

Candace Gold



AUTUMN
LEAVES

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by

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Dedication

~~Dedicated to my son who moved to Arizona. No matter how far you go, I'll always be there with you.~~

Chapter 1

“Ready to go, Kate?” Mark Winters asked, poking his head into her classroom. Her closest friend and fellow sixth-grade teacher, blonde, blue-eyed, Mark was the Prince Charming of many of the grammar school girls’ daydreams.

“Just a sec,” she said, putting the last of her papers into her book bag.

Noticing what she was grabbing, he chided, “Don’t tell me you haven’t gotten to those progress reports, yet?”

Gritting her teeth, Kate Douglas was already upset with herself for leaving the progress reports for her sixth-grade class for the last minute. Normally she’d have them all done and printed out early, but somehow this time she had been side-tracked.

“I’ve already beat-up on myself. I don’t need help from the likes of you.”

“You realize that they’re due tomorrow, don’t you?”

“Don’t remind me,” she said, following him out of the room. “I’ll probably be up to all hours of the night doing them.”

They walked towards the office to punch out. Murray Jackson, one of the assistant principals, saw them leaving and reminded them, “Don’t forget all progress reports are due tomorrow.”

Kate clenched her teeth. “If one more person mentions

those progress reports, I'll murder them."

Mark grinned, but said nothing. He knew Kate long enough to let her sizzle in silence when she was upset. When they reached his car he hit the keyless remote twice and opened the doors. Kate put her book bag on the backseat next to his and slid into the front seat next to him. He loved to watch her slide her long shapely legs into the car. It was a sight that he never seemed to grow tired of.

The ride home was a quiet one. Usually they'd talk about their classes, but Kate seemed miles away, lost in her own thoughts. Mark figured she was silently cursing herself for allowing this to happen. He truly didn't envy the work she had in front of her that night.

He pulled up in front of her apartment. Kate grabbed her stuff and got out. "Thanks," she said as she shut the door. "See you tomorrow."

Mark wished her luck. Knowing Kate, she'd get those reports done even if it took all night. And it most likely would.

* * * *

Kate went directly into the spare bedroom she used as an office and booted up her computer. As it was booting, she went into her bedroom and changed into a pair of sweats.

Taking only short breaks to make more coffee or have a snack, she worked steadily into the night until the last report was keyed into the computer. Releasing a huge yawn and waiting for her eyes to clear, Kate double-clicked on print. Suddenly, the monitor went totally black. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she screamed, "Oh, no! This can't be happening!"

She tried to reboot the system, but failed. "Why me? Why now? This can't be happening..." Her eyes filled with tears of frustration. She began to dial Mark's telephone num-

ber, but looked at the time. At two am, he was probably sound asleep. Besides, he was no computer expert and was probably as useless as she felt at that moment. She'd have to call in sick and bring the tower back to the store tomorrow.

* * * *

Kate was the first one in line for technical help when the computer store opened. While she was waiting for the technician to acknowledge her, four more people got in line behind her. Finally he asked what her problem was in a tone that already sounded bored. Perhaps helping people wasn't challenging enough for him.

* * * *

It had been a boring week for Peter Saunders, as well. Only a few customers had ventured in to purchase a computer and half of which had no idea what they wanted. He found most people ended up buying computers for all the wrong reasons. Either their neighbor had one and used it to buy merchandise on line or their kids bugged them enough. Peer pressure ranked high on the reasons to-buy-list. Very few people he came in contact with intended to use them professionally or put them to any good use at all. Hoping today would be a better sales day, he had just come on the sales floor when he overheard Ralph Marion, one of the techs, say, "I'm sorry, but there's no way that we can get to this before Monday or Tuesday."

"You don't understand. I need this fixed by this afternoon. I've got to get important information from my hard drive printed. I'm a..."

"If you needed it today, why didn't you bring it in earlier?"

"What kind of stupid question is that? I already told you this happened at two am this morning."

"You don't have to be nasty about it," the tech said, destroying what fragile little patience Kate had left.

"Forget it. I see I'm wasting my time here," Kate said, snatching back her CPU.

"Good luck finding someone to do it today," the man said sarcastically.

Peter had been checking out the woman. She was tall with beautiful long, strawberry-blond hair that seemed to shimmer under the fluorescent lighting. For the moment he fantasized about how wonderful it would feel to run his hands through that silky-looking hair. She had a pretty face with large cornflower-blue eyes. The rest of her didn't seem bad, either, and even in jeans, her legs seemed to go on forever, he noticed as he hurried after her.

Kate was frantic at this point. She had absolutely no idea where to go next, while precious time was ticking away. A stray tear began to slip from her eye as she carried the tower from the store.

"May I help you?" Peter asked, as he caught up to her.

"Do what?" Kate asked.

"Carry that to your car for you."

"I'd rather you tell me where I can go to get it fixed."

"I can fix it for you," he said, smiling, taking the tower from her.

That got Kate's attention. She looked at the handsome, well-dressed man with the greenest eyes she'd ever seen. "Are you serious?"

"Seeing how upset you are, I wouldn't have the heart to tease you."

"But *who* are you? You're not some kind of guardian angel coming into my life at the eleventh hour to rescue me, are you?"

He laughed. "My name is Peter Saunders and I assure you that I'm not a heavenly guest on this planet. I pay taxes just like you."

"You work here?"

"Yes. I'm a salesman, but I have a strong technical background."

"Are you working today?"

"I was...until I saw you."

"You can't just take off to rescue me, can you?" Kate asked.

"I haven't had a day off in weeks and I feel an awful virus coming on."

Kate smiled. "You know, you're beginning to look awfully sick to me."

"Told you," he said as he followed Kate out to her car.

"This is it," she said, opening the rear door to her Toyota Camry so he could lay the tower down.

"Give me your address and I'll be there in a half-hour or so. While you're waiting for me, reconnect the computer."

Kate was so happy that she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. "You're a lifesaver."

Peter, detecting a pleasing gentle scent of flowers, said, "Don't thank me until it's actually fixed. Remember nothing in life is certain..."

She nodded and said, "I know, except death and taxes. My dad always says that."

He smiled, revealing adorable dimples to go with his chin cleft. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Are you sure you know where I live?"

Peter looked at the name and address. "Actually, I don't live too far from you. Don't worry, I'll find it."

Kate drove home thinking about Peter. It was truly kind of him to want to help her. A moment before he appeared she hadn't a ghost of a chance in getting those reports in on time. And now...she silently prayed he'd be able to retrieve them.

* * * *

Peter rang her doorbell forty minutes later. Kate was never as thrilled to see someone as she was at that moment. "I made some coffee. How do you take yours?"

"One teaspoon of sugar and a drop of milk. Where's the computer?"

"In here," Kate said. "I'll bring in the coffee."

By the time she returned, Peter had gotten the computer booted up in safe mode.

"How did you do that?" she asked in amazement.

"It's not hard, if you know how. Before I figure out what's wrong, tell me what you need to get off the drive."

"The folder that says 'progress reports.'"

"Are you a teacher?" Peter asked.

"Yes. Sixth grade."

"You're much prettier than any teacher I ever had."

Kate felt her face heating, but managed to thank him for the compliment.

"Is this the file?"

"Yes!" she said excitedly.

"Do you need to print it out?"

"Yes. Two copies of each, please."

"Give me a blank disk to save it to, just in case," Peter said. "You should always back-up your work."

"I know," she said, opening a desk drawer and handing him one. Their hands touched, and an electric spark shot right through her. He must have felt something too, for he hesi-

tated a moment before putting the disk into the drive.

Kate watched the printer churn out the reports and she felt as if a terrible weight had been lifted from her shoulders. At this moment, she had no idea how to fully express her gratitude. Without a second thought, she put her arms about his neck and kissed his cheek.

“You have no idea how grateful I am.”

“I think I do.”

“Can I pay you?”

“Absolutely not. I got the hard driving working, but it still needs to be replaced.”

“Even so, you’re a special guy, Peter Saunders. And you saved my butt.”

“Now *that* I won’t argue about,” he said in a teasing manner.

“How about me making you dinner tonight? It’s the least I can do.” Then, realizing that he might be married or have a significant other, she quickly added, “That is if your wife wouldn’t mind.”

He began to laugh. Kate got a little miffed. What could she have said to him that was so funny?

“I’m not married. Don’t look so upset. I only laughed because the look on your face just reminded me of a little girl who got caught with her hand in the cookie jar. I’d be delighted to have dinner with you. That is, if *your* husband doesn’t mind,” he added, grinning.

Kate smiled back. “I’m also single.”

“Well, I’m glad we got that issue settled, Kate Douglas,” he said, taking her hand and shaking it.

Kate, realizing he was still holding her hand, gave his a gentle squeeze and said, “I’m so very glad you hap-

pened along, Peter.”

“Me, too.”

“Uhm...you know, this is really a nice place,” he said.
“How long have you been living here?”

“Five years.”

“I guess you like it here.”

“Yes. The other tenants are nice; no wild parties. There isn’t much crime and the rents are reasonable.”

“My lease is up this June. I’m debating whether to renew or not, so I’ve had my eyes open looking at other places.”

“You’d like it here.”

“How much do you pay a month?”

“One thousand dollars, plus utilities. It’s a two-bedroom, by the way. Come take a look.”

She could tell by his expression that he was impressed by what he saw.

“I have to deliver those reports to the school,” Kate said.

“How about some company for the ride?”

“Sounds good to me,” Kate replied. “Only I have to stop on the way back at the supermarket to pick up the things I’ll need for dinner.”

“Fine with me.”

* * * *

They talked all the way to the school. Peter had desired a career in computers as a networking consultant. He had been sending out his resumes, but in the meantime worked at the computer store as a salesman.

“Why not a technician?” she asked. “You’re much nicer than that dreadful guy.”

“Who, Ralph? He’s not so bad, usually.”

“Well, he certainly could have used a refresher

course in customer service.”

“He was hired the day before I applied, so I took a job as a salesman.”

Peter waited in the car while Kate ran in with the reports. Her principal, Mr. Wainwright, met her in the hall. “You’re a real trooper, Kate.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” she said with a grin.

“Thanks for bringing them by.”

“See you tomorrow,” she replied, hurrying back outside to Peter.

“That was fast,” Peter said when she returned.

“I didn’t want you to wait long.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were at the supermarket. Tossing the things she needed into the basket, Kate walked alongside Peter who was pushing it. She realized how lucky she was to have Peter rescue her reports. But now the ball was in her court. She might not be a computer wizard, but she was a damn good cook. She’d put together a meal he wouldn’t soon forget.

* * * *

Back at her apartment, Kate put the groceries away while Peter began to run some tests on her computer. When she was finished, she went to see how Peter was doing.

He heard her enter and turned. “I think it’s nothing more than your hard drive needing to be replaced. I just want to be sure.”

“It’s good to know I won’t have to replace the entire thing.”

“You should soon, though. This machine is becoming an antique.”

“It’s perfect for what I use it for.”

“Well, when you decide to put it out to pasture, I know a

place where you can get a real buy,” he said, smiling.

“I’ll bet you do.”

They shared a laugh together.

Kate rose and said, “I should let you finish. I have some reports to grade before I make dinner.”

It was wonderful having someone over to cook for. Sure, Mark stayed for dinner from time to time, but it wasn’t the same. She never really went all out like she did tonight. You could give Mark a couple of hamburgers and fries and he’d be thrilled. It was nice to talk about something other than teaching, for a change.

Over coffee and dessert Kate finally got up enough courage to broach the subject of compensation. She didn’t want to insult him, yet she felt she had to show her gratitude in some way.

“Peter, you haven’t any idea of what you have done for me today.”

“I think I do.”

“But I feel like I should do more to express my gratitude.”

“It isn’t necessary. I gave my time freely. And don’t forget I got a delicious meal out of it also. I’d hate to tell you what I normally have for dinner. Besides, the company was outstanding.”

Kate smiled. Peter returned the smile and reached over to bring her face closer to his. He gently brushed his lips against hers. “Thank you for having me.”

Kate instinctively kissed him back. A ripple of excitement passed throughout her body. “Thank you for coming.”

“Are we even now?” he asked, almost laughing, hoping the bulge pressing on his zipper wouldn’t be noticeable.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Good. It’s late and I’d best be going. But I’m for continuing this at another time, say Saturday night?”

“Is that a proposal for a date?”

“It sure is, lady. So what do you say?”

Smiling, Kate said, “I’d be delighted.”

“Great! I’ll pick you up at eight. Dinner and dancing.”

Kate walked him to the door. Peter turned quickly and took her in his arms for another kiss. This one lasted longer and left her breathless. Yes, computers could be very rewarding, she thought and smiled.

* * * *

Peter walked to his car, whistling. It was the first time in a very long time that he had met a woman who truly interested him. He was tired of the airheads that were nice to look at, but couldn’t hold a decent conversation. Kate was both attractive and intelligent. Along with those two qualities, he found her to be modest and witty. Yes, he really wanted to get to know her better. Right now, Saturday seemed such a long way off.

* * * *

Kate fell asleep fanaticizing about Peter. He was the first man she had met recently who was worthwhile seeing again. She found that most men were out for a good time only. Hardly any desired a lasting relationship or one that lasted more than one night. She scarcely knew Peter, but what she had seen so far was reassuring. And she remembered how good his lips felt on hers.

Chapter 2

Kate picked Mark up the following morning. He slid into the seat on the passenger side. “Morning, Kate. Are we feeling better today?” he teased.

“As a matter of fact, I am, wise guy.”

“I meant to give you a call last night, but I got involved with an old movie.”

“You and your classic movies. No matter, I was busy anyway.”

“Really. I heard you brought your reports in. How’d you get the computer working?”

Kate proceeded to bring him up to date from the time she called to let him know she had a problem with the computer and wouldn’t be in school.

“So this guy just offered his services just like that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re one lucky lady.”

“That’s for sure.” Kate smiled, thinking about Peter. In fact, that’s all she seemed to be doing since he entered her life the day before. Imagining his handsome face with those tiger-green eyes always brought a smile to hers. And that smile... The rest of the week couldn’t pass quickly enough for her. She

found herself looking forward to seeing Peter again with a great deal of excitement, as if she were a sixteen-year-old teenager again. She had hoped he was looking forward to seeing her as well. After all, one-sided relationships usually tended to go nowhere.

* * * *

“Reserving that seat next to you for anyone?” Mark Winters, asked as he eased his tall frame into the chair next to Kate in the Teachers’ Lounge. In all the years she had known him, and they had started teaching the same year, he could always make her laugh no matter what her mood. They had dated once early on, but it didn’t work out. Instead, they became very good friends, often confiding in one another.

She smiled at the tall, blond-haired man with the boyish grin who had interrupted her thoughts.

“By the look on your face, you’re either dreaming of the millions you don’t make here or your prince has finally come.”

“You’re right.”

“Which is it?”

“Certainly not the money, that’s for sure.”

Her answer didn’t escape him. Mark, realizing years ago that he’d have to settle for Kate’s friendship, had truly never given up hope on eventually making her his. He knew as long as they remained friends, there was always the chance that she might wake up one day and look at him differently. As far as he was concerned, she was the only woman he ever wanted and would ever want. He just never told her. And each time a new guy entered into the equation, he feared that man would be the one to take Kate away forever.

“So this guy Peter has come to sweep you off your feet?”

“Not exactly, but he’s pretty damn terrific.”

Mark picked right up on the word terrific. Finding it harder to remain smiling, he said, “That’s nice. Going to see him again?”

Kate punched him playfully and smiled. “What do you think? Gotta get back. See you later.”

“Yeah, later,” Mark said as he felt a small piece of himself shrivel and die.

* * * *

After what seemed an eternity, Saturday finally arrived. Kate spent half the day deciding on what to wear. She eventually chose a green dress. Supposedly it was her color, going well with her blond hair and blue eyes. But it hadn’t been her first choice. She had tried on practically every single dress she owned before she’d decided on that particular one.

Then she fussed with her hair. She had it up, and then she brushed it out. Finally she decided to pin it up to give herself a more sophisticated look. It would be more appropriate with the dress she was wearing. Judging by the pains she was taking to prepare for the date, she definitely had to admit to herself that she was quite infatuated with Mr. Peter Saunders.

Peter knocked on Kate’s door promptly at eight. He held a single long-stemmed yellow rose. She opened the door and smiled at his thoughtfulness.

“Come in, I’ll put this in water and get my coat.”

“You look terrific!” he said, as he handed her the flower.

“Thank you.”

He watched her body move under the dress, imagining the texture of her skin to be as smooth and silky as the dress. Helping her slip into her coat, he caught the same delicate scent she was wearing the other day which further aroused

him. He couldn't believe the effect she was having on him. He thought he had outgrown that crazy age of raging hormones.

"I'm sure you're going to like this place. The food is good, but the music and dancing is great," he said as he led her to the car.

Kate liked the feel of Peter's arm lightly draped protectively across her back. She could just imagine how it would feel to be held in his arms when they danced. The image sent small tremors of anticipation throughout her body.

"Cold?"

"No. I'm fine."

They drove to a restaurant on the other side of town that she never knew existed. It was called Ronnie's and specialized in steaks, chops, and chicken. But, as Peter said, the main attraction was the band. They played every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night, catering to the type of crowd dining there that evening. If most of the diners were in their late forties and fifties, they played oldies from the sixties and seventies. If they were older, the music from the big-band era was featured. A younger crowd composed of people like Peter and Kate listened and danced to the music that had been popular during the late eighties and early nineties.

Peter obviously liked to dance and was a terrific dancer. Kate felt comfortable in his arms and found him easy to follow. Unfortunately the band didn't play enough slow songs for her liking. Being in his arms seemed to play havoc with all her senses. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt so alive. Even the aftershave he wore intoxicated her. She had to literally stifle the desire to nuzzle her nose up and down his neck.

Dancing as close as they were it was hard for her to miss

the pressing bulge against her thigh. Perhaps she had gotten to him as well. That thought put a smile on her face, until she remembered that this was their first date. She wondered what had happened to her sense of propriety. When Peter's lips grazed her cheek, that thought was forgotten.

As dessert was being served, Peter mentioned, "There's a small public park across the street from this restaurant. Would you like to take a stroll?"

"That would be very nice." It had been difficult to hold much of a conversation during dinner and Kate wanted to get to know Peter better. In fact, she wanted to know everything there was to know about him.

It was a lovely autumn night. The air was crisp and fresh-smelling. Kate loved this time of year with its orange and red colored leaves giving trees a last fiery hurrah before they were blown to the ground. Looking up, she noticed that the moon was playing hide and seek with the clouds. Peter took her hand in his and together they crossed the street.

The park was well-lit and had a few benches along a small winding path that bordered on well-kept flower beds and grass. They seemed to be the only ones there taking advantage of one of the few evenings left nice enough to stroll in before the onset of the colder weather.

"How's the computer running?"

"It still is, thanks to you."

"I've got the new hard drive. All I have to do is pop it in."

"Amazing. I wish I knew more about computers."

"That's not such a bad idea. After all, nearly every aspect of our lives is run by computers."

"Too bad that other guy is the repair tech at the store."

"That's okay. I really wouldn't have been that much

happier had I gotten it.”

“Why?”

“I’d like a more challenging job.”

“Like what?”

“A systems analyst in a major corporation. I’ve sent out a number of resumes and hope to hear from one or two soon.”

“You seem to know your stuff. I’m sure something wonderful will come your way soon.”

“I certainly hope so. I’m even willing to relocate, if necessary. That’s the good part about not having a family. You can pick yourself up at any time and move anywhere.”

