands out on the table. Clenched them. Released them. Clenched them again. A dull heavy silence followed.

She noticed he hadn't taken the time to shave and must have come right over.

Suddenly, he was out of his chair, his arms around her again, pulling her close against him again. For one eternal moment, they clung to each other, holding on to the present, letting go of the past. Letting go of the hurt so they could release all the sorrow.

"I have an idea where he might've gone," he said

Hope inflated her heart. "It won't take me long to dress."

Moments later, true to her word and dressed in denim shorts and a short-sleeved cotton blouse, she and her father joined Grant.

## Chapter Seventeen

Sydney sat in front, rigid, not daring to think beyond the moment. The day was turning into one that would easily see the mercury go into the high nineties. The kind of day kids spent with their families—swimming, surfing, building sand castles—not running away from them.

“He strikes me as a bright kid,” Grant remarked, turning the Jeep off the main road. “I’m sure he’ll remember how to get there... if that’s where he’s headed,” he added as an afterthought.

She said nothing. Her father, who sat in the back, had remained virtually silent since leaving the house, seemingly entangled inside his own ambivalent thoughts. On learning the identity of the man who had planted the seed of his grandson inside his daughter, he had as yet to provide his own reaction. Except for clock springs of veins bulging at his temples, she could only guess at what was going on inside the man’s mind.

Actually, she was somewhat grateful for his silence because she knew they’d eventually talk, at which point, like broken shells strewn across a wave-beaten shore, the reason for her deception would be laid out to the world. But now wasn’t the time. The first and foremost concern was to locate Brian.

Grant pulled the Jeep up to a pier from which early-rising fishermen had already cast nets. Nets that reminded Syd of the web she’d created around her own life.

As they made their way across a wide strip of weather-beaten planks, among several moored boats she noticed a beige and white craft rocking in the ocean’s rhythm.

From the description Brian had given the other day, she assumed the boat belonged to Grant. Close by, on its side, lay the commandeered bicycle.

As they ventured closer, clement rays of sun slowly broke through the lonely light of dawn and hungry shrieking gulls shattered the prevailing quiet. She could not imagine Brian, enveloped in his painful confusion, spending an entire night inside that thing.

Grant, making the first move, stepped down on to the deck, while she and her father remained at the dock's edge. He disappeared into the sleeping hold. Seconds later, he reappeared, wearing an expression of both sadness and relief. He looked up at her and said in a sepulchral voice, "He's down there."

Grant put his hand out to her to help her step down. Suddenly, feeling fearful and disoriented, she hesitated. "It's okay, Syd. Besides, he's sleeping," he forewarned. "I'll wait here."

She searched his eyes for a sign, a clue that would disclose what he was feeling. But the impenetrable darkness divulged little and she could only assume he was as nervous as she. She even suspected that, like she, Grant would rather be facing a room of hostile shareholders.

She took hold of his hand for support and lowered herself down to the deck, all the while absorbing from him the needed strength to face what lay ahead. Suddenly, she was thankful – grateful, actually – that he was there. Grateful she didn't need to go this one alone.

Carefully, she made her way down into the shaded interior, and as her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she spotted him lying on one of the bunks, curled into a fetal position. Unaware of her presence, he stirred slightly. She sat on the edge of his bunk. Decided to wait. Let him sleep. She had time. She had all the time in the world. Wearily, she leaned her head against the back wall, and closed her eyes.

A light layer of perspiration already covered her skin. Her blouse clung to her body and defiant wisps of hair stuck to her temples and at the back of her neck. Despite her exhaustion, she felt a certain calm settling in. Resolution was at hand –

“...Mom?”

Her lids fluttered open at the sound of the small tentative voice. “G’morning, sleepy head,” she answered, softly.

His gray eyes probed the dimly lit area. Then realizing where he was, and why, an expression of helpless panic covered his face. “Mom... I’m sorry. I’m sorry I made you angry.”

“Do I look angry?”

He squinted at her. “I don’t know. I can’t tell. Aren’t you?”

“Okay, I’m angry. Especially realizing you’d actually run away. I’m very angry. And shouldn’t I be?” She went over to him, put an arm around his shoulders, and hugged him close. “But I’m more relieved to find you safe. Please, Brian, promise me you’ll never do this again. Don’t go running off before we’ve at least talked. You know I’m always willing to listen.”