“As much as I’d like you to get the job you seek, I’d hate to see you move now that I’ve gotten to know you.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“Yes, I do. You’re a very nice man, Mr. Peter Saunders. Besides, who will help me with the computer if you go?”

“Ah, ha. I knew you had an ulterior reason for saying that,” he said, trying to keep a serious face.

“You found me out.”

“All joking aside, I’m glad you feel that way. As much as I want that better job, I hope I won’t have to relocate too soon.”

Kate liked hearing that. She felt something happening between her and Peter and had hoped he felt it too.

“And you, did you always want to teach?”

“Yes. Both my parents were teachers. They’re retired now and traveling in a motor home throughout the United States.”

“That’s super! I bet they’re having the time of their lives.”

“They seem to be. I get a post card from them once a month showing where they’re staying. They’re traveling

across the northern states at the moment.”

“That’s the way to do it. Just let your whims be your guide. I’d like to travel the country in a similar manner. There’s so much I’d like to see,” Peter admitted.

“Sometimes I’d wish I’d gone with them. They had asked me if I had wanted to take a leave of absence from school and go along.”

“Why didn’t you go?”

“Many reasons. This was their time to be alone together, free of the responsibility to the three kids they raised.”

“So you aren’t an only child?”

“No. I have an older sister who lives in Seattle, married to an Air Force pilot. They have three kids and a menagerie of assorted pets. My brother, Hal, was killed in Vietnam. I’m the youngest.”

“That’s a shame about your brother.”

“He died before I was born. I truly regret never having the chance to know and love him. And you, do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No. My birth was a difficult one and my mother never wanted to have any more children. She was later killed in a car crash. After losing my mother, my father moved in with his sister who lived alone. From that time on, my Aunt Vivian became my real parent. My father drank himself to death. End of story.”

“How dreadful to have to experience all that at such a young age. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Life is a gamble...like the toss of a pair of dice. Sometimes you throw sevens or elevens, while other times, snake-eyes. It can always change. You’ve got to keep believing that your next toss will be a winner. I guess what

I'm trying to say is that you must always be optimistic and hope for the best, even in the worst of times."

"What a remarkable way of looking at life."

"That's the philosophy I live by. It works for me."

"I'm glad it does. You're quite an interesting man, Peter."

Drawing Kate closer, he asked, "Am I?" and gently kissed her.

Suddenly they felt a few droplets of rain. "We'd better head back to the car," Peter suggested, not a moment too soon. Halfway out of the park, the sky opened up and attempted to drown them both in a torrential downpour. Grabbing hands, they flew across the street to the car which was parked in the rear of the restaurant.

Unfortunately, by the time they reached the car, they were drenched to the skin.

Shivering, Kate said, "Please turn on the heat."

"Luckily this car has a great heater."

"Do I look as pathetic as you do right now?" Kate asked.

"Uh-huh."

"I was afraid you'd say that. This is not supposed to happen on a first date."

"No, I think it's reserved for the fourth or fifth," Peter replied, starting to laugh.

Kate joined him and their laughter didn't quite end until they had arrived back at her apartment.

They ran inside, puddles forming around their feet in the hall as Kate fished into her bag for the key.

"I can't let you go home in the condition you're in," Kate said. "Come on in and I'll give you one of my terry robes to put on while we try to dry your clothes."

“That would be great. Anything beats having two gallons of water in your pants. Thanks.”

Before she went to change and get a robe for Peter, Kate filled a tea kettle with water and placed it on the stove. In the cold, wet and soggy condition they both were in, hot chocolate seemed to be the perfect remedy.

In the bathroom Kate stripped off all her wet clothes and put on a robe. Knowing Peter had to be just as uncomfortable as she’d been; she hurried out with another robe.

He gladly took it and went into the bathroom to undress. When he came out, Kate took his clothes and hung them up with hers over the bathtub. Then she made two steaming mugs of hot chocolate and brought them to the living room where Peter was sitting and waiting.

“You know, you’re even beautiful with wet hair and no makeup,” he said, as she sat down next to him on the couch.

Kate had been in such a hurry to give him the robe that she hadn’t noticed the condition she was in. She imagined she looked a sight, yet Peter didn’t even seem to care. He took her hand and raised it to his lips. The spot on her skin he kissed felt ablaze and its heat spread rapidly throughout the rest of her like an out of control brush fire.

“I had a wonderful time tonight, Peter. Thank you.”

Sipping his hot chocolate, Peter said, “I had a great time, too, Kate. I’d like this night to be just the beginning for us.”

Smiling, Kate replied, “I’d like that very much, too.”

Peter put his mug down and took Kate’s from her. Silently, he looked deeply into her eyes, yet she could hear every word he was saying. As he reached for her, she knew he was the man for whom she had been put on this earth.

He delicately traced the outline of her face, gliding over

her delicately defined high cheekbones with his fingertips before he placed his lips on hers, tenderly kissing her at first, as if he were establishing his claim. Then his kisses became more ardent, his tongue seeking hers. Her creamy, fair skin had the texture of silk as he caressed her neck, sliding the robe from her shoulders. His lips slowly seared a path down her neck to her soft shoulders.

Pushing Kate gently back against the couch, he pulled the sash on her robe open, revealing two ivory breasts begging to be tasted. While kneading the nipple of one breast, he gently nipped and tongued the rosy peak of the other. He continued to play with her pebbled peaks until he elicited a soft moan from Kate. His rigid penis, pushing against the robe he was wearing, rubbed her thigh. She slipped her hand between the folds of the robe and stroked it. Peter let loose a groan and then quickly shrugged off the robe altogether, giving her complete access.

Leaning back over Kate, Peter sought her mouth once more, his crisp chest hair grazing over her breasts, keeping them in a constant state of excitement. Kate felt his erection, press against the outside folds of her sex and rubbed against it, sending little shivers of pleasure throughout her body.

His lips left hers to explore the rest of her, slowly as his hands led the way, leaving no place in their wake that didn't pulsate with pleasure. Kate felt the intense heat building within her as she succumbed to the forceful domination of his mouth as his tongue reached his destination.

Kate wrapped her fingers in the thickness of Peter's raven-colored hair. Sucking in air, she felt an involuntary contraction, as he lightly brushed her sex with his lips. She raked his back with her nails as her hips began to undulate below

him as he continued to taste her body with alternating strokes. Kate felt her insides tighten like a fist before the tension was finally released, crying out in ecstasy as her entire body convulsed, filling his mouth with her sweet juices.

Kate pulled him back down over herself as she repositioned herself around his rock-solid penis. Effortlessly, he pushed inside, feeling her warm, wet smoothness. She closed tightly around his shaft as they began to move, each stroke a new step in the ultimate dance of pleasure.

As much as Peter wanted to savor and enjoy this moment, he couldn't. No sooner had he grabbed Kate's bottom, pulling her closer, he felt the beginning of his climax. With each glorious stroke, he felt it inching closer until he felt a wave of pleasure he'd never experienced before. He groaned as the last spasm of ecstasy left him.

Their lips met one last time before they lay back, wrapped in each other's arms and allowed the beating of their hearts to return to normal.

"Will you stay the night?" Kate asked.

"If you'd like me to."

Kate kissed him and said, "More than anything."

Peter smiled and got up from the couch. He held out his hand and Kate took it. Together they walked into the bedroom.

Getting into bed, Kate couldn't believe how she felt. She had just experienced the most incredible sex she had ever had, yet she was aching for more. She had never felt this way about a man before—certainly not on the first date. And she felt guiltless.

As they lay together, Kate felt him stir against her, arousing her own passion. She could feel her breasts become heavy

with desire as he reached for them. He slid into her and she moved up and down positioning herself for maximum contact. It didn't take long for them both to reach the pleasure they sought before drifting off to sleep.

* * * *

Sometime during the night they awoke and made love again. Kate could not believe the pleasure Peter was capable of giving her. He made her feel both beautiful and wanton at the same time. She had never felt so sexually unfettered before. There was nothing she wouldn't do if he asked her to. And she seemed insatiable, which was totally out of character for her. His touch, his scent, his lips simply set her afire. She had no idea what was happening to her, but one thing she did know; she never wanted it to stop.

Chapter 3

Kate and Peter became almost inseparable from that autumn night on. Kate's life took on new shape, centering on him. He became the sole reason she awoke each morning and for every breath she took. Peter turned out to be quite a romantic at heart. He'd often send her flowers to cheer her day or small gifts to remind her how he felt. Kate never knew what lovely thing he was planning. And she loved every bit of the marvelous suspense.

Yet, as happy as she was, Kate feared being too happy. She was afraid she'd awaken one morning and it would all be gone. She had to battle these irrational fears all her life. Sometimes she'd eventually talk herself out of doing something because she was afraid. Through years of therapy, she learned to manage these seemingly irrational fears. Now deep in the very core of her being, she feared something would take Peter away and dreaded the day it would happen. She knew the feeling was unwarranted and irrational, but she couldn't dispel it.

* * * *

Peter continued to send out resumes to major corporations all over the country. He got many responses, but only a handful were usually willing to offer him the type of job and

salary he was seeking. He had gone on a few select interviews, some out of state, but he eventually turned down their offers for one reason or another.

Kate knew she'd support any decision he made. She may not truly want to, but she realized that she would follow him to the ends of the earth, if that's where the job took him. Even though they hadn't been together long, Peter knew their romance had blossomed into love, something neither of them could walk away from. But he hadn't felt that any of the offers he had received thus far were worth uprooting his life or hers.

By the end of November, the temperature had turned so bitter and cold that autumn was but a distant memory. It seemed that after two mild winters in a row, this one would be unusually severe. Now it was only January and Long Island had already been pelted with over ten and a half feet of snow. Hardly a week passed without having to dig out from at least one storm.

* * * *

Peter had spent the night at Kate's apartment. Luckily it was his day off and school had been cancelled for Kate; neither of them was going any place anyway. There were blizzard conditions outside.

Kate had toasted some bagels and made a pot of coffee. Sitting across from Peter at the kitchen table, she studied the face of the man she loved. She never tired of doing this. His green eyes, speckled with tiny brown flecks, usually full of mirth or passion, were definitely a window to his soul. She loved to run her fingers through his thick, black hair that often fell in his eyes, especially when they made love. His mouth, so sensual for a man, gave her such pleasure. Just thinking of the things he could do with it excited her. And his smile which

could light up any room certainly brightened her heart.

“Kate, didn’t you hear a word I said?”

“I’m sorry, Peter, I was lost in thought. What did you say?”

“I set up an interview for a company in Atlanta. It seems promising, yet they’re not doing too well on the stock market, lately, which could be an indication of some internal problem. I figured I’d check them out, anyway.”

“When are you going?”

“Monday.”

“I wish you luck, of course.”

“I know. I don’t think I’ll be going home today. It’s unbelievable outside. I can’t even see the tops of the cars.”

“Peter, I’ve been thinking...”

“You mean that’s not a burnt bagel I smell?”

Kate playfully kicked him under the table.

“Ouch!”

“I didn’t kick you that hard. Stop being such a baby.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“We could solve a few major problems if you moved in with me.”

“Whoa! Are you ready for that kind of commitment?”

“You’re not?”

“I didn’t mean to imply that. I just didn’t want to rush things or crowd you.”

“Peter, you practically live here already. As far as rushing me, I was ready to commit the first night you stayed here. I’ve been in love with you since then. If you’re not...”

“I’m just as ready to commit as you are, Kate. I wasn’t sure if you were ready. I don’t mind the short commute between our places. Hell, I’d do it even if it was three times as far.”

"I thought that if you moved in here with me, you wouldn't have to worry about renewing your lease or getting your mail when you go on out of town interviews."

"That's true. But is this what you really want?"

Kate reached over and took his hand in hers. "I've never been more certain of anything in my entire life. You've become my security blanket."

Peter laughed when he realized she was referring to how he liked to sleep, cuddled up with one arm draped across her chest. "Then consider it done. It certainly beats e-mailing you the nights I'm not here. But do you need a security blanket, my love?" he asked as he walked behind Kate's chair, nuzzling her neck.

"You'll never know how much," she said, as she turned to meet his lips with hers.

"Wanna show me?" he asked, as they walked together into the bedroom.

Kate fell back onto the bed and reached for Peter. He gently dropped into her waiting arms and kissed her. He couldn't believe how aroused he would get from merely kissing her. He had kissed many women in his lifetime, yet none had the power to turn him on like Kate.

Peter's kisses, soft and gentle as the fluttering of butterfly wings, soon became more ardent starting Kate on her ride to ecstasy. Within moments, the few articles of clothing they'd been wearing were scattered on the bed or floor. She was reaching a feverish pitch quickly, her body quivering from his touch.

Kate trembled as Peter tasted her quivering breasts swollen with desire, before continuing down her body. Not one inch of her was safe from his attention. Peter had awakened every nerve ending within her being and each was sending out

pleasurable signals. A moan escaped her lips.

Kate's responses to his caresses excited and aroused Peter further. No other woman ever responded to his touch in such a manner and he wanted to spend the rest of his life pleasuring her. Nor did he ever tire of the sight and touch of her taut breasts and silken skin. He found it most difficult to refrain from touching her or tasting her.

Kate's hands wandered over Peter's body as he drove her to a fevered pitch. She loved to feel the rippling of his muscles under his skin as he moved. It never failed to excite her. She could hardly stand much more, wanting Peter to enter her. Sensing this, he worked his way up her body slowly until he was over her. She took his face in her hands and kissed him deeply as he slipped into her. Having been so close to total abandonment, it didn't take long for her to reach a climax. Peter followed quickly. He kissed her gently and lay beside her as they both basked in the warmth of love's fulfillment.

Outside the wind howled and the snow fell, covering everything with a quiet blanket of white.

Chapter 4

Kate drove Peter to the airport. After a few hugs and kisses, she left him there and headed to school. She was on her way to the Ladies' Room to repair her tear-stained makeup, when she ran into Mark. Seeing the condition of her face, he thought the worst.

"What's wrong, Kate?"

With a weak smile she answered, "Nothing really. Peter left for an interview today. I came directly from the airport."

"Come have a cup of coffee in the lounge for a minute and talk to me."

"What if he takes this one?"

"You're not really happy about relocating, I take it?"

She shook her head. "As much as I care for him, I love my job here..."

"And your friends."

"Especially my friends," she said, patting his hand. "I don't want to leave."

"Unfortunately, that's one decision only you can make."
Too bad I can't make it for you.

"I know."

"Does Peter know how you feel?"

"He thinks I'm okay with it."

"Perhaps you should tell him how you *really* feel."

"I keep hoping it will never happen."

Mark shook his head. "You can't do that."

"On the contrary, you know I do that well."

Mark chuckled. "Look, I've got to run. Want some company tonight?"

"That would be nice. How about dinner?"

"You're kidding. For a free meal. I'd do just about everything."

"I figured that. Come over around six."

* * * *

Ten minutes later, Kate had composed herself and was greeting her class. She liked this year's class very much. They were a great bunch of kids, attentive and eager to learn. Only one child seemed to trouble her.

She had hoped that her last talk with Thomas DeSantis would put an end to his crush on her. Unfortunately, he hadn't altered his behavior for the better and had become a nuisance. He had brought her flowers and apples and sent dozens of love notes. At first she was flattered and was careful not to hurt his feelings, but when he found out where she lived and began to come by her apartment, she really began to feel uncomfortable.

About two weeks ago, she had asked him not to do that. Obviously he didn't listen, for yesterday, she noticed him standing across the street from her apartment building. She felt as if she was being followed by an eleven-year-old stalker. As much as she didn't want to, Kate realized she no longer had any choice. She would have to speak to his parents.

It was such a delicate issue to handle. When parents are

called in for something like that, they often became defensive, making the situation even more difficult. She had tried to do everything properly and had already spoken to Mr. Wainwright, her principal, about the matter. He agreed with her that her next step was to enlist the help of the child's parents.

During her prep period, she called the DeSantis home. Neither parent was home, but she did speak to Thomas' grandmother. Kate requested that his parents call to set up an appointment for a conference as soon as possible regarding Thomas' behavior.

* * * *

Mr. DeSantis called the following morning. Kate tried to put a face to the name. She thought that he might have been at open school night. She tried to remember the man who sat in Thomas' seat. Then she remembered. Those eyes that never left her the entire time. How could she forget the uncomfortable feeling of being mentally stripped naked by those eyes? Was it like father, like son? What a horrid thought.

"Ms. Douglas, this is Charles DeSantis. I was told you needed to speak to me about my boy."

"I would rather speak to you and your wife in person, if that's at all possible."

"Well it ain't, so if you wanna talk, do it now."

Kate was put off a little by his gruff tone, but at least he was on the other end of the phone. She really wanted both parents present. That way they'd both know exactly what was going on and not a twisted version presented by the one parent she'd spoken to.

"All right. I'm experiencing a problem with your son."

"Get to the point, lady, I'm a busy man."

"Are you aware that Thomas brings me flowers, ap-

ples and love notes?”

“So what’s wrong with them things? You should be happy they ain’t guns.”

“Nothing, sir, when it stops there. Unfortunately your son has been loitering outside my apartment building and has followed me on a number of occasions, elsewhere.”

“How did he do it? Fly? Take a cab?”

“Please don’t try to make light of this situation. It’s not funny and definitely inappropriate behavior for an eleven-year-old child. He was on a bike.”

“Are you certain you’re not leading the boy on?”

“Mr. DeSantis! I assure you that is *not* the case. Do not confuse me with the teacher in Washington. I have absolutely no personal interest in your son nor any other student in my class. If anything, I have tried to dissuade your son from continuing his behavior.”

“Well, waddya want me to do?”

“For starters, talk to Thomas and tell him to stop stalking me. I would also appreciate it if he’d stop giving me things.”

“I guess I can talk to him.”

“I certainly hope you do. Your son is a very nice boy and I’m sure he means well. Please let him know that.”

“Just for the record, what happens if Thomas doesn’t stop his *inappropriate* behavior, as you put it?”

“I have already spoken to the principal about this matter and he will most likely take the necessary appropriate action.”

“Such as?”

“Switching your son out of my class for starters. If that doesn’t solve the problem, perhaps Thomas will be placed into another school.”

“I still think you’re making a mountain out of a mole hill.

Maybe it's *you* who needs to get with the program, so to speak."

"Mr. DeSantis, I assure you I'm not blowing this matter out of proportion. If your son was an adult, he would be arrested for stalking. We're talking about a serious situation here."

"Bullshit, lady! We're talking about a kid that has the hots for his teacher."

"I see we're not going to make any further progress here. Talk to your son. Thank you for your time..."

"Are you hanging up on me, lady?"

"Do you have anything else you'd like to say?"

"I don't like to be threatened."

"You weren't."

"Just remember he's a kid."

"Kids grow up and questionable behavior worsens. Help Thomas, Mr. DeSantis. Talk to him."

By the time Kate finally put the receiver down, her head was pounding. She couldn't remember the last time she had such an exasperating conversation with a parent. She decided to discuss the matter further with Mark when he came for dinner later. He knew she was having a problem with Thomas and had suggested she call the parents for a conference immediately. Wanting to give the child the benefit of the doubt, she held off. Now she doubted if it even mattered at all. She wondered if Mr. DeSantis had any intention of speaking to Thomas and correcting the problem. After all, he didn't seem to think there *was* a problem.

Chapter 5

“Hi, gorgeous! Feeling any better?” Mark asked, handing Kate a chilled bottle of Chablis as he walked into the apartment.

Before answering, she took a quick look outside behind him. He noticed.

“Looking for somebody? And here I thought I was all you needed.”

Kate smiled. “I was making sure that Thomas DeSantis wasn’t lurking about.”

“The kid still following you?”

“Yes. I spoke to his *charming* father today.”

“I take it that your conversation didn’t go well?”

“Not at all. First of all, Mr. DeSantis doesn’t think there is a single thing wrong with Thomas’ behavior. He refuses to accept the fact it’s gone beyond a harmless crush.”

“Terrific. Did he agree to talk to Thomas, though?”

“I’m not sure. I tried to explain that he had no choice, but he perceived it as a threat.”

“Nice.”

“What was worse was the fact that he even accused me of leading his son on.”

“He sounds like a piece of work. He’s definitely making this a lot more difficult.”

“I know, and the kid is beginning to get on my nerves. I went down the frozen food aisle at the supermarket the other day and saw him at the other end watching me. I’m becoming paranoid. I’m not sure what I’ll do if the kid doesn’t stop soon.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure Mr. Wainwright will stand by you on this.”

“I hope so. Something tells me I’m going to need all the support I can muster before this is over.”

“Keep Wainwright abreast of whatever happens. That way he can stay on top of the situation. If you can’t make any headway with the parents, let him request a conference with them.”

“Good idea. Thanks.”

“So when do we eat?”

Kate playfully punched him on the arm and said, “Right now. Didn’t you have lunch?”

“Yeah, but I salivate at the thought of having one of your home-cooked meals.”

“I’m beginning to think that’s why Peter comes by so often,” she said with laughter in her voice.

Always Peter, Mark thought. She’s definitely in love with this guy. I see how she comes in to school now after a night with him. Damn! How can I ever compete? I doubt if he’ll ever love her as I do. I hate having to keep on a happy face when I’m dying a little more each day.

“Come to think of it, you’re always hungry.”

“I must constantly fuel this active mind of mine, you know.”

“Could have fooled me.”

Mark laughed good-heartedly. "You got me...finally."

Over dinner they talked about school, her parents and their travels, but somehow the conversation turned to Peter. Despite how he felt, Mark had a few questions of his own.

"I noticed a lot of men's things lying around the apartment, especially in the bathroom. Unless you're secretly changing into one, it looks like Peter's moving in."

"He is when he comes back from the interview."

"He's the one, isn't he?"

Kate broke into a huge smile and nodded.

"You must love him very much. I've never seen you this happy."

"He's a wonderful guy, like you, in many ways. He's sweet, sensitive, and caring."

"But he isn't me."

Kate tuned in to the tone of Mark's voice. He sounded hurt. Could he still be harboring feelings for her after all these years? She always considered him to be a wonderful friend, nothing more. She looked into his eyes and saw the pain she had somehow overlooked all that time. How could she be so insensitive?

She began to say something, but Mark cut her off sharply. "I guess this is as good a time as any to get this off my chest. Remember that crazy date we had so many years ago?"

"Yes. Everything went wrong, but it was such fun."

"But not good enough for us to go out again."

"If I remember correctly, it was you who wanted to remain friends," Kate said.

"That's because I feared losing you altogether. By staying friends, you'd always be near and I could keep the hope alive that one day you'd see me in another light and give us another chance."

“Oh, Mark,” Kate said, gently stroking his cheek, “I’m so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you.”

Mark took her hand and kissed her palm. “It’s not your fault. I’m stuck on you and that’s my problem. But I want you to know that I’ll always be here for you. If anything ever goes wrong, just look over your shoulder.”

Kate began to cry. She threw her arms around Mark’s neck and hugged him.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” he whispered. “I only wanted you to know how I felt and that I’ll always care.”

Looking into his eyes, she saw the depth of his feeling. How could she have been so blind? “I wish things could have been different. You’ve been my best friend and confidant. I love you as I would a brother. Promise me you’ll never change.”

“I promise you I’ll always be there, but I’ll never love you as a sister. You’ll always be much more to me than that. I also promise that I will never ever make you uncomfortable again by bringing this matter up.”

“Maybe one day you’ll fall in love with someone else.”

“That will never happen, Kate. But if it makes you feel better, think that way. As far as I’m concerned you are the only woman in the world for me and no other can ever compare to you.”

“Flatterer,” she said, as she kissed his cheek and hugged him once more.

He held her close a little longer than she would have liked, but she allowed him to, knowing he needed it having just bared his soul.

Mark looked at his watch and said, “Time to clean the dishes because it’s getting late. We both have school tomorrow.”

"I can do the dishes by myself."

"No. Let me help clean up. I made half the mess."

Afterwards, Mark grabbed his coat and Kate walked him to the door. "I meant every single word I said, Kate. If you need me, just call, no matter what. I want you to always remember that."

"I will. And Mark, thank you." She kissed him good night and shut the door. She leaned against the door for awhile, her head spinning.

How could she not have guessed how Mark felt? Was she so absorbed with her own needs? What terrible pain she must have caused him over the years, dating other men while he stood and watched. Mark had dated, but never nearly as much as she. She had never given it any thought, though.

In the shower, as the water cascaded down, she suddenly remembered an incident that occurred about four years ago. She had arranged a blind date between Mark and an old high school friend, Patty. She had bumped into Patty at the supermarket. After a failed marriage and a child, Patty had moved back to New York from California to start over again.

The date went well from Patty's point of view. She really liked Mark. They had gone to a movie and had a quick bite to eat before going back to her apartment. The babysitter went home and Patty and Mark ended up in bed.

In fact, Patty had called Kate the day after and told her she had a fantastic time with Mark.

"Why didn't you tell me that he was such a terrific lover, Kate?"

"I never slept with him, Patty, so I wouldn't know. Mark and I are only good friends."

Patty and Mark dated a few more times, always ending up

in bed. When Mark finally stopped seeing her, Patty angrily called Kate and accused her of trying to keep Mark for herself. She had protested her innocence, telling Patty it was a ridiculous idea. But thinking back, with the knowledge she now possessed, maybe there was some truth in it...at least on Mark's part. Could he have been using Patty to relieve his frustration? She had never heard from Patty again.

Peter knew she and Mark were long-time friends and seemed comfortable with it. He knew that it was platonic on Kate's part. Now she wondered if he suspected or even knew how Mark felt about her. She had never given it any thought before tonight. Now knowing how Mark felt about her, she was forced to look at things differently. She also promised herself to try to be more sensitive to Mark's feelings in the future.

Chapter 6

The next morning Kate was called into Mr. Wainwright's office. She had intended to make an appointment to see him anyway to discuss the phone call she'd had with Mr. DeSantis. Besides that, Thomas DeSantis hadn't come to school that day. She found that unusual for a child who had never missed a day of school since September.

"Good morning, Kate," Mr. Wainwright said, as she entered his office. "Mr. DeSantis called my office right after he spoke to you yesterday. He was fuming."

"I tried to keep the conversation low-key and pleasant, but he was a most difficult man to reason with."

"I know. He was testy with me as well. The bottom line is that he thinks you have blown the entire situation out of proportion."

"I couldn't convince him there was a problem. All I kept thinking was how lucky I was not to have to face him."

"Unfortunately, you will."

Kate felt her entire insides liquefy. "When is the meeting for?"

"Tomorrow after school."

"It will have to be a brief one. I have to be at the

airport around five.”

“Hopefully it won’t take long. I’m sure we’ll be able to handle the situation once we sit down with Mr. DeSantis.”

“I wish I could feel as confident.”

“Why do you say that?”

“First of all, he didn’t want to waste the time to come speak to me in the first place. Aside from the fact he finds nothing wrong with his son’s behavior, he also suggested that I might be leading the boy on.”

“You’re kidding?” Mr. Wainwright said and began to chuckle. Seeing the serious look on Kate’s face, he stopped and added, “You’re not kidding, I take it. This definitely changes the complexion of things.”

“And he didn’t mention that to you?”

“No, only what I told you about being a typical woman and reading into a boy’s innocent crush.”

“Skipping the fact that he’s obviously a sexist pig, I wonder what else is on his agenda?”

“Do you think he was merely going to spring this on me?”

“Probably. Who knows what that Neanderthal is capable of? I’m definitely not looking forward to meeting this man.”

Mr. Wainwright laughed. “Whatever you do, please don’t slip and call him any names.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“Kate, please don’t worry. We’ll find the best solution to this problem. You are one of my best teachers and I know you’d never do anything that was questionable.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wainwright. Your reassurance does make me feel a great deal better.”

“Good. Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye,” Kate said, smiling, and left. She sincerely

hoped he was right.

Driving home, Kate wondered what Peter was doing. Knowing that he was due to return home the following day made her feel better.

Chapter 7

At that very moment, Peter was sitting in his motel room going over the information he had garnered about DMB Technologies. The Human Resources manager had given him a benefits packet along with printed information on the company. Everything seemed to be enticing. The starting salary that he had been offered was fifty-one thousand dollars. There was a 401K and a good medical and dental plan. The only problem was that there didn't seem to be much room for advancement. With Kate working, the salary was all right. But there was no way he could raise a family on that kind of money. Once they had a baby, he wanted Kate to be home to raise it. No nannies or day care for his kids. When they reached school age that was a different story.

The real estate didn't seem to be significantly cheaper than New York, either. He liked the job, but it didn't warrant the relocation. He had another interview to go to the following morning with the president of the company. Unless there was a dramatic change in what was being offered to him, he intended to turn the job down.

He took a quick shower and went downstairs to the restaurant for some dinner. It was a small place that was made to

look like a diner from the fifties. Nostalgia seemed to be big in the part of the city he was staying in. There were record shops that specialized in music from the fifties and sixties and clothing stores that sold second hand clothing from that time as well. *It seemed that no matter how far we advance technologically, we always hunger to regain bits and pieces of the past.* That was what occurred to Peter as he looked around the restaurant. It wasn't crowded and most of the booths were empty. He must have come at an off-hour. That he didn't mind one bit.

The waitress recognized his New York accent immediately and began to flirt with him.

"You don't come from around here, do you?"

Peter shook his head.

"Let me guess. I'd say, New York."

"That's right. I'm from Long Island, actually."

"I'd like to see New York. I've never had the chance to go there."

"This is the first time I've ever been in your beautiful city. It's a lot like New York, you know, with the congestion and traffic."

"Let me take your order and then we can continue our little chat."

"I'll have the sirloin special."

"How would you like it cooked?"

"Well done."

"You have a choice of soup or salad."

"Salad, please with French Dressing."

"For a vegetable, there's baked potato, creamed corn, peas, spinach, or string beans."

"A plain baked potato will be fine, thank you."

"What will you drink with that?"

“A coffee.”

She smiled and grabbed the menu. Five minutes later she brought him a cup of coffee and a salad. She hovered over him for a few minutes, before asking, “Have you seen the night sights around here?”

“I haven’t had time. I’m here on a job interview and have another one early tomorrow morning.”

“I’d be willing to show you around some, if you like.”

Perhaps under different circumstances Peter might have taken up her offer. She was an attractive woman in her early twenties with beautiful blond hair which she had tied back into a ponytail. It was the kind of hair a man loved to run his hands through. She was tall and had nice legs. In many ways she reminded him of Kate.

Politely, he declined her offer. “I do have to get up early, but thank you anyway.”

“How about a drink after I get off my shift at nine?”

“Sorry, again, no thanks.”

“Someone at home?”

“Yes.”

“She’s a lucky woman.”

“Thanks.”

The waitress, whose name turned out to be Cass, brought out his main dish. They chattered a little more, but nothing else was mentioned about getting together.

After dinner Peter went back to his room and called Kate whom he missed terribly. He got her on the first ring.

“Hello, Love,” he said.

“Hello, Peter. It’s good to hear your voice. I miss you.”

“I wish I were there so you wouldn’t have to.”

“I wasn’t sure if you were going to call again, since we

spoke earlier today. But I'm glad you did."

"I needed to hear your voice with the New York accent."

Kate laughed. "Do they speak that funny down there?"

"No, not really. I just stick out like a sore thumb."

"Oh, before I forget to mention it, I have an important meeting with a parent and Mr. Wainwright after class tomorrow. I may end up a little late, but I'll be there to pick you up. I didn't want you to worry."

"Is it about Thomas DeSantis?"

"Yes."

"Good luck."

"I'm going to need it. His father sounds like a real Stone Age throw back."

Peter laughed. "Knowing you, you'll charm him. If that doesn't work, offer him a Saber Tooth tiger hide."

Kate almost choked on her laughter. "I love you, Peter."

"I love you, too, Kate. Good night."

"Good night," she whispered and replaced the receiver into its cradle.

Kate found herself restless after Peter's call. She decided to call Mark to let him know that she was meeting with Mr. DeSantis the following afternoon. Kate was just about to hang up when Mark answered.

"Hey, you. Where were you hiding?" she asked.

"Believe it or not, I couldn't find the phone. I had left it in my bedroom under a pile of clothes."

"I won't ask."

"What can I do you out of?"

"I called to let you know that Wainwright set up a meeting between DeSantis and me tomorrow afternoon. After I spoke to DeSantis yesterday, he immediately called Wain-

wright to complain about me.”

“For what?”

“That I was being a typical female blowing everything out of proportion.”

“Figures.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He probably treats women like objects. Why else wouldn’t he find his son’s behavior improper?”

“Good point.”

“Dress very conservatively tomorrow. Don’t give the man anything to ogle.”

“That’s for sure.”

“I wish you luck. Peter coming home tomorrow?”

“Yes. I don’t know if he’s going to take the job or not.”

“That would drive me crazy.”

“It is.”

“I know if it were me, I’d hate having to pull up stakes and move to another state.”

“Luckily, it’s not.”

“Unfortunately, the impact will be the same as if it were.”

“I know, Mark. You’re my best friend. Leaving you won’t be easy.”

“Well, we’ll both know tomorrow, won’t we?”

“Uh-huh. Good night.”

“See you tomorrow.”

* * * *

Mark sat there staring at the phone. He realized that even if Peter returned after not taking the job offer, it was only a temporary reprieve. There would be others. And one of them would be acceptable. How many more nights would he be

wondering was this going to be the one to take Kate from him? Loving her was so hurtful at times, but living without her had to be worse.

Chapter 8

The following day gave new meaning to Murphy's Law. Everything that could possibly go wrong did so. Kate had prepared a lesson on the planets in the solar system and needed the use of a slide projector. She had requested one well over a week ago. The visual aids monitor delivered one to her room, but it was broken. She sent it back and had to wait a good forty minutes before she was told there weren't any more working projectors available. After wasting all that time, she had to teach something else.

Then one of her students took ill and regurgitated her entire breakfast all over herself and her desk. Nothing got done until the custodian cleaned up the mess. By this time Kate was more than ready for her free period and was glad to take her class to music. On a whim, she decided to stop by the nurse to find out what was wrong with Thomas DeSantis, who wasn't in class again today. She was getting concerned.

"Hi, Carol. I was wondering if you knew why Thomas DeSantis was not in school again today?"

"Funny you should ask," Carol Johnson replied. She was a petite, dark-haired woman hardly taller than the six-graders herself, with a heart of gold and a love for children.

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, I’ve been trying to contact the DeSantis family all week, but nobody ever seems to be home.”

“That’s strange. I spoke to Mr. DeSantis yesterday and he has an appointment to speak to me this afternoon.”

“Perhaps both parents work. But that doesn’t explain where Thomas is, though. Oh, well, please keep me posted,” Carol said.

“I will,” Kate replied and went to the teachers’ lounge.

It was difficult for Kate to keep her mind on preparing lesson plans for the following week. She kept thinking about Thomas DeSantis and his father. She dreaded having to meet with the elder DeSantis later on that afternoon. At least he’d be able to shed some light on why Thomas hasn’t been in school all week. She hoped he wasn’t sick. At the same time, she wondered if his absence had anything to do with her.

* * * *

The last bell signaling the end of the school day rang. Kate gathered her things together and made her way to Mr. Wainwright’s office. Mrs. Williams, his secretary, told her to go right in; she was expected.

She barely had a chance to speak to the principal when Mr. DeSantis arrived. Mr. Wainwright rose and extended his hand. “Please have a seat, Mr. DeSantis. This is Ms. Douglas.”

As Mr. DeSantis turned his gaze towards Kate, she felt his cold, onyx-colored, beady eyes undress her and shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

“My son is a very lucky kid to have such a looker. My sixth-grade teacher had shaggy, dull brown hair and a large, hairy wart on her face.”

Coming from a man such as Mr. DeSantis, Kate didn’t

find that statement flattering and chose to ignore it. "Speaking of your son, Mr. DeSantis, has he been ill?" she inquired instead.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because he hasn't been in school for the last three days and I'm concerned."

"So you *do* have a personal interest in my son, after all."

"Not in the manner that you're inferring. He has not missed a day of school since September and then suddenly he's out for three days. Wouldn't you be concerned had you been his teacher?"

"It's irrelevant at this point. I doubt if you'll be seeing much of Thomas...for a while, at least."

"What do you mean?"

"I almost called to cancel our little get together, but curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to meet you."

"But what about Thomas?"

"Oh, yes. You won't be having any more of your so called problems because Thomas is gone."

"Gone? Gone, where?" Mr. Wainwright inquired.

"Who knows? His delightful mother took him to God knows where."

"Well since you are here, I believe we still should discuss Thomas' inappropriate behavior," Mr. Wainwright said.

"What the devil for?"

"Don't you believe your wife and son will eventually return?" Kate asked.

Mr. DeSantis shrugged his shoulders. "If the authorities find them."

"Has your wife done this before?" asked Mr. Wainwright.

"Yeah, but what's it to you?"

"Perhaps she'll go to a place she's been. People are basically creatures of habit."

"Yeah. Wendy's a creature of habit, all right," Mr. DeSantis said and chuckled. "A habitual pain in the ass."

"Does she have any family she can stay with?" Kate asked.

"Yeah, her father, but his head is usually stuck in a bottle. I doubt if he'd even notice her and the kid. But she's not there."

"How do you know?" Kate asked.

"The local police have already checked the place out."

"What about friends?" Kate continued her line of questioning.

"You're a nosey broad, ain't you?"

"I'm just worried about Thomas."

"I don't get it. I'm called here because there's a problem with the way Thomas is behaving towards you, yet you tell me you're worried about him. What's with you, lady?"

"Just because Thomas is doing something wrong, it doesn't mean I can't be concerned about his welfare. He may not understand why what he's doing is wrong. That's why I asked you to speak to him."

DeSantis rolled his eyes. Kate realized that he probably didn't comprehend what she was trying to tell him. He was probably too dense.

"I'll tell you what, Miz. Douglas, if I happen to see my son in the near future, I will tell him how concerned you are. I guess that raps things up. It's been real."

Kate and Mr. Wainwright watched the stocky man strut out of the office.

"He was quite an interesting man, to say the least. I think you judged his character correctly, Kate."

"I fear that Thomas will suffer the most from the game his parents are playing."

"Unfortunately, I think you're right again." Then glancing at his watch, Mr. Wainwright said, "You'd better head on out to the airport if you don't want to be late."

"Thanks for your support. I'll see you tomorrow."

"And, Kate... Drive carefully."

With a smile she said, "I will," and left.

* * * *

Even though the traffic was building, it still wasn't too bad when Kate got on the parkway. She was able to maintain a decent speed. Then suddenly, all the cars in front of her were braking and the parkway became an instant parking lot. With the way her day had gone, this development may have upset her, but it didn't surprise her one bit. She only worried that she would be late.