“Is it true, Mom?” His young tortured face demonstrated his anguish. “My real dad isn’t dead?” His strangled voice battled to contain a sob. “That... man in the picture is not my dad?”

She drew in deeply. “Yes, Brian, it’s true. Grant Sinclair is your biological father. I shouldn’t have lied. I wanted to give you a memory of a father. I never meant to hurt you.” She rubbed her sweaty palms against the rough texture of her denim shorts. “We’re supposed to act like adults, but at times even grown-ups can do stupid things.”

The cabin felt claustrophobic as the morning heat penetrated the walls. “I made the story up because I didn’t want you believing you had a father out there somewhere and that he never came around because he didn’t want you. You see, Grant never knew about you either. I can’t explain all of it right now. But I will later. For now, it’s enough that you know I should’ve never made up that story. I was wrong.” She gave a wistful humorless grin. “I should be the one telling you I’m sorry for lying to you. Sorry that I hurt you.”

He stared at her. “Mr. Sinclair knows about me?” he asked, confirming in his mind what she had just told him.

“Yes, he knows. But, like you he’s only recently found out he’s your father. I was planning to tell you —”

“Did he know I was his son when he took me fishing?”

Puzzled, struggling to follow his train of thought, she replied, “Yes...”

“Oh.” Tears rimmed his eyes.

“Brian, what is it?”

“Maybe he wishes it wasn’t true. Wishes he wasn’t my father. I wasn’t his son. I mean, I had an awful time throwing the dumb fishing line into the water. Maybe he feels he’s going to be stuck with a kid who can’t do things the way other kids can do. That’s why Donald didn’t want me around.” He jutted his chin outward, and looked at her with moisture-rimmed eyes. “And I bet Mr. Sinclair feels the same way as Donald. I’m not the kind of son a father wants.” He swiped the back of his hand across his eyes, stared down at his right hand which wore neither the glove nor the prosthesis, but lay there, bare — as bare as the resurrected truth.

She drew him close. Held him tight. Soft silent sobs broke forth from him, shaking him and her. She let the tears come. Let them flow. Let the anger, the pain, and the suffering pour out like a dam that had been determined to break from the start.

When he had finished, she placed the palms of her hands against the sides of his face. “Brian, listen carefully to what I say. No one can make Grant Sinclair do anything he doesn’t want to do. Nor does he like people because it’s expected of him. So whatever nice things he does for you... it’s because he wants to.” She gulped in another breath of air. “Besides, he’s told me he does want to be your father. He wanted me to tell you way before this. I was the one who kept pushing it off, waiting for the right moment. I only wish you hadn’t found out the way you did.” She smoothed his hair, gently clutched his small shoulders and made sure his eyes were locked with hers so he could see in her eyes only the irrefutable truth. “Brian, whatever happens after this, there’s one thing you need to know. I have always been proud that you are my son. I will always be proud you are my son. Nothing will ever change that. Nothing.”

He looked at her, and she sensed he was struggling to believe her words as he struggled to hold back his tears.

"Brian... your father is up on the pier, waiting with Gramps."

Brian's eyes lit up at the mere mention of their names. With the bottom edge of his pajama top, he quickly dried his eyes. "We better go on up, huh?" She again stroked his hair, smoothing it from his face.

"Yeah, we better." She attempted a smile. "Gramps hasn't had his morning coffee yet and you know how grouchy he gets when he doesn't."

As they made their way up the short ladder, a thought froze inside her. How much more were their lives going to change as she took more steps away from her past?

~\*~

"Hey, sport, if you wanted to spend the night on the boat, all you had to do was ask," Grant jokingly remarked as they climbed into the Jeep. Despite his even toned voice, the erratic pulsating movement along the cord of his neck revealed the extent of how much he'd been affected by this latest event.

On the way back to the condo, they stopped first at a restaurant where they ignored the stares produced by a young boy wearing not only pajamas but who had a missing right hand. Sydney's father called her mother to let her know Brian was all right. Then Grant ordered them all a huge breakfast. While Grant stabbed mindlessly at pieces of his hash browns, the tension mounted. What did any of them say now — ?

"Hey, Brian, how about you and me heading over to Sarasota Jungle Gardens this afternoon?" Frank Morgan suggested in an obvious attempt to alleviate the strained silence.

"Nah, don't feel like it, Gramps," Brian mumbled, not bothering to look up from his plate.

"Okay then, how about the beach later?" his grandfather went on, not easily put off. "Surf should be pretty good considering the storms that blew through last night."



"Nah. I don't think so."

Grant inhaled a deep breath. "Brian, if it's okay with you, after we drop your mom and grandfather off, how about you and me taking a short ride?" he suggested, looking at Sydney for silent confirmation.

His interest captured, Brian lifted his head and looked at Grant, but not without some wariness. Young hostile eyes narrowed into distrust at whatever the motive was behind the suggestion. Then he said, "I don't think so," in the same monotonous tone he'd used with his grandfather, only with more emphasis, re-establishing his unwillingness to go along with any of their suggestions.

"I think that's a good idea," Sydney urged, the authoritative tone in her voice giving him no choice.

Brian, realizing the implication of her stares, and that he was outnumbered, returned a pleading look. But realizing his mother was not about to give in, the boy ventured a look at Grant. "Okay, I guess," he replied, then halfheartedly poked at his syrup-drenched pancakes.

Sydney threw Grant an oblique glance. Questions, he knew, were forming fast inside her mind, all centering on what the two would talk about once alone. But she would have to wait, because he himself hadn't a clue as to what one told a young boy who had just found his father. He stabbed, mindlessly, at the overdone eggs.

~\*~

When they left the restaurant, a peaceful mid morning sky filled with white billowy clouds greeted them. Clouds, Sydney knew, were short lived once the customary late afternoon thunderstorms arrived.

"We won't be long," Grant promised. Brian was now seated in front; his apprehensive face mirrored her anxiety.

Moments later, Sydney watched them disappear. One more step to releasing that past.

~\*~

Grant had absolutely no idea what he was going to say to Brian. To this young boy who he had no real connection with, outside of a biological one. But he knew the words would eventually come because they needed to come, if only to establish some communication between them.

"Kind of throws you for a loop, doesn't it?" Grant started.

"Huh?" Brian responded, squinting at him from beneath his baseball cap.

"Finding out all along you've got this father hidden away somewhere."

Brian abruptly turned his head to the front. "Yeah, I guess."

"Must seem like I came out of the woodwork."

"Huh?"

Grant gave a faint smile. Okay, so he was beating around the bush. Not his usual style, he mused. "People make mistakes. Sometimes these mistakes work out. Sometimes they don't. Before you say 'huh' I want you to know I think this mistake's going to work out just fine."

Brian blinked, but maintained a frontal focus.

"When I first found out you were my son, my outlook on life pretty much changed. I don't know if your mom has told you the whole story, but I was married to someone else, and the marriage didn't work out."

"Some of my friends back home have parents who are divorced," Brian said, venturing into the conversation as one would inch into icy waters. "Is that why you didn't marry my mom? Because you were married to someone else?"

Grant smiled at the boy's perceptiveness. "Sometimes we adults do foolish things."

He nodded. "Yeah, she said the same thing."

"She did, huh?"

"Yeah. She said you guys do really 'dumb' things. Do you have any other kids?"

"Other kids? No. I... don't."

"Oh." Disappointment edged his voice.

"I bet you were hoping you'd be getting a brother or sister out of this?"

Brian shrugged. "No big deal."

"But that's not saying there can't be any in the future."

"Huh?"

Grant pulled the Jeep over and stopped on the side of the road. His fingers gripped the steering wheel. He sucked in the hot air. He could smell the tar coming up from the heated road. Hear the cacophony of dissenting insects.

He turned to Brian. "I want to be your father, but I don't think at this point telling you those words makes me one."

Brian squirmed, clearly confused. "Huh?"

"So I'm proposing a little deal. Your mother may not have told you yet, but I'm pretty good at putting together deals. Oh, and before I forget to mention it, you have a friend waiting for you when you get back to your grandparents."

"Huh?"