The cars ahead of her began to move...slowly, but at least they were moving. Soon she was able to see the cause of the traffic jam, a minor fender-bender. Because there was no blood and gore requiring the need for emergency vehicles, the rubber necking was kept to a minimum and soon she was able to pick up speed.

There were no other mishaps along the way and she arrived at the airport just as Peter's plane was touching down. She watched at the gate as the passengers from his flight disembarked. Being six feet four, Peter towered above most of the other people and Kate spotted him right away. A huge smile spread across his face when he noticed her standing there.

Putting his bags down a moment, Peter took Kate in his arms and kissed her. "God, I've missed you," he whispered

before he kissed her again, sending sparks of electricity through her.

“I missed you more.”

“Wanna argue, lady?”

“No. I’d rather make love.”

“That can be arranged. Just wait till I get you home.”

Smiling, Kate inquired if he had eaten on the plane.

“A snack and a beverage.”

“Would you like to stop at the diner for a bite on the way home?”

“That sounds fine.”

They held hands as they headed for the baggage area.

The few minutes they had been together were therapeutic for Kate. Already the frustrations of the day were fading into distant memories.

* * * *

The diner wasn’t too busy and they were able to get a booth quickly. After they ordered, Kate asked how the interviews went.

“Don’t pack your bags; we’re not leaving.”

“You turned down the job offer?”

“Yes. Even though the benefits were top notch, the salary wasn’t high enough to warrant relocation.”

Kate was secretly relieved. Even though she told him she’d follow him anywhere, she wasn’t truly ready to give up the job she had and leave New York.

“How did things go with DeSantis? You had a conference with him today, didn’t you?”

“Yes. What a character! He was the epitome of everything I dislike in men...a real sexist. He even had the gall to tell me that he came to school just to meet me.”

“What do you mean?”

“His wife has taken Thomas and fled. He could have just called and cancelled.”

“I wonder why.”

“I already told you...”

“No, not that. I wonder why his wife ran away.”

“From what I saw of him, he didn’t strike me as the model husband and father.”

“So, what did he say after he met you?”

“Are we back to that again?”

“Uh-huh. Curiosity.”

“He said that his son had good taste.”

“Well at least he wasn’t blind. That’s a plus, isn’t it?”

Kate rolled her eyes.

“You know I was only kidding, don’t you?”

A smile appeared across Kate’s face despite her attempts to hide it.

“Seriously, I’m really worried about Thomas. Some family life he must have. DeSantis said this wasn’t the first time his wife had done this.”

“Poor, Thomas. Hopefully it will all work out. His fixation with you makes more sense the more we learn about him and his family.”

“That’s true. He’s definitely crying out for affection.”

Peter and Kate finished filling each other in with the events that occurred during his absence over dessert. Then, holding hands, they left the diner and drove home.

The door to the apartment was barely closed behind them, before Kate was in Peter’s arms. One breathless and longing kiss led to another, before they were both gasping for air. Shedding their coats, Peter lifted Kate into his arms and

carried her into the bedroom.

He put her gently down on the bed and looked into her warm, blue eyes. He saw his future in those loving eyes and thanked Providence he'd found her. They had been seeing each other for over six months. It might not be considered a very long period of time, but during that time they had bonded and had become closer than many couples who have been together longer. He couldn't picture his life without her in it. That was the reason he was being so selective in his job search. He wanted to make Kate happy and give her everything her heart desired.

From what her eyes were saying, he knew she loved him. Those glorious windows to her very soul told him that all her passion and desire was for him alone.

Deftly Peter began to unbutton her blouse and unhooked her bra. Within moments, his lips were tenderly teasing her unfettered breasts. She arched her back so he could reach her more easily. Kate helped Peter out of his shirt and pants. She desperately needed to feel the texture of his skin, running her hands across the hard muscles of his back. She inhaled his male scent and let its intoxication overtake her.

Kate looped her hand through Peter's thick, black hair as he began to blaze a searing path down her body with his lips and tongue. Kate moaned as the ache inside her increased in intensity. She writhed in pleasure as Peter stroked the soft, vulnerable flesh between her legs.

She could hardly stand much more pleasure as he assaulted her already excited nipples with his mouth. As he entered her, she felt her first wave of pleasure. He rode her with abandon, until they succumbed to their passions. Eventually collapsing in a sated heap, they clung to one another until sleep overpowered them both.

Chapter 9

The following weekend Peter began to move his things to Kate's apartment. He rented a U-Haul and enlisted a couple of his friends from work to help him move his furniture. There was a problem with what to do with some of it. Kate's apartment was big, but not large enough for all of his furniture. He basically had two choices, sell it or put it in storage. Luckily one of his friends knew a couple who had just gotten married and needed some furniture, so he was able to sell the items he didn't need.

Technically Peter still had five months left on his lease. The landlord gave him the option of finding someone to rent the apartment and he'd let him out of the lease. If not, Peter would have to continue to pay until the end. Despite any of the drawbacks, it was a win-win situation to Peter, because living with Kate was worth the extra expense. Besides, who could put a price on being able to see her every night before he closed his eyes and the first thing in the morning when he opened them? Or reaching out for her in the middle of the night?

Peter, having placed his resume on the internet, was continually getting a steady stream of responses. The first few

days after his return from Atlanta, he began to weed through the impressive amount that had developed in his absence. He'd hardly been able to read them all, when a fresh crop was added to the ones he already had.

When Kate wasn't marking papers or preparing lessons for her class, she'd often watch him. She realized that Peter was looking for a better job with their future together in mind. There was little doubt in her mind that they would eventually marry and have children. The problem was that she hated when he traveled to out-of-town interviews. He'd often be gone for two or more days and after having him around, she hated to be alone. She could never shake the irrational, icy fear that sometimes gripped her heart, that if she let him go on these interviews out of state, she'd somehow lose him. She knew he loved her and the fear was childish at best, but it still lurked deep within her. Besides, it was so wonderful, feeling his strong arms around her when they slept. He truly was her security blanket.

Peter sensed Kate's melancholy each time he left to go on an out of town interview. He hated to leave her, but he had little choice. He always tried to return as soon as possible, and while he was there, he'd call as often as he could.

* * * *

The following evening Kate was preparing dinner as she half-listened, half-watched the six o'clock news. Suddenly the name DeSantis caught her ear. She dropped the knife she was holding and turned her complete attention to the small television on the counter.

The windblown newscaster was standing in front of a gruesome-looking accident that had taken place on the New Jersey Turnpike earlier in the day.

“...as a result of a high speed chase, Mrs. Wendy DeSantis and her eleven-year-old son, Thomas, were killed when...”

“Omigod! Poor Thomas! Why?” Kate exclaimed as she collapsed into a chair. Tears fell as she tried to reason why the innocent children got hurt all the time in the cross-fire of parental fighting.

Kate suddenly had to know what actually happened. She began to furiously surf through all the channels until she came to one that hadn't reported the accident yet. She was able to hear the report in its entirety. It turned out to be almost as she imagined. A witness thought that Mrs. DeSantis may have been driving erratically at high speeds to elude another car when she lost control and slammed into a guard rail on the service road of the Turnpike. Because of the excessive speed, the compact car became airborne, eventually coming to a halt upside down.

There was a quick snapshot of a hunk of twisted metal. If she hadn't known it was once a car, Kate would not have been able to identify it. “It was thought that both Thomas and his mother had been killed on the first impact, because by the time the car stopped and people were able to approach it, they were already dead. Other witnesses later came forth to say they saw a dark-colored sedan chasing Mrs. DeSantis.

“An ongoing investigation was in progress. Charles DeSantis, the estranged husband, could not be reached at this time for comment.”

Kate found it difficult to breathe. It felt as if she had a fifty-pound weight sitting on her chest. As the tears streamed from her eyes, she couldn't help but feel that the elder DeSantis had something to do with the chase. He had mentioned at the meeting that he had hired investigators to find his wife.

Obviously, Wendy DeSantis was determined not to return at any cost. She ended up paying the ultimate price. Why? Had Charles DeSantis been physically abusive? Oh, what difference did any of it make now? Thomas and his mother were dead.

Peter came home and found Kate sitting at the kitchen table, red-eyed and surrounded by crumpled tissues.

"What's wrong, sweetheart? Your parents okay?" he asked, enfolding her in his arms.

"Thomas...he and his mother are dead. Killed in a car crash," she said, as fresh tears began to well in her eyes.

"What happened?"

"It was on the six-o'clock news. Someone was chasing them; they hit a guard rail and spun in the air."

"Do they know who was chasing them?"

"No. But I think it might have been the investigator that Mr. DeSantis had hired to find them," she said, sniffing.

"Poor kid. He never had a chance. It's a shame," Peter said.

"Oh, God! I forgot about dinner."

"It's okay. I'll call something in. Maybe you'll feel hungry by the time it arrives and have something to eat too," he said, kissing the top of her head. "Go take a couple of aspirin and lie down. I'll clean up the kitchen."

"Thank you, sweetheart," Kate said, and went to follow his advice.

When Peter went to check on Kate thirty minutes later, he found her sleeping. Figuring she needed the rest, he left her and went to eat his pizza by himself.

* * * *

The following day Mr. Wainwright called Kate into his office. She could tell he was just as disturbed by the

entire incident as she.

“You look like you had a rough night, Kate.”

“The news hit me like a ton of bricks. I never expected something as horrific as this.”

“It was quite a shock. I knew whatever Mr. DeSantis was doing wouldn’t have a positive effect on Thomas, but such a tragic accident...” he said, shaking his head.

Kate had never known Mr. Wainwright to show much emotion. He was close to retirement age with a head full of wiry, white hair. What he was expressing today was the most she had seen in all the years she’d worked under him.

“We’ll send the proper condolences to the family.” Then, suddenly in an emotional voice he asked, “Why do the children have to suffer for the parents’ failings? I should be used to it by now, and yet, I find I still can’t accept it.”

“I have the same unanswered questions. I doubt if anyone can explain them.”

“You better get back to class before your students come back. Thanks for stopping by.”

“Thank you,” Kate said as she turned to leave. She couldn’t help wondering why death had to be so final.

Chapter 10

Summer was almost at an end. It would soon be autumn again and a year had gone by since Kate had first met Peter. Because she had met him in autumn, that season would always hold a special place in her heart. She would forever associate the changing of the leaves to bright, vivid oranges and reds with the wonderful change in her life that brought her Peter. But deep down inside she still harbored a terrible, irrational fear that like the trees that eventually would lose their withered leaves, she might lose Peter.

Peter had become the sun in her life and she orbited around him like a moon. She couldn't imagine a day without him, let alone a lifetime. She felt as if he was her destiny and she had been put on this earth just to be with him. She knew how corny and clichéd it sounded, but as far as she was concerned, it was true and her heart believed every word.

* * * *

One September afternoon Kate brought in the mail. She sorted through the normal pile of bills, ads and other garbage mail. But there were a few important looking envelopes addressed to Peter. She noticed some had company logos in the corner. They were undoubtedly replies to his resumes.

Tempted as she was to open them up, she didn't. She knew Peter wouldn't mind, especially if they were important and she called to tell him about them. But she still felt it was his place to open his own mail. She was funny that way. Her curiosity could wait a few more hours until he got home.

Sitting down with coffee after dinner, Peter looked through his mail. She watched as a smile began to spread across his handsome face and she immediately knew it had to be one of the companies he had hoped to hear from.

"This could be the one, Kate. It's one of the biggest corporations in Phoenix."

"As in Arizona?"

"Yup! That be the place," he said teasingly.

"Have you ever been to Arizona?"

"No. But it's got three things I love, not counting you, of course."

"Like what?"

"Cactus, palm trees, and warmth all year round."

"What if it's too warm? I've heard the temperature can reach one hundred and twenty or more during the summer months."

"I'll learn to deal with it or move on. Nothing is written in stone...except my love for you."

"Arizona. Sounds...nice."

"You don't sound too sure."

"It's a big jump. About twenty-five hundred miles or so."

"But what would be holding you back? Just your job, right? You're a good teacher. Good teachers are needed everywhere. You could always get another job in Arizona. But, hey, aren't we jumping the gun, just a teeny little bit? I mean, I haven't even gone on the interview yet. It may not even be

what I'm looking for."

"You're right. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Glancing at his watch, Peter said, "I might still be able to get in touch with them today. There's a three hour difference."

As Kate watched him call, she picked up the letter he had just read from a company called MSS Technologies. They seemed very interested in his qualifications and wanted to speak to him as soon as possible. They felt confident that Peter would find what they had to offer more than satisfactory. There were a few other offers from different companies. Kate guessed he didn't find them as impressive as MSS Technologies.

It was so amazing, Kate thought, as she watched Peter's face. It was such an open book. She could always tell what he was thinking by merely looking at him. She watched the joy and excitement animate his features, making him look like a little boy at Christmas.

Peter was on the phone for quite a while. When he finally hung up and approached Kate, he looked as if he had just received a ticket to heaven. As much as she really didn't want him to go and leave her, Kate wouldn't put a damper on his happiness.

"I spoke to the Human Resources manager. It sounds like a really great job offer, exactly what I'm looking for, hon. I just have to make travel arrangements and I'm off. It's too late to catch a travel agent tonight, so I'll have to wait for tomorrow. I want them to reserve a rental car for me, also, so I can drive around Phoenix and see what's there. Maybe I'll check out the apartments too."

“That’s a good idea.”

“MSS will reserve a room for me at the Hampton Inn right near the airport. I just have to tell them when I’m flying out. I wish you could go with me.”

“No. I hate taking off for more than a day without letting the school know in advance so they can get a decent sub. Besides, you’ll probably be so busy, you won’t have any time for me.”

“You’re probably right. I’ll only be gone two or three days at the most. I’ll be back before you even notice I’m gone.”

Kate got up and put her arms around Peter’s neck.

“Uh-uh, I’ll miss you right away,” she said, bending down to kiss his cheek.

He pulled her down into his lap and kissed her lips. “Good. They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

Kate kissed him back. “I doubt if my heart is capable of growing any fonder...without exploding.”

“Very funny, lady,” he said as he got up and carried Kate into the bedroom.

As Peter began to make love to her, Kate soon forgot all her misgivings and worries. The only things she could think about or feel were the sensations caused by his loving lips and hands.

Chapter 11

The next day Peter made airline reservations. He would be flying out of La Guardia on American Airlines Wednesday morning. It was at twenty past seven in the morning so Kate would be able to take him and still get to school on time. It meant getting up at an hour unfit for people who enjoyed sleeping, but Kate didn't mind. She wanted to drive him and say goodbye at the airport, despite his wanting to take a car service so she could sleep. As silly as it may have sounded, Kate felt if she drove, it would be less time that they would be apart.

After a brief stopover at Chicago, O'Hare Airport, he'd finally arrive in Phoenix at half past twelve New York time. Peter promised he'd call from Sky Harbor Airport when he arrived. With the three-hour time difference, Kate should be home by then to receive the call.

Since Peter had taken the day off he had plenty of time to prepare for the trip. He was all packed and ready to go by the time she came home from school. He had written out his itinerary and left it for Kate by the telephone. He would be coming home Friday at twenty to four in the afternoon New York time. Kate noticed that he had circled his interview on

Thursday morning at eleven o'clock in red.

"Let's go out for dinner, Kate."

"All right. Your choice."

"Umm, on second thought, let's call something in."

"Okay. Still your choice."

"How hungry are you?"

"Not much. Mark and I went out with a few other teachers for lunch today to celebrate Irene Delano's engagement."

"How about pizza?"

"Fine."

Peter called in the order for the pizza and within a half-hour they were eating a half-mushroom, half-meatball pie. He was very talkative. It must have been the excitement of the forthcoming interview. Kate realized how much the job meant to him and hoped it would turn out to be everything he wanted. She knew he was more than qualified and that one look at that gorgeous hunk of a man, they'd want him in a heartbeat. Especially if the interviewer was a woman. Maybe she was a little prejudiced, so sue her.

They made it an early night since they had to get Peter to the airport at least an hour and a half before his flight's departure.

Snuggling in bed, she tried not to think about his leaving in the morning. But her mind betrayed her and kept focusing on it. Despite all her efforts to prevent tears, they slowly slid down her face onto Peter's arm.

"Hey, you are going to miss me, aren't you?"

Too choked up to say anything, Kate merely nodded.

"I'm coming right back. Nothing short of death can keep me away from you. You know that, don't you?" he said as he gently kissed her.

Kate found her voice and said, "I know. It's just this crazy fear I have of losing things I love. Don't mind me. I'll be all right."

"This is for us, Kate. The faster I land a good job, the faster we can marry and start a family."

"I know. Just hold me, Peter."

Eventually a dreamless sleep overtook Kate and before long it was time to get up and take Peter to the airport.

* * * *

Peter's flight left on time. Kate had less control of her tears than she did the night before. She kissed and hugged him goodbye. She wasn't very good at good-byes—not that he was either.

Reluctantly she pulled herself away to leave the airport. She turned one last time to catch a glimpse of his back as he walked through the gate. Wiping the last of her tears away, she headed towards her car parked in the short-term parking lot.

* * * *

The rest of the day dragged. Even the kids in her class were restless. She had lunch with Mark, but picked at it. He knew that Peter had left that morning for an interview and tried to cheer Kate up. But even his antics didn't help. He offered to come over to keep her company that night, but she wanted to be alone. Mark's last thought as he said goodbye to her was how he wished she could love him as much as she did Peter.

Chapter 12

Peewee Boyd had gotten up twenty-five hundred miles away in Phoenix with a throbbing headache. He had endured his last embarrassment and cringed under the weight of the last insult hurled at him the evening before. Today he'd show them all. They'd have to find someone else to pick on because he had had enough. He was leaving and doubted he'd ever be back.

Peewee didn't get the nickname because of his size. He was average height for a man at five feet ten inches. In fact, everything about him was average, except his mental capacities. He was a pint low as most would put it. Some said it was because he was the runt of the litter, being the last of nine kids and got the least of everything.

Whatever the case, Peewee was the one everyone had teased and made fun of for thirty-one of his thirty-two years. The first year he had been given the benefit of doubt.

Well, he had just about had it. He was tired of being the butt of every damn joke and would show them all real good.

* * * *

Kate got stuck in traffic and feared she'd miss Peter's call. Luckily the phone was still ringing as she

opened the door to the apartment.

"Hello," she breathlessly said, after having clumsily dropped the receiver.

"Hello, babe, it's me. What did you do, jog home?"

"Oh, darling, it's so good to hear your voice. I got stuck in traffic and almost missed your call."

"I'm glad you didn't. It's good to hear your voice, too. I just wanted to let you know that I arrived safely. I'm going to pick up my car rental and head out for the hotel. I'll call you tomorrow at six your time to let you know how the interview went."

"Good luck, Peter, though I know they'll want you the minute they see you."

"Not too biased, are we?"

"Not when it comes to you."

Peter laughed and said, "Love you."

"Love you, more. Drive safely."

"Bye."

"Bye, Peter."

* * * *

Peewee decided to head for Texas. He was sure he'd make it big there. He'd find himself a woman and a job, the order of which mattered little. The only thing that kept him from following his dream was a set of wheels. Peewee didn't own a car. Since he couldn't afford one, he'd have to steal it. His friends did it all the time when they needed fresh wheels. He couldn't figure out how to hotwire one, so he'd have to car jack one. How hard could it be? He had a gun and he knew how to use it. Besides, how many people would argue with a man pointing a gun at them?