~\*~

Sydney found herself alone. She didn't like it, this sudden aloneness. It felt uncomfortable. Even unnerving, left with a turbulence of thoughts raging through her mind. Having no idea when Brian and Grant were getting back, she needed to keep herself busy, her mind free from its mindless chatter. She decided to take a swim, a long hard swim. When she approached the pool, she noticed three women sitting at the far end, and immediately recognized her mother's neat bouffant hairdo, heard Katherine Benson's high-pitched prattling, and spotted swirling streams of smoke emitting from Alexis's cigarette.

She greeted the surprised faces. "Dad went over to Edith's looking for you," she informed her mother.

"When he sees I'm not there, he'll come back. And where's Brian?" her mother asked anxiously, then leaned over to one side, hoping to see her wayward grandson coming toward them.

"He's fine."

Three puzzled faces focused on Sydney's face.

"Brian's not here right now."

Her mother pursed her lips into an 'O'.

"Grant and Brian went for a short ride."

"Together?"

"Yes, Mom. Together."

"Oh?"

Alexis pulled her dark glasses down ever so slightly. Peered over the rims at Sydney with those Elizabeth Taylor eyes. "I find that a bit odd."

"Actually, under the circumstance, it makes perfect sense," Sydney replied.

Alexis's lifted brows demonstrated a need for further clarification.

The two older women, their eyes fixed on Sydney, stared on while she removed her cover-up and settled into a nearby chaise lounge.

"The reason Grant took Brian with him is so they could have a private talk."

Alexis's puzzled expression deepened. "That's admirable but I don't understand why —"

"Brian is Grant's son," Sydney said, her voice calm, resolved.

*The truth — finally out.* The whole world would now know... or soon would. She felt a weight rising off her shoulders, and suddenly found she could even sit straighter.

A gasp escaped Katherine Benson's mouth and she squirmed in her chair. Suddenly, she glanced down at her watch. "Is it that time already? I—I really should get going. Jon's father is meeting me at the mall and —"

"Thank you for coming. I do appreciate your concern for Brian's welfare," Sydney told her. "Also give my regards to Jon," she added, knowing full well she would not be hearing from him again.

"I, uh, think I've gotten enough sun for today," her mother suddenly said, then stood, glanced up into the sky. "Looks like we might not get that afternoon storm after all. I'd better go look for your father and put something together for supper. I'm sure they'll all be hungry when they get back."

She gave her daughter a *tell-me-everything-later* look and accompanied Jon's mother, whose chatter faded as their distance increased.

Sydney turned to Alexis, who made no move to leave. It was just the two of them. They traded artificial smiles. She sensed the redhead's composed facade was a far cry from what was actually going on inside the woman's mind.

"So Grant's a father." She drew a long filtered cigarette from an almost empty pack. Paused before lighting it. "That's going to take a little getting used to." Her lavender eyes were directed fully at Sydney. "Then you were obviously *more* than his 'loyal' protégée. What was it? One of those tasteless tawdry office romances gone sour?" She lit the cigarette with a gold lighter. One hand trembled. She took a long drag, slowly exhaled an even stream of smoke. "I'm sure Grant will meet his commitments to the boy, whatever that might entail." She put the cigarette down, picked up a tube of sun block cream. Squeezed a glob of it into her palm, and then applied it all over her face, leaving a bit of white on the right side of her nose.

Sydney, tempted to smooth away the imperfection, scrunched up her knees instead. "I have no intentions of making any demands on him, financial or otherwise. There's more involved here than money."

Alexis shot her a cynical look.

"Brian has recently learned the truth about his father. I only hope I haven't done him irreparable harm because of it. I don't want him paying for my mistakes. Look, if you and Grant have more than a professional relationship going on between you..."

Alexis suddenly sat up, nervously flicked her ashes, missing the ashtray.

"I know what you're implying, Sydney, but I'm afraid – and not for lack of trying on my part – my relationship with Grant hasn't advanced that far. Oh please, spare me the glint in your eye. It's absolutely blinding."

"Then you and Grant haven't... aren't—"

"Lovers? You tell me. You're the one who's spent time with him lately. Do you think he's the type who would jump from one woman's bed into another?"

A familiar dread of suspicion entered her mind as the past threatened to resurrect itself. But things were different now. Trust, once missing, had reestablished itself. She was determined to trust again. Trust him. Trust herself and her feelings. Trust her life, not so much because of what she expected from it, but knowing whatever was going to come her way, she would face head on and not run away.

"Alexis... I can't tell you what's going to happen between Grant and me. I'm just trying to get past the point where he and my son at least know each other. I'm hoping from that point on they may forge a bond. My anger and pride is the reason why they've missed so much time already."

Alexis puffed away at her cigarette. Through the swirl of smoke, she listened. "You've never stopped loving that man, have you?"

Sydney had to pull her eyes away from the woman's face; she fixed them on to the fathomless pool waters.

"I knew it the minute you walked into the boardroom," she pressed. "The way you looked at each other." Alexis's voice was tight, controlled; and Sydney sensed that by her own admittance these words were causing her pain. "But at the time I refused to see or believe what all that might mean."

"I'm sorry."

Alexis snuffed the cigarette out, and then extricated herself from the lounge chair. "Puhleeze, spare the apology. Above all, I don't want your pity. Like they say, all's fair in love and war." She ventured a weak smile. "This war has now been declared officially over. The way I look at it, you're part of GS Enterprises. We're on the same side. My career at GS still means a great deal to me. And maybe, as we get to know each other better, we'd even make a good team." A half-wicked smile slid across her face. "Give those old boys in the boardroom something to reckon with."

Sydney, relieved that Alexis was no longer an adversary, asked, "How about doing a few laps?" She needed to work off at least some of her adrenaline. She thought of Grant, Brian, and their 'private' little talk.

Alexis's mouth broke into a full smile. "I still have the entire weekend to get through. Hey, you don't happen to have Jon Benson's number handy?"

~\*~

Later, by the time Sydney showered, changing into khaki shorts and a white knitted top, Grant and Brian still hadn't returned.

She endured lunch with her parents, who kept asking an untold number of questions—questions which would help them better understand their daughter, and vice versa. Things were different now. The life they'd once known would not be the same. But the longer Brian was gone, the more her anxiety increased.

When she heard the Jeep pull into the carport, feeling as though she'd been holding her breath, she let out a longer than usual exhale.

"Hi, Mom!" Brian yelled, running into the house, and then started up the stairs, taking two at a time, all the while yelling down to her, "Why didn't someone tell me Augie was here?"

She had completely forgotten, and could only smile. "Happy Birthday!" she yelled back instead.

Brian peered down at her through the railing, a smile breaking across his face. "Thanks! I thought everyone forgot." Then he fled up the stairs.

When Grant appeared, Syd and he looked at each other as if trying to read the other's mind. Deep lines were carved into his face and he was in a bad need of a shave. Suddenly, she noticed he was wearing the shirt that still harbored a faint outline of catsup. And white slacks, which still held a hint of purple around the zipper area, announcing he'd obviously gotten dressed in a big hurry that morning.

"Care for a cold drink?" she asked.

"What I need right now... let's say this isn't the time or the place." His eyes seemed to devour her for sustenance. "Perhaps tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"When we're together... alone."

She regarded him with caution. "I don't know if that would be a good idea. I mean, after all that's happened today, and it is Brian's birthday."

He nodded and walked into the living room where he wearily settled down on to the sofa.

"Don't you have something to tell me?"

He looked up. "You're dying to know, aren't you? How about we make a deal?"

She shot him an odd look. "A deal?"

"I tell you what Brian and I talked about. You stay with me tonight."

"That's blackmail, not exactly your style... can I think about it?"

He raised a brow.

"Because it'll depend on what you two talked about. You could've talked about the weather, or fishing, for all I know."

He paused, drew in a deep breath. "Brian and I made a pact."

"A pact? Really?" Surprised entered her voice.

"Here, sit beside me. I'm getting a kink in my neck."

When she sat beside him, he put his arm protectively around her shoulders.

"Much better," he murmured, nestling his face into the crook of her neck. If she didn't know any better, she thought she could actually hear him purr.

"Okay, go on. Tell me more about this pact."

"It's going to be more like a probation."

"Probation? Who? Brian or you?"