Now that Peewee had decided how to get his wheels, he

had to figure out the best place to get them. While sitting in his tin-can of a trailer, slaking his thirst with a beer, a car rental commercial came on the TV. It took a few moments, but eventually his mind made the connection. A crooked grin spread across Peewee's freckled face as he got up and shut off the TV. He grabbed his gun and slammed the trailer door behind him.

* * * *

That night lying in bed, Kate missed the closeness of Peter who liked to cuddle. When they had first started sleeping together, she would joke that he was like a security blanket because he liked to cuddle so much. Thinking about Peter, she eventually dozed off into a restless sleep.

She began to dream. She was standing on the sidewalk of a busy city street when she witnessed a car accident. She could see the flames shooting into the air, but she couldn't see who was driving. The nightmare was so vivid, so real, that she woke up drenched in her own sweat, gasping for breath. Fearing that it was some kind of a premonition, she began to tremble. She only prayed it was somehow connected to her irrational anxieties that often plagued her and nothing more. Despite her attempts to reassure herself of this, Kate couldn't sleep a wink after the nightmare, and she tossed and turned until it was time to get out of bed.

* * * *

Peewee hitched a ride to the strip near the Sky-Harbor Airport where most of the car rental companies were located. Remembering the Dollar Rental commercial, he hung out there and waited for an easy mark.

He watched as a tan car pulled away from the parking lot and head toward the exit to be checked out by a guard. The

car then went about three hundred yards or so and pulled over to the side. It looked like the man had pulled out a map and was studying it.

Peewee smiled and headed over to the car. He knocked on the driver's side window. The man rolled the window down to ask what Peewee wanted.

Still smiling, Peewee said he needed a ride. Before Peter could react, the stranger had pointed a gun in his face and was in his car.

"If you want to see the sunrise tomorrow, you'll just drive," the stranger said in a menacing voice.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Just drive. Are you deaf, man?"

Even though Peter was being cooperative, Peewee had taken an instant dislike to the handsome man sitting next to him. He'd wager that he never was made fun of.

Peewee decided to show him who was the better man. He would kill him.

Peter was afraid. He had no idea what the guy with the crooked smile was capable of doing. He certainly didn't want to upset him, so he did his best to cooperate. And yet, he wondered what the man was after. If the man had meant him no harm, he could have just taken his money and the car in the beginning. Instead, the man was making him drive to a desolate area.

Peter felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He realized that he was going to have to do something soon, before he was told to stop the car.

"Stop the car."

Too late, Peter thought, though he knew he had to do something. He stopped the car. There was no room to ma-

never in the car. He got out. The stranger slid out after him, the gun still aimed at Peter's head.

Suddenly Peter pivoted and turned into the other man, knocking the gun from his hand. The element of surprise was still on Peter's side and he slugged the guy in his gut. The man doubled over and Peter hit him again, knocking him to the ground. On instinct, Peter charged for the car. He opened the car door and was about to jump inside when he heard a noise. Almost simultaneously he felt a jolting pain on the side of his head which knocked him to his knees. The second shot hit him in his back. Then the world around him suddenly went dark.

"Thought you'd outsmart ole Peewee, did you? Well, I certainly showed you," Peewee said, dragging Peter's body to the side of a ravine and letting it drop. No-one would find the man for days or even weeks. By then, Peewee would be long-gone in Texas.

He felt great. The last time he felt this way was when he did Mabel in her beat-up Chevy. Getting back into the car, Peewee sped back to Mesa to collect the stuff he was taking to Texas.

Only Peewee never made it to Texas. He was going at an excessive speed when a motor cyclist cut him off. He had to swerve sharply to avoid hitting him, but ended up directly in the path of an oil tanker. The brakes on the truck locked and it slammed into the car Peewee was driving, creating an inferno.

Chapter 13

The next day Kate still felt the awful effects of the night before. She couldn't wait to hear from Peter and put the nightmare to rest. Despite all her attempts at bravado, Kate looked forward to that six o'clock call with a sense of desperation. She needed to hear Peter's voice to chase away all her lingering negative emotions and nagging fears.

There were no last-minute conferences or traffic to keep her from getting home. She arrived there with time to spare. Nothing stood in the way of her receiving that call.

Only, the call never came. Stunned, Kate waited for an agonizing hour. Then she called his cell. It went directly into his voice mail. She left a message, figuring that Peter might have gotten stuck at an interview or forgotten the time.

She waited a little longer and called his cell once more. Still no answer and no word. This was so unlike him. He always found a way to call when he said he would. She had never known a more considerate man. Something terrible had happened to Peter! She just knew it!

Already her hands were shaking from the mixture of caffeine and fear. She fought the impulse to scream as her heart thudded against her chest in time with the developing throb in her head.

She grabbed the sheet of paper Peter had left with his itinerary on it and found the telephone number listing for the Hampton Inn. She commanded her shaking hand to key in the number.

“Hampton Inn, how may I help you?”

“I’d like to speak to Peter Saunders, please.”

“One moment, please.” There was a momentary pause before the pleasant-sounding man came back on the line. “We had booked a room for a Mr. Saunders, but he never checked in.”

“Are you certain?” Kate could hear the panic rising in her own voice. “I mean, there can’t be any mistake?”

“No, ma’am, I’m afraid not. Perhaps the gentleman is staying at another hotel. Is there anything else I can help you with today?”

“No...no thank you.”

By the time Kate had replaced the receiver in its cradle, her tears were falling. Every breath she took had become a labor. Where was Peter? What could have happened? She recalled the last things he had said to her when he had called from the airport. He had mentioned that he was on his way to pick up the rented car. Then he was heading to the hotel to check in. Something had to have happened after he left the airport and went to get the car.

Kate realized that she couldn’t let herself fall apart. She had to keep her mind clear. Becoming irrational would be counterproductive especially when time was a big factor. She had lost too much precious time already. She went to the sink and splashed cold water on her face. Then she made a new pot of coffee which she knew she shouldn’t have. There was probably more caffeine flowing through her veins at this point than

blood, but she needed something to give her hands to do. The constant flow of the warm liquid might also warm the icy feeling that was gripping her heart.

Peter had listed the number of Dollar Rental. Kate again willed herself to call. A woman with a strong southwestern accent answered.

“Dollar Car Rental, Donna speaking.”

“Hello, I wonder if you can help me. My fiancé was supposed to have picked up a car yesterday. Can you let me know if he did?”

“What’s his name?”

“Peter Saunders.”

Kate heard the clicking of nails against a keyboard. A moment or two later, Donna got back on the phone. “According to our files, he did and still has it.”

“Thank you, Donna.”

“Is there anything else I can help y’all with?”

“No, thank you.”

“Well, then, when y’all need a car, y’all call back now.”

“I will, thank you.”

Kate held the disconnected phone in her hand. He picked up the car and still has it. So where did he go from the car rental? Glancing down at Peter’s itinerary sheet once more, Kate dialed the number for MSS Technologies. Maybe she could still get a hold of the Human Resources Manager.

“MSS Technologies.”

“Human resources, please.”

“One moment.”

Kate was connected immediately to a woman with a lovely voice.

“Carolyn James. May I help you?”

"I certainly hope you can. My name is Kate Douglas. I'm...a close friend of Peter Saunders..."

"You know, the strangest thing... He called from the airport when he arrived yesterday, but he never showed up for his interview at eleven this morning. I became worried and called the hotel he was staying at, only to discover that he never checked in. I haven't heard from him. Has he called you?"

"No. He was so excited about this interview. Oh, God! Now I know something terrible has happened to him," Kate said between sobs, no longer able to control her emotions.

"Ms. Douglas, give me your telephone number in case we do hear from him."

"It's the same number listed on his resume."

"I see... Well then, I have some local telephone numbers you may want to have if you're going to try and locate him. Do you have a pen handy?"

"Yes, go ahead," Kate said, regaining some composure.

Kate was given the telephone number of the Phoenix Police Department and all the surrounding hospitals.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No. You've been more than helpful. Thank you for all your time and trouble."

"I hope you find your Mr. Saunders safe and sound. He sounded like a very nice man on the phone."

"He's a wonderful guy...and I'm a very lucky woman," Kate said as a fresh crop of tears stung her eyes. Trying to control the sobs in her voice, she added, "Thanks again for your help," and hung up.

Kate let herself go and cried for a few minutes before she attempted to pull herself together again. Grabbing a fresh box

of tissues, she daubed at her eyes and blew her nose. Then she poured her umpteenth cup of coffee and dialed the Phoenix Police.

“Sgt. Dennison, how may I help you?”

“My name is Kate Douglas. I’m calling from New York”. Making their relationship more official, she said, “My fiancé flew to Phoenix yesterday and seems to have disappeared. He never checked into the room that had been reserved for him at the Hampton Inn nor showed for his eleven o’clock appointment at MSS Technologies this morning.”

“What is his name? Age? Approximate height and weight?”

“Peter Saunders. Twenty-nine. Six-foot-four and approximately two-hundred and twenty pounds.”

“It’s Ms. Douglas, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Ms. Douglas, is it possible that your Mr. Saunders may not want to be found?”

“No. Peter was very excited about the interview and the possibility of relocating in Arizona. We were very happy.”

“Do you know for certain that he actually arrived here?”

“He called me from the airport to let me know that he arrived safely.”

“Around what time was this?”

“Quarter to one your time, yesterday afternoon.”

“And you say he had an interview scheduled for eleven o’clock this morning over at MSS Technologies. Do you know if he ever got in touch with them?”

“He did. I spoke to the Human Resource Manager, a Ms. Jones, who personally had a conversation with Peter when he contacted her from the airport.”

"Did Peter happen to mention to you where he was heading after he left the airport?"

"As a matter of fact, he did. He was going to pick up a car at Dollar Rental. I called and found out that he picked up the car and hasn't returned it."

"Do you have access to a fax machine?"

"Would you like me to fax you a recent photo of Peter?"

"The sooner the better."

"Sgt?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think he might have been involved in a car accident? Or a mugging? Do you have a high rate of muggings in Phoenix?"

"Ms. Douglas, I realize this is difficult for you, but as soon as I have any information, I will call you. I give you my word."

Kate gave Sgt. Dennison her home phone number as well as the school's with the instructions to call her any time, night or day.

After hanging up the phone, a terrible thought occurred to Kate. What if her nightmare had been a form of precognition? Had her subconscious sensed something was going to happen to Peter? This would explain the irrational fear she had of losing him days before he left. *Everything would make sense, if I were psychic. But I'm no more psychic than a crooked medium*, she decided. *I can't let myself assume the worst. I must believe that Peter is all right.* There must be a logical explanation for everything, she concluded, squeezing her eyes shut as if to close out all negative thoughts.

Kate got up and washed her face once more. The cold water felt good. Sitting and crying wasn't going to help find Peter. She had things to do.

She went to get her photo album. Fresh tears began to fall as she began to look through the pictures of Peter. His handsome, smiling face seemed to beckon to her. The most recent one had been taken upstate two weeks before.

It had been a glorious Sunday afternoon and the leaves on the trees had begun to change color. They went apple picking and rolled in the leaves and... *Oh, Peter, come back to me*, she begged as she lowered her head on the table and cried.

* * * *

The discordant ringing of the telephone roused Kate from her misery and she ran for the phone. Breathlessly, she asked, "Yes?"

"Ms. Douglas, I'm calling from the A-One Construction Company..."

"Don't you people ever give up?" Kate said and slammed the phone down. Moments later she realized how rude she'd been, but the damage was done.

Kate faxed the picture of Peter to Sgt. Dennison, praying he'd find Peter. She suddenly felt an inner chill that seemed to rise from the very depths of her being. Hugging her shoulders, she felt so lost and alone. She began to aimlessly walk from room to room until she eventually tired and collapsed into a living room chair. She couldn't sit still and not do something. There must be something she could do. She could almost hear the precious time ticking away.

I'll fly to Phoenix, she thought. *But what then? Where does one begin searching for a person? Not knowing what I was doing, I'd probably just get in the way and impede the investigation. No, going out there would be the worst thing for me to do. I'll leave the search to the police, who are trained professionals. But, I've got to do something or else I'll lose my mind.*

Kate began to call every hospital in Phoenix and the surrounding areas. Then she began calling the morgues. No one had heard of a Peter Saunders. At least he's not hurt or dead. That's a good sign, she reasoned.

Finally the pounding in her head was beginning to get to her. She had to take some aspirin and lie down.

* * * *

Sometime during the night, Kate cried herself to sleep. She was jarred from that fitful sleep by the persistent ringing of the phone. Yawning, she reached for the phone.

"Hello, Ms. Douglas?"

The cobwebs of sleep were immediately blown away when Kate recognized the voice of Sgt. Dennison. She glanced at the clock sitting on the night stand by her bed. It read seven-fifteen. That would have made it four-fifteen in the morning in Arizona. When did that man sleep?

Totally wide awake and realizing her entire world turned on the answer to her next question, Kate said, "Yes, hello, Sergeant. Have you any news of Peter?"

Chapter 14

“Yes...” Sergeant Dennison replied.

The tone in his voice and his hesitancy unnerved her. She wasn’t certain she was prepared to hear what he had to say. “It’s not good, is it?”

“No. I’m afraid not.”

“Tell me...please!”

“The car he was driving collided with a gasoline truck. Both vehicles exploded in a blazing inferno. Neither driver survived. I’m terribly sorry.”

“Are you certain it was Peter?”

“Both bodies were burned beyond recognition but we’re definitely positive that the car involved was the one Peter had rented from Dollar.”

“I appreciate you calling me so quickly with the news,” Kate said, with a voice so choked with emotion, even a man like the Sergeant, so hardened by crime, felt tears sting his eyes.

“Look, Ms. Douglas, I realize that this is probably the furthest thing from your mind at the moment but it is important. As soon as you have decided, please let us know where you want us to send the remains.”

“Thank you, Sergeant for all your help,” she said as best she could. “I’ll let you know as soon as I make the necessary arrangements. Goodbye.”

“You have our department’s sincerest condolences. Goodbye.”

Kate dropped the phone and cried out, “No, dear God, no! Not Peter! How could you have taken him from me? Why? Peter! Peter!” she cried aloud, beating her pillow, until she exhausted herself.

Her brain was screaming Peter was dead, but her heart wasn’t ready to accept it. How could it? Peter was her soul mate, her reason for living. How could she possibly go on without him? The Sergeant’s words, “Let us know where you want us to send the remains,” kept echoing over and over in her mind. There was no way she could imagine her Peter reduced to ash. Sergeant Dennison had to have made a mistake.

The thought of not being able to see or touch Peter ever again was alien to her very being. She definitely wasn’t ready to accept it. Would she ever? Nor could she understand how he could be gone from her life just like that. She had no idea how she’d go on or if she even wanted to. She had no idea what to do now. She had to tell Mark. He’d know what to do. He always knew what to do.

* * * *

Kate blew her nose and dialed Mark’s number.

“Hello, this better be an important call. If you’re a solicitor, and you value your life, hang up now.”

“Mark...”

“Kate? Kate, what’s the matter?”

“Peter...it’s Peter. He’s dead,” she said and began to unravel.

“How?”

“He’s dead; he’s dead,” she half-whined, half-sobbed, mewling like a wounded animal.

“Kate, I’ll be there in a few minutes. Hang on baby.”

Mark could hardly understand her, but it was obvious that she needed him. Her tone frightened him. Fearing she might do something to hurt herself, he threw on some sweats and jumped into the car.

He only lived ten minutes away, but that short time felt like an hour. As he drove, he wondered what had happened to Peter. Regardless, nothing could bring him back. He had to take care of Kate now and help her through this dark time. Her pain was his pain and he would be more than just a shoulder to cry on.

He used the key that Kate had given him. They had exchanged apartment keys years ago to look after each other’s plants and mail during vacations.

“Kate! I’m here,” he called.

His heart dropped when she didn’t reply. He rushed into the bedroom and found her lying across her bed, sobbing. Clad in only a tee shirt and panties, she looked like a little girl, but still had the power to turn his insides to mush.

“Oh, Mark...” She began to wail when he took her into his arms.

“Shhh, baby, it will be all right. I’m here.”

“I loved him so.”

“I know, baby, I know,” he said, kissing the top of her head.

He held her tight and rocked her gently until her sobbing abated. Seeing her this way was killing him.

“Would you like some coffee, Kate?”

She nodded.

"I'll go make us some. Be right back."

By the time Mark had the coffee maker going, Kate had thrown a robe on and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Tell me what happened, Kate?"

"He was killed in a car accident in Phoenix. I wish I'd been with him. What will I do now?"

"Knowing what I do about Peter, I'm sure he'd want you to move on eventually."

"To what? He was my reason for being."

"I doubt that Peter would want you to fall apart."

"I know, but I can't even accept the fact he's gone. What am I going to do without him?"

"You're going to heal and go on. The alternative sucks."

Kate shook her head. "Not from here, it doesn't."

Mark got up and put his arms around her and gave her a gentle hug.

"You're not alone, Kate. I'm here with you and will help you get through all the hurt and pain. Lean on me."

After giving out a huge sigh, she whispered, "What would I do without you?"

"Probably nothing," he said and kissed her tear-stained cheek before he got up to get two mugs of coffee.

"My God, what I must look like!" Kate said, realizing she must look a disaster.

"Bringing that up is a good sign, even though you'd look gorgeous to me, no matter what."

"The last time I spoke to Peter was when he first arrived in Phoenix. When he didn't call me at the time he said he would last night, I knew in my heart that something was wrong. I called the hotel where he was staying at only to be told that he'd never checked in. I called the police... They no-

tified me early this morning that Peter had been involved in a fatal accident with a gasoline truck. Now they want to know where to send the remains,” she said and broke down into sobs once more.

Mark got up and pulled Kate into his arms so he could hold her while she cried. His heart was aching for her. Seeing her this way was almost too much for him to bear. He knew her display of emotion was for another. What he would give if only she could love him as much.

After her sobbing abated, Mark suggested, “Maybe you’d feel better if you took a hot bath, Kate.”

“That sounds like a great idea. I think I’ll go run the water.”

Mark released Kate from his arms and held her at arm’s distance. “I want you to remember one thing, Kate. No matter what, I’m *always* going to be here for you. Okay?”

“Yes. Thank you. You are such a dear man.”

Kate kissed him, picked up a fresh mug of coffee, and disappeared into the bathroom. A moment later, Mark heard the water running. He was a little nervous about her being alone in the bathroom for long, so he decided to give her fifteen minutes before checking on her.

Sitting in the living room with a mug of coffee, Mark attempted to pay attention to the television. It felt like the longest fifteen minutes of his life. He put the mug down and went to the bathroom and called out Kate’s name. Getting no answer, he panicked and rapped sharply on the door. He was ready to rush in when he heard her answer him.

“Are you all right, Kate?”

“Yes. I must have dozed off. The water’s cooled, so I’ll be out in a minute.”

Relieved Mark said, "Okay," and returned to the living room to wait for her.

Ten minutes later, Kate walked into the living room dressed in sweats. She had brushed her hair and tied it back into a ponytail, making her look years younger.

"Feeling a little better?"

"I guess. If nothing else, I'm cleaner. If you hadn't checked on me, I'd have shriveled up into a prune."

"There's more coffee, if you'd like."

"Oh, Mark, what do I do now?"

"First off, I think we should plan a funeral or some type of memorial service for Peter. Did he have any family?"

"No. There's very few people to notify, only some friends and acquaintances."