He chuckled. "Me, of course."

She gave a slow nod. "Really? The one who puts other people's heads on butcher blocks?"



The corners of his mouth twitched as he struggled to maintain a serious countenance. "Are you letting me finish?"

She nodded, stifling another giggle.

"I told Brian I wanted to be his dad, except I didn't know what kind of a father I could be since I haven't had much experience in that area. So, he's going to try me out for size. I mean hey, he's had this Superman image all these years of a dad who can do everything. I'm not sure if I'll be able to live up to the image. Especially after our fishing trip, which I'll go into at another time."

"You're not serious." She studied his face. His eyes gave her the answer. "You are."

"He regards me as a friend. The father bit is going to take time."

Skeptically, she nodded her head. "I guess that makes sense." She felt his fingers press up against the back of her neck. Sensations of exquisite pleasure raced through her.

"You smell delicious—Shalimar—reminds me of vanilla. And I've always had this thing for vanilla. Please, don't ever stop wearing it." He drew her to him and his lips were suddenly on hers. Deliberately, forgetting where she was, separated only by walls from her parents and Brian, she circled her arms around him, determined never to let go.

"I love you, Syd," he murmured huskily, then drew slightly away. "Out on the boat this morning, I wanted us to be a family. I was glad I could be there to help you and Brian get through this. It felt good. I've missed a lot, but I'm not blaming anyone. We still have a lot of time ahead of us. I'd sure like to try my hand at proving to you the kind of husband I can be."

She lifted her head, and stared directly into his pale gray orbs. Did he say *husband*?

"Okay," she said.

"Okay? But I haven't asked anything."

“Doesn’t matter,” she crooned. “Because I’ll say yes to anything about now.” She kissed him. “Yes, I’ll stay with you tonight.” She kissed him again. “Yes, I’ll stay with you forever.”

She kissed him again and again.

Between kisses he asked, “Yes? You’ll be my wife? Because this time, Sydney Morgan, I’m not letting you get away.”

## Chapter Eighteen

### *One Year Later*

Sydney gazed out a floor-to-ceiling window, one of many gracing the outer wall of her office, toward a calm ocean. A lazy haze hung, merging ocean and sky. She walked back to the large oak desk, pushed aside a puzzle, reached over a doubled frame that contained a photograph of her, Brian and Grant, and flipped opened her organizer. Then she checked her watch.

"Don't worry, Mr. Sinclair will make it if he can," Tamika reassured, and gathered a stack of folders for filing.

Sydney nodded. "The closing is still in progress."

Poor Harold had wanted to go by car, bus, cab, train even. But Grant insisted they take the chopper. She could still visualize Harold's pale face peering down from the cockpit, reminding her of her first trip in that thing only the year before.

"Brian's game starts in one hour," she mumbled. "Being the new kid on the block, this is going to be an important one. They're letting him pitch. Grant promised he'd be there, but may not be able to make good on his promise."

Brian wanted him there. She wanted him there. She hadn't meant for it to sound like a life and death issue, but had tried pointing out to him it was not easy choosing priorities, especially where family was concerned. GS was, and would always be, Grant's first love. Words she had angrily thrown at him the night before—the first major argument as man and wife. But then why should she expect he'd change because he was now legally bound to her and Brian?

Grant said nothing about their argument when he'd gotten up that morning. Merely picked up his briefcase and joined Harold, who'd been pacing the walkway outside their house. She glanced at her phone. Mentally dialed his cellular number.

"How's it going?"

"Hi, Mrs. Morgan!" Tamika greeted before exiting the office.

Sydney glanced up. "Hi, Mom." Then settling behind her desk, she let out a groan. "Lord, if this tummy gets any bigger, I'm not going to fit behind this thing."

Her mother chuckled. "How are you feeling? You're eating okay, no more iffy diets? After all, you are eating for two—"

"It's looking more like four!" Sydney replied, gawking down at her overly burgeoned stomach, recalling the blurred black and white images of the ultrasound done that morning which showed instead of two, three fetal hearts beating.

Her mother's eyes widened to dinner plate size. "Noooo. Are they sure?" Shaken by the news, she sank heavily into a chair.

Sydney nodded. "They are very sure."

"Grant knows?"

"Not yet. I plan to tell him when he gets back from this closing."

"Have you had lunch?"

She sighed. "Yes, mother. I eat quite well now. You can't tell?"

Her mother stared at her stomach.

"I'm eating. I'm eating. I just finished a whole pasta salad, a yogurt and two peaches."

She raised one brow, as if to ask if that passed her mother's approval.

"That's all?"

She sighed. "I'll eat more tonight. I promise."

"You're looking tense. That's not good for the baby... babies." She touched the side of her jaw. "Imagine, three. Grant will have a conniption."

Sydney squirmed under the scrutiny, heaved another sigh and rubbed her stomach. "Sometimes I catch Brian staring like that. When I ask him what he's thinking,

he shrugs and walks away. I hope he's not going to resent the babies once they're here. He's had Grant and me all to himself for a little while. He might not want to share us, especially with Grant just coming into his life. And then this game and Grant possibly not being there; Brian may think he's being shoved aside."

Immediate understanding filled her mother's eyes. "I'm sure Brian will understand."

"He's always had to. It doesn't stop his disappointment."

"Aren't you putting a lot of pressure on Grant? You know he loves Brian."

"I know. And I know compromises have to be made. Like pretty soon I'm not going to be able to work a full day." She rubbed her stomach again. "But I'm ready to give up that part of my life for now." She looked around her office. "I always thought an office filled with windows would somehow complete my happiness. But none of it compares with what I have with Grant and our children. And I don't want Grant feeling that, by doing his job, he's failing me at home. I guess I just want him to know he shouldn't have to miss out on the things that truly matter. Namely, our family." She glanced down at her watch. "I guess we better get going. Dad said he'd meet us at the ball field once he locates Augie, again." She let out a chuckle, and then pushed herself up from the chair. Augie had been keeping her father—who had insisted on painting the nursery—busy with his shenanigans. She rubbed the small of her back and lumbered toward the door. "First I better make a visit to the ladies room. That ball park better have plenty of porta-potties."

~\*~

Grant raised his forearm and checked his watch.

"That's the fiftieth time you've looked at that thing. You'll wear out the crystal," Harold remarked jokingly, before placing another stack of agreements and exhibits requiring signatures in front of him and James Naigle, the future buyer of GS's former Danbury headquarters.

"Let's hurry this one up," Grant said in a whispered voice, his impatience clearly evident.

"We're almost there," Harold reassured.

After affixing his signature to the documents, Grant sat back in the brown leather chair. He rubbed the back of his neck, at the same time as he glanced around the dark paneled room. Airoway Industries was a good company, and willing to pay well for the building and land that had been cleared completely of all toxic substances.

Nonetheless, it had been a long morning. Time had suddenly become a too-precious commodity to be spent signing these things.

"Brian's got a game this afternoon," he suddenly said to Harold, who regarded him with curiosity, unsure if Grant were addressing him, or talking to no one in particular. Grant was suddenly on his feet. "Look, I noticed a sporting goods store up the road a bit. I'll be right back. Jim, you keep signing away. I'll catch up later."

Harold's eyes widened in wonderment, as if the man he'd been working for all these years had changed into another life form.

He slipped the papers more quickly to Naigle.

~\*~

Sydney squinted up into the bleachers. No way was she going to make it up there. She spotted her father's white hair and waved to him. Frank Morgan was seated at the very top. He spotted her and waved back.

She mouthed a *thank you*. He'd remembered to bring two comfortable chaise lounges for her and her mother. There were times, she mused, when the role of 'daddy's little girl' wasn't too difficult to take.

"Since this is the first game, the coach is letting Brian pitch," she informed her mother, "Brian may need to warm up. If you hear moaning and groaning, just ignore it. Brian's used to it."

*Even if she would never be.*

The familiar butterflies were alive and well, and fluttering quite lively inside her stomach. *Butterflies? No, babies – two girls and one boy. The boy whose name she already knew – Garth Sinclair.*

If this turned out to be one of Brian's off days, she knew he was going to get his share of flack, not only from the spectators but also from team members who were still uncomfortable with this one-handed boy.