"We could hold a memorial service at...what's that place called up the road a ways?"

"Cooke's Funeral Home?"

"Yeah, that's the one. What do you think?"

"That's fine."

"Good. Would you like me to call the Phoenix Police department and give them Cooke's address and find out how long it will take for them to send Peter's remains?"

"No. I already have a rapport with them, so I'll do it."

Mark noticed Kate shudder. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

"Okay. I'll call Cooke's and get things rolling. As soon as you find out how long it will take Phoenix, I'll set up a date."

A fresh crop of tears spilled out of Kate's eyes. Mark opened his arms and she nestled inside, laying her head on his chest. He kissed the top of her head and rubbed her shoulder. All he wanted was to make her pain go away. She tilted her

head and he kissed the tip of her nose. She looked so miserable. He wanted to hold her in his arms forever. He had loved her for years and now here she was in his arms, only, it was for all the wrong reasons. He kept kissing her hair and then her face, over and over again. Impulsively he kissed her lips. They were warm and inviting. To his surprise, she returned his kiss.

Mark could hardly contain himself. All the bottled up feelings began to escape with a force he could hardly control. What complicated everything was the fact that Kate was responding. He was losing all sense of reason.

He kissed her face, her eyes, her lips, again and again. He felt as if he was on fire and only Kate could squelch the flames. Her kisses were as exciting as he had always expected. He was losing himself in her.

For the moment Kate was safe and warm in Mark's arms. She needed to be held and comforted. Her mind had shut down and her body was running on pure instinct. She moaned as Mark's lips slid down her neck.

Mark slipped his hand inside her terry robe and found a firm breast. He could feel the nipple firming into a tight bead at his touch. Another soft moan came from Kate's lips. As he bent down to kiss the breast, he felt her body tremble.

His resolve all but gone, he lifted Kate and carried her into the bedroom and put her gently on the bed. He quickly shucked off his sweats and lay down next to her. All his senses suddenly seemed heightened. The fresh scent of her bath soap had become a perfume arising from her fair silky skin. The quickening of her breathing excited him further. Now all he could think about was tasting her. He could hear the beating of his own heart and wondered if she could hear it too. Cer-

tainly, she merely had to glance at him to tell how lost he was. Though, he doubted she'd even notice, for she seemed just as lost.

But what was more miraculous to him was the fact that Kate was responding to him. She acted as if she wanted him as much as he desired her. He knew this was because of the emotional turmoil she was in, but did not want to dwell on it. He didn't want to consider whether it was right or wrong. This was the moment he had longed for all these years. This was his moment to prove to her how much he loved her. He wanted this to be wonderful for her.

Mark paid homage to each of her quivering breasts. Licking and gently teething each rosy nipple, he watched it darken and harden. A new shudder racked through her. Leaving a trail of butterfly kisses, he traveled down towards the nub of her sex. Kate grabbed onto the sheets, writhing in pleasure. She opened her legs giving Mark more access. Within moments spasm after spasm overtook her.

Not being able to control himself any longer, Mark entered Kate. He moved slowly at first in order to rekindle the embers of Kate's desire. Surprisingly, she began to move with more urgency, wrapping her legs around his waist so each thrust would be deeper. That was too much for him to bear and he exploded, deep inside her.

He knew loving her would be wonderful and he wasn't disappointed. If she could only love him, his life would be complete. He didn't kid himself. This was probably a one-shot thing. It was too soon for Kate to make rational decisions about her life. But like always, he would be there to patiently wait it out.

He kissed her. Her face was wet with tears. Did she al-

ready regret what they had just done? He felt guilty, but she seemed to need it...if only out of comfort. Kate said nothing and seemed to drift off to sleep.

* * * *

But Kate did regret what had happened when she realized what she had done, just before sleep overtook her during that moment of twilight when everything always seemed so crystal clear. How could she betray Peter and go to bed with another man? His ashes weren't even cold. She had acted like a whore. How could she? What must Mark think of her? And what had she done to their friendship? But, no, she didn't want to talk about it now. She was much too tired.

Holding Kate, who had fallen asleep, Mark soon drifted off into his own dream world.

Chapter 15

Mark had awakened long before Kate, but allowed her to continue sleeping. If it were up to him, he'd never release her. Not wanting to stir, he drifted off to sleep once more.

Kate finally opened her eyes and took in her surroundings. Seeing herself in bed with Mark brought back all the guilt and self-loathing she had felt before sleep had overtaken her. She got up with a start. Then realizing her nakedness, she drew the sheet closer around her.

Mark said nothing. He waited for her to speak, fearing what she might say. Kate could hardly look at him. She still couldn't believe what had happened between them.

Yet it obviously had and it couldn't be erased.

"Mark...how...how did this happen? How could we?"

"You needed the comfort...I was here."

"Comfort? Is that what it's called now?"

"You're making it sound sordid."

"Well, isn't it? Peter isn't even buried yet... And, oh...dear, what you must think of me..."

"I don't think any less of you. If anything, I love you more. Perhaps, had I been a stronger-willed man, I could have backed off. But I couldn't help myself...seeing you like

that...loving you for so long. My, God, Kate, I'm still a man. I'm only human."

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have put you in such a compromising position."

"Kate, no matter what you think, it was a beautiful thing. You have no idea how long I dreamed of making love to you. I could die today and go to heaven."

"But...Mark...I..."

"You needed to be held and loved. I was there. End of story. We'll never mention it again if it hurts you."

"It not just that. What about us? We were friends. What about our friendship?"

"We're still friends. Nothing can ever change that. I once told you I'd always be there for you. I meant every word."

Kate began to cry and Mark held her. "Kate, I know how much you loved Peter, but he's gone now. And from what I know of him, it's obvious that he'd want you to go on with your life."

"I'll never love another man the way I loved Peter. He was my heart and soul, my reason for living."

"You feel that way now, but in time you may feel differently. You need time to heal. But in the process, if you need a shoulder to cry on, I'll be there...always."

"Oh, Mark," was all she said before her tears began to fall again.

Mark hugged her close to him and kissed the top of her head.

* * * *

Mark helped Kate plan a simple memorial for Peter. The remains were shipped to Cookes from Arizona with a note of sympathy from Sergeant Dennison. Kate decided to have Pe-

ter's remains buried instead of retained in an urn. The thought of keeping someone's ashes on a mantle place seemed somewhat ghoulish to her.

The day of the funeral, Mark picked up Kate and drove her to Cookes Funeral Home. It was a lovely ceremony. There was hardly a dry eye in the place. Even though Kate had thought she was all cried out, her tears kept flowing. No, she doubted if she'd ever get over Peter.

Chapter 16

The desert heat was stifling as it beat down on his throbbing head. Peter had no idea where he was or how he got there. He only knew he had to keep going. To stop would mean certain death. And he knew he didn't want to die. So he clawed his way out of the ravine in which he had waked, inch by inch with the bloody-stumps of his fingers, until he made his way to the road.

The blood from his head wound had finally congealed, but the sweat dripped into his eyes, stinging them. Attempting to wipe them with bleeding hands was next to useless. All he knew was that he had to keep going and tried to ignore the fact that every part of his body burned with agony.

He heard voices. They seemed to fade in and out. Were they merely in his head? Or were they real? No they were real and they were coming towards him. He tried to raise his body, but it was like a gelatinous mass. Two men on bicycles approached him. He tried to raise an arm.

"Mac, that guy looks hurt, really bad."

"I'll call for an ambulance," the other bicyclist said, whipping out a cellular phone.

The man called Mac was already trying to make Peter

more comfortable. Seeing he was conscious, he asked him his name.

But Peter didn't hear him, for he'd lost consciousness again.

"What do you think happened to him?" the other guy asked.

"God only knows," Mac said.

"I wonder how he got here? I didn't see a car."

"Someone probably dumped him. I only hope the medics get here in time."

Chapter 17

Kate had gone back to school after taking a couple of weeks off to try and heal her shattered heart. She flew to Washington to visit her sister, Joan, and her family. It turned out to be good therapy to be with them. Joan's twin five-year-old boys ran her ragged, but she loved every second of the delightful torture.

Joan had married her childhood sweetheart. Paul always knew he wanted to be an airline pilot. He had taken lessons from the moment he was allowed to fly and had logged hundreds of flying hours by the time he applied for a job with American Airlines after graduating from high school.

Kate knew that her parents had wanted Joan to go to college and have a profession to fall back on in case she needed to support herself, but they kept their silence when she decided not to go and took a job in a local department store. It wouldn't have mattered much, anyway, for two years later she was married and living in Chicago.

Joan wanted children more than anything. Unfortunately she had one miscarriage after another. But she refused to give up. Finally after nine years of failed pregnancies and disappointment, she conceded that if she wanted to have children

she would have to adopt.

Waiting to be called and told that the adoption agency had a child for her, she conceived once more. Only this time she carried full-term and gave birth to two beautiful boys. That Christmas, Kate and her parents flew to Seattle to see the babies. She had gone back for a visit two years later, but hadn't been there since. So seeing the boys again was like seeing two new kids, because they had grown and changed so much.

The visit took her mind off Peter during the day. It was during the long empty nights that she ached for him the most.

Joan, knowing her sister was hurting, brought up the subject of Peter. "Kate, I know you loved Peter with your entire being, but he's gone. You've got to accept that and get on with your life."

Kate said nothing. Tears formed in her eyes.

"I love you, Kate. I would never say anything to hurt you."

"Why did He have to take him? We were so happy, damn it!"

"If you're trying to understand God, forget it. He definitely works in mysterious ways. I'm a prime example."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Nothing, and yet, everything. He took Peter for a reason. I have no idea why, only that it's according to His game plan."

"That's a crock and you know it."

"You've got to believe in something, Kate, so you can move on."

"I believe that He is a spiteful God."

"No. Kate, not really. You're just hurting now. You'll

see things differently in time.”

“Look, Joan, I don’t want to seem ungrateful, but I really don’t want to talk about this now.”

“All right, but I’m here if you need to talk.”

Kate thanked her and walked away, tears streaming down her face. Why didn’t anyone understand how she felt? Waking up and greeting each new day without Peter was so painful. Everyone told her she had to get on with her life. What life? The empty shell she had become? Peter had been her entire being.

Joan did not bring up the subject again, which made the remaining days of Kate’s visit more comfortable. On the last day a postcard came from her parents. They were in Texas and thinking of joining a cattle drive.

“I thought you brought our parents up to be logical people,” Kate said to Joan.

“Don’t you dare blame me for this craziness. I left them in your care after I moved out.”

“Where did we go wrong?” they both said in unison and began to laugh. They laughed until the tears came.

“What’s so hysterical?” Paul Dyson asked, walking into the kitchen and finding his wife and sister-in-law laughing and crying at the same time.

Not able to quite catch her breath yet, Joan handed him the card. He read it and then asked, “So, what’s so funny?”

That started the women laughing again. Confused, Paul left the kitchen. When they were calm and all laughed out, they found Paul in the den watching TV.

“You don’t think it’s funny that my parents want to join a cattle drive at their age?” Joan asked.

“Is that what you two were so hysterical about?”

"I guess you had to be there," Kate added in their defense.

"I guess so," Paul said. "Where are the kids?"

"At Sarah's. She offered to watch them so we can go out to dinner for Kate's last night here."

"That was nice of her. Did you decide where you want to go eat?"

"Yup."

"I thought so. Wanna fill me in."

"The Blue Striper, since we all like seafood."

"Do we need reservations?"

"No. I don't think we'll have a problem getting a table. It's a Wednesday night."

"Okay. I'll go shower and change. You two do whatever you two have to do."

After Paul walked out, Joan said, "Doesn't he just have a way with words?"

Kate suppressed a laugh. "Don't get me started."

"You needed that."

"Maybe," Kate said and hugged her older sister. "Sometimes I miss not sharing a room and having you there to tell my problems to."

"There's always the telephone."

"It's not the same."

Joan smiled. "I know what you mean, Sis." Then glancing at the wall clock, she said, "Hey, we'd better get ready too."

* * * *

Joan drove Kate to the airport. Kate promised not to wait too long to return for a visit. After a tearful goodbye, Joan watched her younger sister walk into the terminal. She hoped that she'd come to terms with Peter's death soon and find a way to begin again.

* * * *

Kate tried to keep her mind on the book she had started, but it kept straying. She thought about some of the things Joan had said and wished she could accept everything on blind faith. But she knew she couldn't. Religion had really never been a strong point in their home. She just wanted to make some sense out of the whole thing. Why give her something so beautiful only to eventually take it away?

An hour into the flight Kate fell asleep. She dreamed of Peter. They were lying in bed together after having made love. He kissed her head and then her hand.

"I love you, Kate. I never thought I find someone that filled me with such wonderful thoughts as you do."

"Maybe you were hanging around computers too much."

"I'm being serious here."

"Sorry."

"I've been with many women, but none could hold a candle to you."

Kate leaned over and kissed his mouth. "I love you just as much."

"That's why I want to find a better job. I want to be able to give you whatever your heart desires."

"I'd love you even if you were a ditch digger. It's you that matters, not materialism."

"I know that...but I want you to have everything..."

Kate put her finger over his lips and shook her head. "None of that is necessary," she said, kissing him. "Just stay with me forever."

"You know I will. Till death do us part..."

* * * *

Mark picked Kate at the airport and took her home. She

felt as if she had been on the plane for a week, let alone only a few hours.

"Would you like to come in for some coffee?" Kate asked when they reached her apartment complex.

"If you're sure you're not too tired."

"I'm okay. I'd like to be filled in on what's been happening at school."

Kate made a pot of coffee and opened a box of cookies.

"Yuck! Those are low fat cookies."

"That's all I have. I'm sorry."

"What the heck? I'll suffer. The things I do for you."

Kate couldn't stifle a smirk when she heard that.

"So tell me the news."

"Okay, let's see...Ron Silver got engaged. Marilyn had a baby girl, while Steve Lauro split from his wife. Oh, yes, Mr. Wainwright has grown a beard."

"I guess a lot happened while I was gone."

"I missed you."

"I missed you, also."

"So what did you do in Seattle?"

"Played with my nephews and spent a great deal of time with Joan. I didn't realize how much I had missed her."

"I often regret being an only child. There was no one to blame the broken windows on."

Kate shook her head and laughed. It was good to be home again. Mark always had a way of making her laugh.

They talked a little while longer and then Mark went home. Oh, how he wished he was staying the night.

* * * *

The next morning Kate felt a little queasy as she reached over and shut off the alarm. She blamed it on all the coffee she

had consumed the day before and jet lag.

Not being able to take any more time off from school, she dragged herself into the shower and dressed for work.

When Mark honked, she came out and gingerly got into the car.

“You look a little green. Don’t you feel good, Kate?”

“Just a queasy stomach.”

“Why didn’t you stay out?”

“Not fair to the kids after all the time I took. I’ll be all right.”

Luckily, as the day progressed, she did feel better. And by lunch, when she met Mark, she felt like her old self again.

Chapter 18

Peter woke up in a hospital bed. His vision was still a little blurred and he ached in places he didn't think possible, but he was alive.

"So you've decided to rejoin us," a pleasant voice said.

Peter tried to focus his eyes in the direction it came from. He felt a soft hand pat the back of his. Opening his mouth to speak, he realized his throat felt like sandpaper.

"Would you like some water?"

Peter nodded as best he could. A bent straw was gently placed between his parched cracked lips. He choked slightly as the cool liquid began to go down his throat.

"Easy, easy now. Take it slow."

Peter tried to focus his eyes so he could see who was talking to him. He guessed it was a nurse since all he could see was white. She wiped his brow and helped him lie back down. Then she seemed to vanish.

A few minutes later, he heard the same sweet voice speaking to a deeper male one.

"It's a good sign that he's awake. The swelling must have gone down. That was some gunshot wound. He's a very lucky man. Has he said anything?"

“No. His throat is still sore.”

“I wish we knew who he was so we could notify his family.”

“Maybe when he begins to speak, he’ll tell us.”

“I certainly hope so. I’ll stop by to check on him tonight before I leave.”

“See you later. I’m going to check on my other patients.”

As the voices drifted off, Peter closed his eyes and slept.

Chapter 19

When Kate woke up nauseous again the following morning, she knew something was not right. And because the feeling would be gone by the afternoon, she feared she might be pregnant. She immediately thought it was Mark's baby, recalling that embarrassing night she slept with him. How could she allow herself to get in such a predicament, she wondered? *Knowing Mark, I'm certain he'll want to marry me. But how can I marry a friend just because I'm pregnant with his child?*

What would she do with a baby? Who wanted one now? Maybe there was a chance she wasn't pregnant after all. At this point, she reasoned, anything was possible. She put everything on hold until she saw the gynecologist, jotting down her number from her address book.

Remembering she had read somewhere that soda crackers were good for morning sickness, she forced herself out of bed and into the kitchen. She rummaged through her pantry until she found a box of plain crackers. Probably stale, she thought, as she began to bite into one. She was right, but ate it anyway. A few more crackers later, her stomach felt a little more settled. Looking at the time, she realized Mark would be picking her up for school soon, so she took a hurried shower. By the

time he beeped, she was dressed and ready.

"Morning, gorgeous," he said, as she slid into the car.

"Good morning, Mark."

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. You know the guy that lives next to me?"

"Oh, I know who you mean. His name is Jerry or something and he's married to an accountant."

"Yes, that's the one. Well, his wife, Sally's pregnant, but get this...they're having triplets."

"And that's supposed to be wonderful?"

"Whoa! Time out! What's with you this morning?"

"I'm sorry, Mark. I'm a little under the weather lately."

"Are you taking vitamins?"

"Yes."

"Could be that you're taking the wrong ones."

"How could a multiple vitamin be the wrong one?"

"It doesn't have enough of what your body might need."

"Since when did you become a nutritionist?"

"Will you stop biting off my head?"

"I really don't mean to. I'm sorry. It's me, not you. Maybe we shouldn't even talk."

Mark knew Kate well enough to suspect that something was bothering her. It certainly would explain her testiness this morning. "Is there something wrong? I mean...is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

"Wrong? What could be wrong?" Kate spat at him.

Mark took a deep breath. "Okay. You win. Silence it is."

Kate practically jumped out of the car before Mark shut off the engine in the school parking lot.

"See you for lunch," he called after her, but she was already out of earshot.

Every little thing seemed to bother Kate today. Even her class began to get on her nerves. They were learning about the early history of Long Island. It seemed that every few minutes she had to stop to answer a stupid question. It was as if the kids had left their brains at home. As if that wasn't enough, they were talkative and inattentive. When it was time for her free period, she couldn't leave the classroom fast enough.

She saw Mark in the teacher's lounge at lunch time. Before he could say a word, she said, "No, I don't feel any better and I don't want to talk about it."

A few other teachers walked in and the conversation was dropped. Kate retreated behind her self-imposed wall of silence and Mark talked with the others.

* * * *

When Mark dropped Kate off at her apartment after school, he was positive something was very wrong. He decided to call her or stop by after dinner to find out if he could help.

As soon as Mark pulled away, Kate got into her car and drove to the drug store. She picked up two different brands of pregnancy tests, paid, and went home. As she took them into the bathroom, she suddenly felt so alone and wished she was still in Seattle with her sister.

She sat down and began to read the instructions on each box. They were written in such simple English that even a dummy could understand them. "And me," she said aloud and laughed. She was still upset with herself for getting into such a predicament to begin with.

The first test results proved positive. As the tears of anger began to sting her eyes, Kate watched the same results appear in the second test sample. She was undeniably pregnant.

Suddenly the thought of getting back into the car and driving off a cliff began to sound attractive to her. How was she going to go through with this? She had no means of support other than herself. Who would watch the baby while she worked? So many problems and much too many unsolved questions. More than anything, though, Kate was scared.

This time she didn't rush to the phone to call Mark. She didn't feel like talking to anyone. Instead, she crawled into bed and fell asleep. Moments later, she began to dream. In the dream she was walking with Peter through fields of tall grass. Someone called her name and she turned around. When she turned back, Peter was gone. She ran back and forth through the unending grass calling his name, but couldn't find him.

Chapter 20

Twenty-five hundred miles away, Peter awoke from a dream. During the dream he was with a beautiful woman. They were running and holding hands in a grassy field. He could not recall her face and yet he knew she was someone very important to him. He wished he knew who that person was almost as much as he wanted to know who he was.

Unfortunately, he couldn't recall either. He had no past. All he could recollect was feeling a tremendous jolt of pain go off in his head. Then he was clawing and crawling his way out of a ditch. Nothing before then. He knew he must have had a life, but could not even remember his name. The more he tried to recall even the slightest shred of his past, the more frustrated he became.

The doctor told him there was no physical reason why he couldn't remember. Amnesia was a mental problem and most often the person suffering from it does regain some or all of his lost memory. There was no way to predict when or even hurry the healing process. But he made no progress at all since his so-called incident.

Peter knew eventually when all his physical wounds had healed he'd have to leave the hospital and start a new life. But

what would he do? Where would he go?

Robin Billings, the day nurse, was most kind to him. Knowing he had no friends or relatives to visit, she'd often sit and talk to him. She was an attractive woman, tall and brunette, with soft-brown eyes that twinkled when she smiled. She had a four-year-old son named Dylan, whom she brought up single-handedly. Her husband had died of cancer shortly after Dylan was born. She was the only bright light in Peter's existence and he found himself looking forward to seeing her on the days she worked.

"Good morning. And how are you today?" Robin asked as she breezed into Peter's room.

"Okay, I guess."

"Have you considered a name you'd like to be called?"

"Not really. You pick one."

"It has to be a name you'll like."

"But how can I like any when I know it'll be wrong?"

"You don't really know that, do you?"

"True, but..."

"Just pick a name that you like. Unless of course you want to be called John, which is what they have on your chart."

Peter thought for a moment. Then he shook his head. "I don't know. Why don't you come up with a name for me?"

"Okay, then. You remind me a little of Mel Gibson, but you're not a Mel."

"Who's he?"

"Oops! I forgot you have no long-range memory," she said, smiling. "Mel Gibson is a hunky actor."

"Oh. I don't feel too hunky lying here."

Robin smiled. "I know, I'll call you William. He was a

character in one of Mel's movies. How's that?"

"It's as good a name as any, I guess."

"Then it's William. I hate the name John Doe."

The newly named William smiled. "I didn't like it much, either."

"Now that's what I want to see more of," Robin said, pointing to his smile. "Gotta go, but I'll be back... William."

"William," he repeated. It sounded as meaningless as the rest of his existence. If only he knew who the devil he was.

Chapter 21

It was Kate's turn to drive to work. She was in a terrible mood. She was feeling sorry for herself, but angry as well for letting herself get into such a predicament. Mark got into the car and asked if she was feeling better.

"No. Nor do I want to talk about it, either."

"Okay. I won't say another word."

Kate hit the gas and the car lurched forward.

"You don't have to kill me to keep me quiet."

Kate said nothing, but gave Mark a look that said back-off in six different languages. The fifteen-minute car ride became worse than a ride on a roller coaster. It was obvious that Kate was taking her anger and frustrations out on the road.

As soon as Kate pulled into the school parking lot, Mark turned to her and said, "That's it. Either you tell me what's wrong or I'll wring it out of you. You have just given me a ride from Hell and that entitles me to know."

Kate slammed the steering wheel with both hands.

"You really want to know?"

"No. I'm asking you just for the hell of it. Of course I want to know."

In a tiny voice Kate said, "I'm pregnant."

“What?”

“Which part of the sentence didn’t you understand?”

“We’ll get married as soon as possible.”

“You’re so predictable.”

“But it’s my child, I love you and therefore it’s the right thing to do.”

“For you, maybe, but not me.”

“But I’m the father.”

Suddenly a thought filled Kate’s mind. What if the baby wasn’t Mark’s?

Noticing the expression on Kate’s face, Mark said, “But you haven’t slept with someone else other than me.” However, just as soon as the last words left his mouth, he thought of Peter. “Could it be Peter’s child?”

“I don’t know. I’ll find out Saturday when I see the doctor.”

“What difference does it make who the father is? Marry me and I’ll make an honest woman out of you.”

“Why do you assume that’s the only solution?”

“Oh, I get it. It’s your body, ergo your decision. I won’t fight you.”

“Fight me over what, Mark? No matter whose baby it is, I intend to have it. If it’s Peter’s, it’s all I have left of him,” she said, tears streaking down her face.

Mark wiped her tears away. “I love you, Kate. I don’t care whose baby it is. I want to help you with it, so please don’t shut me out.”

“I know. I’m so sorry. I snapped. I didn’t mean to bite off your head.”

“I realize that, Kate, and I understand,” Mark said as he put his arms around her shoulders in an effort to comfort her.

Giving her a gentle squeeze, he said, "We're going to be late if we don't get our behinds in gear. Go fix your face. I'll see you for lunch."

Kate kissed Mark's cheek. "Thank you, dear friend."

As she walked into the building, Kate realized that she was truly lucky to have Mark as a friend. He was always there to help whenever she needed him. Also aware that his feelings for her were deeper and that kept him near, she wished she could feel the same about him. It would be so easy to say 'I'll marry you, Mark,' because it would solve everything. However, as much as she cared for him, marriage couldn't be an act of convenience. For her it had to be an act of love. And the man she loved was dead.

Chapter 22

Kate woke up with a start. She thought she had overslept and missed her doctor's appointment at nine. Glancing at her alarm clock, she saw that it was only seven-fifteen. She dragged herself into the shower to wake up after having to munch on a few saltine crackers. Hopefully her bout with morning sickness would soon pass.

As the hot water cascaded down, she remembered how edgy Mark had been since she mentioned her pregnancy. He was literally acting as if he hoped it was his child. Perhaps he thought in the tangled webs of his thought process that she would eventually marry him. Like the eternal optimist that he was, he never seemed to lose hope. But life is never so ordered or easy. Her heart lay buried with the remains of another. "Oh, Peter, why?" was all she managed to say before she slid down the side of the shower and collapsed in a heap, her tears joining the water spiraling down the drain.

* * * *

Dr. Katz was Kate's first female gynecologist. She had always gone to men before. When she had first come to Dr. Katz's office, she had been somewhat uncomfortable. But the doctor's pleasant manner soon dispelled the discomfort. The

fact that she was a pleasant-looking woman who wasn't made up to look glamorous also helped.

No matter how many years she had been going to the gynecologist, Kate would never get used to it. She hated the entire examination. As she waited in the examination room for the doctor, she could feel the sweat trickling down her back. She tried to trick her mind into thinking of other things, but the shiny silver stirrups kept her focused.

After the usual pleasantries, Dr. Katz sensed that Kate was upset so she asked, "What's up, Kate?"

"I took two pregnancy tests. Both were positive."

"Is this a good thing?" Dr. Katz asked.

"Yes and no."

Dr. Katz raised her eyebrows.

"The guy I was living with was killed in Phoenix."

The doctor nodded, knowingly. "Okay, let's take a look and see what's going on inside," she said as she motioned for Kate to position herself in the stirrups and slide down. And as usual, Kate didn't go far enough and had to edge her body down the table.

Kate gritted her teeth. How she hated this. The examination table had to have been invented by a man, she thought to herself, as she finally reached the right spot for the doctor.

The internal didn't take long. When Kate was sitting upright, Dr. Katz took off her gloves and gave her the long-awaited information.

"You are beginning your third month. Are you going to have this baby?"

Kate's brain shouted at her, 'it's Peter's, it's Peter's'. A certain calmness enveloped her.

"I knew you'd ask that, knowing my situation." Tears

welling in her eyes, Kate said, "I loved Peter very much. This child will be something of his that I can love and cherish. I have no doubts."

"It's not easy being a single parent, financially or emotionally."

"I know."

"Okay. Now that we have decided on the path to take, we'll set up scheduled visits and prescribe the necessary vitamins. If your pregnancy goes well, you'll be able to work close to the end since your job isn't physically strenuous."

They talked a little while longer and then Kate got dressed and left. She stopped off at the drug store and picked up her vitamins. Then she drove to Mark's apartment.

Mark practically ripped open the door before she even knocked. He must have been watching for her car. He had wanted to go with her to the doctor's, but she had wanted to go alone.

She wasn't even in the apartment before he asked, "How far along are you?"

"I'm starting my third month and I'm having the baby."

Mark tried to hide his disappointment, but couldn't. "Come, I made coffee," he said without looking Kate in the eye.

"Mark, wait."

He turned around to face her, tears welling in his eyes. She walked up to him and took his face in her hands.

"I'm sorry. I wish things had been different, but the Guy up there playing with our strings has His own game plan," she said, as she kissed his cheek.

"Okay, fine. Maybe you don't love me now and maybe you won't ever, but I'll never give up. Whenever you need

me, I'll be around. And even if you don't need me, I'll still be there. I intend to grow on you like a fungus."

"Heaven forbid!"

"Well, maybe a fungus isn't the nicest example, but I think you get my point."

"I certainly do, Mark. But I can't lean on you forever. I need to have a backbone of my own. And you need to have a life of your own, as well."

"You *are* my life...please don't interrupt," he said when he saw that she was going to say something. "This is my choice. If nothing else, I'll be that crutch for those times you need an extra hand."

Smiling, Kate reluctantly agreed and they sat down and had coffee. Mark became his usual cheerful self and changed the direction of their conversation.

"Have you thought of names?"

"Yes. Definitely Peter if it's a boy and Paige if it's a girl. What do you think?"

"Good choices."

"Now all I want is a healthy child."

Mark put his hand on hers and nodded.

Chapter 23

It wasn't obvious that Kate was pregnant until she was well into her fourth month. Then the rumors and finger-pointing began among the school faculty. These people were her so-called friends. How could they wonder whose baby it was? They knew she hadn't been one to sleep around. Most of them had met Peter at one school function or another. What about the Christmas party? It was he who helped Sal Mancini get his car started after it died in the restaurant parking lot. And these same people came to his memorial service.

As if that wasn't enough, a few letters from concerned parents reached Mr. Wainwright's office questioning her morality and whether she should be allowed to teach their impressionable children.

Reluctantly, Mr. Wainwright called Kate into his office to discuss the situation.

"Eh, good morning, Kate."

"Good morning, Mr. Wainwright."

"As you can tell, I'm a little uncomfortable this morning. What I must discuss with you brings me no pleasure."

Worry began to course through Kate as she saw the seriousness etched on her Principal's face. Had he heard some of

the gossip circulating around the school?

"You are one of my best and brightest teachers. There is no academic complaint that can be lodged against you. However, I have received more than a handful of letters complaining about your morals."

"My morals?"

"Many parents feel that their impressionable children should not be exposed to a 'loose' woman. That is not my terminology or opinion, by the way."

"I can't believe, with what their children are exposed to in this day and age on afternoon TV, that they could even think that because I'm pregnant and unmarried, I'm a whore."

"Kate, please!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but look at the daytime soap operas with people playing round-robin in bed. I was living with Peter and would have married him, had he not been killed. Okay, I goofed and got pregnant, but I didn't sleep around. I gave and got all my business from one man."

"You don't have to convince me, Kate. I'm just as annoyed about all this as you are, but the Board is going to have to deal with this."

"I intend to fight to keep my job."

"I'd expect no less from you. I'm glad those same self-righteous hypocrites don't read much or else they would have complained about some of the books we have on our library shelves."

Kate gave a weak smile. "When is the Board meeting?"

"Tuesday night at seven thirty."

"I'll be there. The parents can see their Jezebel in the flesh."

"Kate, be yourself. The Board members will see that the children will be the big losers if they vote to remove you."

"I love teaching. I don't know what I'd do if I lost my job...especially now."

"You're a good teacher, Kate, one of the best I've ever had the pleasure to work with. Getting another job will be a snap. I only hope this stupidity doesn't come to that."

"Thank you for your support and kind words."

"It's all true, Kate."

"But the way things have been going for me lately..."

"Don't let yourself think like that. Things happen. Some are good, some are bad, but they always work out for the best."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wainwright, but that philosophy doesn't quite work for me."

"You've got to have more faith, Kate."

"You're the second person to tell me that."

"Then perhaps, it's true. But regardless, I'll be batting a thousand for you at that meeting." Her principal patted her hand.

"Thanks, I couldn't ask for better support."

Mark met Kate in the hall as she was leaving Wainwright's office.

"Trouble?"

"Big time. The good people of our district have been protesting the fact that I am pregnant and unwed. They feel my presence in the classroom will hurt the children's impressionable minds."

"You've got to be kidding... You're not kidding."

"I wish I was."

"Kids see more provocative stuff on television when they get home from school. Sounds like a bunch of small-minded hypocrites, if you ask me."

“But it’s serious because the Board intends to vote on whether or not to remove me from the classroom.”

“No way I’m going to let them burn you at the stake, Kate. I think you should speak to the teachers’ union rep. There must be something that they can do.”

“I’ll call later.”

“In the meantime, I’d like the other members of the faculty to know about this witch hunt. Is it all right if I spread the word?”

“I don’t think it can hurt. The Board meeting will be held Tuesday night at seven-thirty in the cafeteria.”

“I’ll see you later at lunch. Right now I have to put my big mouth to use.”

Kate smiled and mouthed, “Thanks,” as he left.

* * * *

Stacey Lyons, a student in Kate’s class, walked into her spacious kitchen for a snack. She found her mother engrossed in a telephone conversation. Hearing her teacher’s name mentioned, Stacey stopped to listen. She knew that eavesdropping was wrong, but what she had heard upset her greatly.

“Yes,” her mother said. “The Board will be meeting in the cafeteria at seven-thirty, Tuesday night. With all the letters they’ve received, the tramp will be out of a job. Guaranteed. I certainly hope that the teacher who replaces her will have better morals and a great deal more restraint. Stupid slut! Did she think we’d allow an unwed, pregnant woman with the obvious morals of an alley cat to teach our children?”

Hearing that, Stacey was out the door and halfway down the block on her way to the house of her best friend, Allison. She practically lived at Ally’s house, anyway. She had the coolest mom on the block who always had time to listen to

her or any other kid with a problem.

"Ally, open up!" she shouted, banging on the front door of a sprawling ranch house.

Deborah Kahn, Allison's mother, opened the door and was practically knocked down by a human canon ball that headed straight for her daughter's bedroom.

"Well, and a hello to you too, Stacey," Deborah called after her.

Charging into Allison's room, she found her friend sprawled across her bed surrounded by books and CDs. The posters on the wall were nearly identical to hers. It was truly a-home-away-from-home for her.

"Hi, Stace, what's up?"

"We got a humongous problem."

"What's wrong? Start at the beginning and don't leave a thing out."

"My mother and her snobby friends are trying to get Ms. Douglas canned."

"What? Why?"

"'Cause she's preggers and not married."

"So? I don't get it. She's still the same person."

"Tell them that. They think she's become a bad influence on us."

"They're nuts. She one of the greatest teachers I've ever had. So what did they do?"

"They sent letters to the Board of Education complaining about Ms. Douglas and the Board is going to decide whether or not to fire her."

"We can't let them do that."

"I know, but what should we do?"

"We should talk to my mom. She'll know what to do."

“Let’s go. There’s no time to waste.”

The girls found Deborah preparing dinner in the kitchen.

“Would you like to stay for dinner, Stacey?”

“I don’t know...”

“Mom, we’ve got more important things to worry about.”

“What’s wrong?” Deborah asked, looking concerned.

“You’ve got to help us stop them before they get Ms. Douglas fired.”

“Who?”

“My mother and her friends.”

“Why, Stacey?”

“Because Ms. Douglas is pregnant and not married. The whole school knew she would be if the guy she loved didn’t get killed. It was so sad. Now they think she’s a bad influence on us.”

“Like we’re all going to run out and have babies,” Allison added, rolling her eyes.

“God forbid,” Deborah said under her breath. “How do you know all this, Stacey?”

“I overheard my mother talking on the phone. She called Ms. Douglas a tramp and a stupid slut.”

“No way!” Allison interjected. “Ms. Douglas is a terrific teacher.”

“Yeah. We’ve got to do something.”

“I happen to agree with both of you. I had the pleasure of working with Kate Douglas on a couple of occasions. She truly loves kids and is a fine person.”

“So you’ll help?” Allison asked.

“Yes. What your mother intends to do is wrong. It’s not her place to punish Ms. Douglas.”

"I'm going to call all the kids in our class to let them know. Maybe we can all write something nice about Ms. Douglas," Allison said.

"You mean, like a petition. You can write a paragraph in support of Ms. Douglas and have all the kids sign it."

"Great idea, Mom."

"I'll get in touch with some of my friends and make sure we all go down to the Board in support of Ms. Douglas. I don't want the school to lose such a good teacher. We need more like her. Do you know when the Board is meeting?"

"I heard her say seven-thirty, Tuesday night," Stacey answered.

"Maybe all of the kids can go to the meeting to show how we care about our teacher," Allison offered.

"I don't think all the parents would allow it. First of all, it's a school night, and secondly, I have a feeling many things will be said that a child shouldn't hear."

"Mom! You know we know everything..."

"I'm not referring to sex, Allison. I just have a feeling that people will use language and perhaps act inappropriately."

"I think I understand what your mom means. I can just imagine all the nasty things my mother can call Ms. Douglas. She was probably practicing this afternoon."

"Unfortunately to win their argument some people don't fight fairly, kids, but I have a terrific idea that you might really find cool. It will also be a great help to Ms. Douglas."

"What?" the girls asked, practically in unison.

"You can make a video. Every kid will get a chance to speak about Ms. Douglas and why she is a good teacher."

"Can we use Daddy's video camera?" Allison asked.

Deborah nodded, smiling.

"But how do I get all the kids in our class together?" asked Allison.

"How about inviting them to a pizza party at our house on Friday night? You can make your video then."

Both girls hugged Deborah. Allison, looking at her mother with adoring eyes, said, "I knew you'd think of something great. You always do."

"Yeah, you're really super, Mrs. Kahn. Too bad my mom can't be more like you. She acts like such a child sometimes."

Deborah Kahn knew exactly what Stacey meant. She knew her mother and disliked her. Kim Lyons acted a great deal like a spoiled brat more often than a parent. Pampered, over-bearing, and downright snooty would be other adjectives that would fit just as well. She was the kind of woman who fought for causes—her own. *Too bad, when you marry money it only makes you richer, not better*, she thought.

"Earth to Super Mom," Allison called, tearing Deborah from her thoughts.

"What time should I tell everyone to be here?"

"How about seven o'clock? That should give everyone time to get a ride here."

"Okay. And Mom..."

"What?"

"I love you."

"And I love you," Deborah answered, tears suddenly welling in her eyes.

Chapter 24

Mark and Kate stopped at the diner for dinner. Kate found it difficult to eat and picked at her food. Her stomach was too tied up in knots. She couldn't truly believe that in today's day and age, people would censure her for her pregnancy.