Again, she peered up into the bleachers. Despite the heat, a lot of parents – not all busy signing off on major divestitures – had turned up to watch the game. Suddenly, she felt caught in the middle. As an executive officer of the company, she fully understood Grant's position and predicament. Still, the knowing and the understanding did not lessen her growing disappointment.

A roar rose from the crowd. The players were marching out on to the field. It was going to take some getting used to, she thought, watching Brian play in red rather than the blue uniform he had left behind in Connecticut.

"Hey, the kid's got only one hand," someone whispered behind them.

"Play ball!" an anonymous voice shouted.

She heard a faint whirring sound coming from overhead. Not too many took notice at first until the noise increased and drowned out their voices. Sydney followed the curious stares of those turning in that direction. Soon all heads were turning in the same direction. Gaping eyes remained focused on the red and white flying machine as it landed on a flat clearing positioned just beyond the edge of the field.

Swirls of dust rose, mixing with the heated air. Once the whirring blades stopped, the door to the aircraft slid open.

"Is that –" her mother whispered, her mouth agape. Sydney stretched her neck, absently rubbed her stomach. All she could make out was something bright and glowing amid the swirling dust and debris. Bright orange on top of dark gray suits emerged. Two familiar figures, hunched over, ran toward them. She could feel the beat of her heart accelerate.

Suddenly, she knew she couldn't love the man coming toward her more than she did at that moment. Her eyes became riveted to the bright orange hat each man wore. Both looked out of place in their impeccable suits now covered with field dust.

"Has the game started?" Grant yelled, his pale gray eyes darkening with concern. Harold, looking disconcerted and confused, though nonetheless relieved to be back on good old terra firma, was wearing his cap backwards. Unable to speak because of the lump forming inside her throat, Sydney could only shake her head and stare at the bright orange caps.

A sheepish grin covered Grant's face when he approached them. He said nothing at first, but out of his jacket pocket, pulled out another cap and gently set it on her head. "I wanted be sure he knows we're here."

"I don't think you have to worry," she managed to say, "considering your unprecedented entrance."

Grant smiled as he yanked off his tie and tucked it into the pocket of his jacket, then removed the jacket and flung it over the back of her chair. He took one of her hands into his and gave it a gentle squeeze as he bent down to kiss her. Gently, he placed his other hand on her stomach.

"Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine, but it seems there's been a slight miscalculation."

His brows gathered together.

She held up three slender fingers.

"Three, Grant," her mother cried. "Sydney's carrying three."

He stared at his mother-in-law before finding his voice. Then he turned back to her. "I love you, Syd." His eyes had turned the palest of gray.

She choked back a sob. "I love you."

He straightened up and turned toward the field. A sea of red uniforms seemingly frozen into their designated positions gawked at them.

"C'mon, you guys. My dad came here to watch us play ball!" Sydney heard Brian yell. "So let's play ball!"



### *Author Note*

Since childhood, I've enjoyed creating fictional worlds. In fifth grade a group of us would take a story out of history, adapt it into a play format, which we would then put on for the rest of the school. During summer vacations, I'd have my parents lug along this shiny black Royal typewriter to the shoreline where we had rented a cottage for a week or two. At night while listening to the crashing surf, I'd create stories, usually animal stories. As a young adult, I started to read romances, and then some years later decided to write my own romances. Eventually **No More Secrets, No More Lies** became a result of that decision. So far, I've been published in audioscript format, novel length fiction, and short story. I also write screenplays and hope one day to see one of my creations up on the silver screen.

I worked in the corporate and legal environments for a number of years, and although I do miss interacting with others, I am thankful I now have the time to devote to my writing pursuits. My two cats, Sammie and Misty keep me company as well as a few tropical fish and a husband who on occasion pulls me away from the computer for a round of golf.

*No More Secrets, No More Lies* had taken root some years ago when my two sons and their father were involved in Little League. My husband, as coach, made sure everyone on his team got a chance to play, and that included one team member who turned out to be a great ball player despite the fact this little boy had an undeveloped hand. This provided the inspiration for the young boy Brian in my story. The rest of the characters are of course fictitious. But as most writers know, when you live with your characters long enough, they do take on a life of their own. I'm happy that others will get a chance to read their story.

~Marie Roy~