"Kate did you hear a word I just said?"

"Sorry, Mark."

"Nervous about tonight?"

She nodded. "What will I do if I lose?"

"Don't think like that. You won't lose."

"I'm sorry, but I don't share your optimism."

"Well, Gloomy Gus, if you do lose, you'll chalk it up as their stupid loss and get another job, even if you have to wait until after the baby is born."

"No, I'm not only upset about losing my job. I'm more upset about my class. They have to find another teacher in the middle of the year. It will be tough on the kids. Think of the work they'll miss. They'll fall behind. Damn all those sanctimonious hypocrites!"

Mark began to laugh. Kate didn't think she said anything remotely funny and became angry.

“Kate...” Mark said, trying to stifle his own laughter, “...do you think this is a right-wing conspiracy? Maybe those people are being bankrolled by those same conservative groups that are trying to run our government.”

“Are you crazy?” Then seeing the humor in what Mark had said, Kate began to laugh also. “You idiot,” she said affectionately.

“Seriously, Kate, please try to relax and not worry so much. I know how hard it is, but you’ve got to try.”

“I know. This has been quite a year for me so far. It’s been one crisis after another. I feel like my Puppet Master has yanked my strings so much that He’s gotten them tangled.”

Her metaphor made him chuckle, but his reply was serious. “I know, babe. It’s been rough. But you’ll see this through, like everything else.”

Kate took his hand and squeezed it. “Thanks. You’re better than a psychologist sometimes.”

“And I work a lot cheaper, too.”

Looking at her watch, Kate said, “We’d better get going. I don’t think I should arrive there late.”

“No, I think not. After all, you’re the star attraction.”

* * * *

The Board meeting was being held in the school cafeteria. Despite the size of the room, it was quickly becoming a full house. The custodial staff had to bring more chairs in to accommodate the crowd. The last Board meeting hardly drew any attention compared to this one.

Some parents, realizing Kate’s value as a teacher, brought their children with them to show their support. Likewise there was a group of parents, whose children were in Kate’s present class and some who might be in her future classes, in

attendance to see that she was removed from the classroom because of her impropriety. Many of the faculty who worked alongside Kate viewed this as a witch hunt. The consensus was that if that group was successful in getting Kate fired, who would they go after next? Perhaps the male teacher who wore his hair too long or the female teacher whose hems were considered by some to be too high. Kate's plight would affect all of them.

Ironically, there were a few teachers, both male and female, who found Kate's condition offensive to them and were willing to speak out against her despite the fact her dismissal could have a harmful effect on them. Chances are, they didn't even consider the gravity of the situation.

By the time Kate and Mark arrived at seven-fifteen, the place was packed. The noise coming from the room was so great they could hear it all the way down the hall. Yet when she entered the room it became instantly quiet.

"Nothing like making a grand entrance," he whispered to her.

"Some grand entrance. I feel like a Christian about to be thrown to the lions."

"Is that the new guy she's screwing?" someone said loud enough for Kate to hear.

"My, God, Mark, are they for real?"

"They're just small-minded, petty people," he answered, as they found two seats in the rear.

Kate felt as if everyone in the entire room had their eyes on her. As if she weren't uncomfortable enough, the baby chose this moment to start kicking. She couldn't get comfortable.

Mark sensed her physical discomfort and asked what was wrong.

“The baby is kicking up a storm. It’s probably angry with me for not eating dinner.”

Mark chuckled. Their attention was drawn to the front of the room as the Board members began to enter and take their seats.

“Looks like the show’s about to start,” he said, taking Kate’s hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

The president of the Board was a woman. Irene Kennedy had been a member, it seems since forever. When her children were young, she had been president of the P.T.A. and served on practically every committee the elementary school had. As her kids grew, she moved with them into the junior high and subsequently, the high school and helped out there. Whenever the school needed a parent to head a committee, Irene was always called. She was known as a fair person who believed that education opened all doors. She had gone to college and received a degree of some sort, but never worked a day in her life. Her children were her only job and when they grew up and began families of their own, the school district became her focus in life. Jack Kennedy, her husband, had died leaving her independently wealthy and with few worries.

As she banged her gavel down, she looked at the swelling audience. She had been brought up as a strict Catholic and didn’t know anything about sex until she was married. Yet, she knew Kate Douglas to be a fine teacher. She also did her research and knew all about how Kate’s fiancé and how he was tragically killed. For all intents and purposes, she’d be married now and this meeting wouldn’t be happening.

From what she could tell, the group before her had become polarized, each side feeling righteous about their cause. This was going to be most difficult at best and she prayed for

the wisdom to see it through.

Irene Kennedy knew her fellow Board members well, yet she wouldn't wager how each would vote on the issue. It was indeed a tough call. She would listen to the facts that both sides presented. This meeting was going to be held up to the highest quality. She was not going to allow any name-calling or mud slinging. Only valid arguments would be heard.

"I call the Hither Hills Board of Education to order. I see before me a full house. Before we begin, I'd like to establish a few ground rules. Both sides will have a fair chance in putting forth valid arguments. There will be absolutely no mud-slinging or other inappropriate behavior allowed. I hope I make myself clear on this point. We are going to decide the professional fate of one of our teaching staff. I'll not allow the podium to become a pulpit for either side.

"Now here is the issue that was placed before the Board. We have received a number of phone calls and letters complaining that the teacher in question, Kate Douglas, was obviously pregnant and unmarried. These people feel that their children are impressionable and should not be exposed to such implications. They want her removed from the classroom immediately and her tenure revoked. In essence, fired.

"We will open with arguments in favor of putting Ms. Douglas on suspension while the district goes to court to rescind her tenure."

Kate closed her eyes and prayed. *If there was a God who was as good and just as everyone had said He was, could He please prove it now? If not for me, for my class.*

All eyes were on Kim Lyons, the self-acclaimed spokesman for the issue at hand, as she slowly rose, probably for effect, and walked with head held high to the podium.

She cleared her throat and looked around the room at the people sitting there until she found Kate. Staring straight at her, she began, "It saddens me to have to ask the distinguished Board to remove one of our teachers, but it must be done for the good of our children. We must try and protect them from being exposed to impure and improper things inside the school as well as outside. Letting Ms. Douglas remain as a teacher is sending our children the wrong message. We are telling them it's okay to have sex without the sanctity of marriage. In an age riddled with terrible sexually-transmitted diseases, this would be playing Russian roulette with their health. We cannot condone her behavior and expect our children to refrain from sexual activity.

"Therefore the Board must do the right thing. And that is to revoke her contract with the Hither Hills School District. Thank you," she said, as she looked at Kate directly and smiled, before stepping down from the podium.

An uproar ensued and Irene Kennedy banged her gavel. "Please, people, we will not be able to accomplish anything if we continually erupt after each person speaks."

As the room quieted down another parent spoke of the bad influence an unwed pregnant woman had on her students and others that she might encounter. Her argument ran along the same line as that of Kim Lyons. It was agonizing for Kate to have to sit through such painful testimony. As she reached the point of screaming after having heard how horrible a person she was for the umpteenth time, Mr. Wainwright rose to speak.

"Finally, the cavalry," Mark whispered into Kate's ear.

"I have come here tonight to speak on behalf of Kate Douglas' teaching ability." He looked out into the audience

and found her to reassure her with a smile how he felt.

"I have been a fixture at this school longer than some of the toilets."

Laughter broke out and as it died down, he continued, "During that period of time I have seen many teachers come and go. As a district, we have been fortunate to have many talented teachers who have held the teaching profession to the highest standards. Many of whom are now in this building which exemplifies what an elementary school should be.

"One of those teachers is Kate Douglas. She is undoubtedly one of the finest teachers I've ever had the pleasure and good fortune to work with. A good teacher is a special person who can capture the hearts and minds of children and show them the exciting world around them. Not everyone can do this, for it is truly an art. Kate can do this, though. Her influence on her students has been phenomenal. But, alas, no one is perfect. We all make mistakes. That's what makes us human. Yes, perhaps Kate Douglas made a mistake. But I feel the biggest mistake would be to dismiss her. And the biggest losers would be this school district and its students."

There was applause following Mr. Wainwright's impassioned speech. Mrs. Kennedy banged her gavel once more.

"Told you, you were Wainwright's pet," Mark whispered to Kate.

"Now we will hear from Deborah Kahn who has something to say on behalf of Ms. Douglas."

Deborah turned to Kate and gave her a warm smile. As she walked to the podium, Mark patted Kate's hand, and said, "Here come the good guys."

"Good evening, everyone. I'm sorry I have to be here tonight. I cannot believe that some parents of this district want

to revive the witch hunts.”

As she said that, an undercurrent of noisy complaints rose from the audience which forced Irene Kennedy to bang her gavel.

“I know Ms. Douglas and have worked on more than one occasion with her. I have found her to be a competent and deeply caring teacher who has always held the welfare of her students in the highest esteem. But I am a parent and not a student who must be with her every day for the entire school year. So I feel I am not competent to judge her merits in the classroom. For that I must defer to the experts, the ones having opinions that count, her students,” she said, as she signaled the custodian.

Kim Lyons jumped out of her seat as a television on a stand hooked up to a VCR was rolled in front of the audience. “What kind of stunt is this?”

“This is no stunt. I beg the board’s indulgence to hear what Kate Douglas’ students have to say about her. We must be a hundred percent certain that her removal is warranted,” she said as she turned on the video.

One child after another spoke about Kate and what she meant to them. Some were crying, while others begged their parents and the Board not to fire her. It definitely was a moving video. The highlight came when Stacey Lyons spoke.

“That’s a crock!” Kim Lyons shouted from her seat.

Mrs. Kennedy slammed down her gavel. “You are out of order.”

After it finished, Deborah concluded, “I doubt if there is anyone in this audience unblemished enough to judge Ms. Douglas on her morals, but I will say this on her behalf. It is not for us to judge and punish her. That is best done by an au-

thority who is higher than us all.

“Please keep in mind that she would have married the father of her baby had he lived. We do not have here before us a loose woman, but one who is more of a victim. She has already been subject to a tragedy. Why is it so important to increase her pain? We must also keep in mind that if the Board votes to fire Ms. Douglas, they will set in motion a dangerous precedent. We will be allowing one group to impose their set of morals on another and may very well be opening the door to abuse. What will they find morally wrong next? A teacher’s mode of dress, books in the library? Please vote to retain Ms. Douglas. Thank you.”

A few more people spoke for and against Kate before Irene Kennedy asked Kate if she had something to say on her own behalf.

Kate dropped Mark’s hand and walked to the front of the room. She swallowed hard, looking down, trying to gather her thoughts. Finally looking up, she rested her eyes on Mark’s.

“I want to sincerely thank Mr. Wainwright, all my students and Mrs. Kahn, as well as everyone else who spoke on my behalf tonight. All my life, as far back as I can remember, I wanted to become a teacher. Now I am a teacher. I love my job and always try to give it one hundred percent. I only ask that you don’t take this joy away from me. I had two loves in my life and have already lost one. Don’t take the other from me. I implore you to let me remain a teacher in your esteemed district where I have worked for the last seven years. Thank you.”

Kate got a thunderous applause as she walked back to her seat and the Board members left the room to deliberate. Pan-

demonium broke loose in their absence. There was some name calling, but those people were silenced by others.

“Let’s take a walk, Kate,” Mark said.

“I can use some fresh air.”

They walked out of the cafeteria together. Some of their fellow teachers gave them the victory sign while other people made some offensive noises.

“How long do you think they’ll take?” Kate asked.

“Dunno. It could be fast, yet, who knows? You know you can marry me and close down this entire circus.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“I’m serious, Kate. Marry me. I have enough love for both of us.”

“Kate! The Board has returned,” Deborah Kahn called.

“Thank you,” Kate called back. “We’re coming.”

“Will you think about it?” Mark said, holding her back.

Seeing the hope and trying to ease the pain in his eyes, she nodded. “Thank you for asking.”

Mark’s face changed to one of anger. “Damn it, Kate, I didn’t ask you out of pity.”

Kate’s lips trembled as tears formed in her eyes. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Mark. Seeing how his words stung, he said, “I love you.”

“I know, believe me I know,” she said, practically fleeing back to the cafeteria before she began to cry.

Mark hurried after her, cursing himself for his feeble attempts to get her to marry him. They entered to the banging of Irene Kennedy’s gavel.

A hush fell over the room. This was the moment everyone had come for. The moment of the proverbial truth.

“We the members of the Board agonized over this deci-

sion. On the one hand, it is obvious that being unwed and pregnant goes against the basic thread of morality and weakens the foundation of the traditional family. But today we find the traditional family, not so traditional any more. There are more single parent homes and even same parent homes today. Our children are bombarded with sexually explicit programs during the day on the soap operas and at night with the new programs mirroring our society. So what do we do?

“Simple. We must do what we’ve always done. We must teach our children in our own homes what is right and wrong. We cannot leave this basic education to the schools. It is the parents’ responsibilities. Obviously, we cannot put blinders on our children. After we give them the basics at home, we must trust them to do the right thing.

“The Board does not condone Ms. Douglas’ behavior, but it cannot in good conscience condemn her either. She has been embarrassed and punished enough by tonight’s public vilification. As far as being a bad influence on the children in her classroom, I believe the video we watched spoke for itself.

“On the other hand, if we vote to remove Ms. Douglas from the classroom, we’d have to go through numerous stages. She cannot be immediately fired because she has tenure. First she would be placed on suspension, with pay, because we must prove wrong-doing. Then we’d have to take the matter to court to prove just cause to have her tenure rescinded. Then, and only then, could she be fired. By that time, the child in question who had caused this uproar would be one or possibly two-years-old. The whole procedure costs money. Do we want to divert money necessary to the continuance of a proper education for our children in this manner?

“All that I have mentioned had been taken into account.

Our vote reflects what we the Board believe is the best solution for our children. I am sure that not all of you present here tonight will be happy with it, but it is our unanimous decision.”

Irene Kennedy paused to sip from her cup of water. “We the Board have decided to allow Ms. Douglas to continue to teach in our district without censure.”

Pandemonium broke out once more. Kim Lyons and her group cried foul, but they were drowned out by the cheers for Kate. She was surrounded and hugged by well-wishers. Tearfully she thanked them all for their support.

Suddenly, she felt quite exhausted and asked Mark to take her home. It had been quite a week. Now at least it was all over. Her job was safe. She would thank her class on Friday by giving them all a special lunch, for without their support the decision might have been different. And she would personally call and thank Deborah Kahn.

Driving Kate home, Mark said, “I guess my marriage proposal is unimportant now that your job is secure.”

Smiling weakly, Kate answered, “You’re wrong Mark. I want you to know that I really did consider marrying you. It would have made everything so simple, but had I said yes, it would have been for all the wrong reasons. If we ever marry, Mark, it would be because I loved you.”

Hope, no matter how little, relieved Mark of his misgivings and once more reinforced his desire not to ever give up. Now he was certain of one thing. Time was his ally. All he had to do was remain a constant in Kate’s life. Eventually she would come to see him in a new light and then she’d be his.

Chapter 25

By the time Kate's due date arrived, everything was ready for the baby's arrival. She had transformed the second bedroom into a nursery. Of course Mark had helped her. She wondered how she would have gotten by without him. He even helped her find and select the best nanny for the baby.

Knowing that the baby was a girl made things a great deal easier. She had picked the name and purchased all feminine clothing.

Now if only the child would decide it was time to be born. Kate watched her due date pass with mild annoyance. She was ready. Why couldn't Paige be? After putting on about thirty-five pounds, she felt as big as a cow. Mark loved the way she looked and loved to feel the kicking of the baby. She couldn't understand his fascination with her stomach. He could sit and watch it change shape for hours as the baby kicked. It mattered little to him that sometimes the kicking would drive her crazy. Perhaps if he had to tote around the extra weight and felt like a punching bag, he'd feel differently.

The novelty of the pregnancy had long worn off for her. She was uncomfortable and cranky. Sleeping had become a luxury. She'd finally get comfortable and drop off to sleep

usually at the same time the baby decided to kick up a storm. In order to lull Paige back to sleep, she had to get out of bed and move around. When she had mentioned this to her sister, Joan, she was told that movement always put infants to sleep. After her twins were born, the only way Joan could get them to sleep was to drive them around in the car for hours.

Kate would often rock these quiet times during the wee hours of the morning away in her rocking chair. It was then that her mind would often drift back to Peter. She still missed him so and doubted she'd ever stop. She'd close her eyes and visualize his ebony hair and tiger-green eyes that sparkled like emeralds when he smiled. That smile! How it used to light up her life. The tears would begin to fall and the image would fade, leaving her with only the heartache. But knowing that Paige would soon enter the world softened the pain.

It was on such a night that Paige decided to be born. It wasn't just the kicking that woke Kate. It was pain that seemed to radiate throughout her entire lower body. When she realized that she might be in labor, she began to time the pains. They didn't seem to be close at all and were very erratic. Even so, it was impossible for her to sleep. She wanted to call Mark, but looking at the time which read four-thirty, she felt guilty about waking him.

When the next pain overwhelmed her, her guilt was forgotten and she dialed his number.

He picked up after the fifth ring. "Hello," he said, sounding like he was still asleep.

"Mark, I'm in labor. It's just started so we have plenty of time, but..."

"I'll be there as soon as I throw on some clothes."

Kate began to say something else, but realized he had al-

ready hung up. *My God, he's acting as if he was the father*, she thought as she padded into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee.

Ten minutes later, Mark was at her door.

"Did you fly here?"

"Okay, let's go."

"Hey, take it easy. We have plenty of time," she said, leading him into the kitchen.

"Are...are you...sure...I mean...you're not going to just have the baby without warning, are you?"

"No, I promise to give you ample time."

"That's okay, because I'm not going any place until it's time to take you to the hospital."

"But it could be hours."

"No, problem, babe. I'm not budging."

"All right, Mark," Kate said and kissed him.

"Umm, you smell good."

"None of that," she teased. "Have some coffee."

Mark decided to carry the coffee cups into the living room where Kate could be more comfortable. As she was about to sit down, her face contorted as a pain came. Mark practically flew over to grab her.

"Kate! Are you all right? What can I do?"

"I'll...be fine...in...a moment.... You can't fall apart every time I have a pain, Mark. You'll drive me crazy."

"I'm sorry, Kate. I just can't stand to see you in pain."

"This is one pain I'm glad I have. I couldn't take being pregnant too much longer."

"Did you call the doctor to tell her that you were in labor?"

"Yes, but they're still erratic. She said to call back when the pains are about eight minutes apart."

“How far apart are they now?”

“They’re too inconsistent to tell. They just come every so often.”

“Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?”

“Maybe there is. My lower back is bothering me. Maybe you can rub it.”

“Lie down on your bed and I’ll massage it.”

Kate went into her bedroom and took off her robe and performed her usual struggle to get into bed. She couldn’t lie on her stomach, so she got on her side. Mark knelt down by the side of the bed and began to rub her back.

She uttered a moan of pleasure. “Oooo, that feels so good. Don’t stop.”

Despite how uncomfortable she felt, Kate detected an unmistakable warmth spread through her. Mark’s hands on her lower back was turning her on. It had been a long time since she felt the touch of a man’s hands.

“How are you feeling?”

“Delightful, Mark. Don’t stop.” She almost laughed to herself when she thought what he didn’t know wouldn’t kill him.

Eventually, Mark relaxed her enough so that she could fall asleep. He lay down next to her and watched her sleep for a few minutes before he dozed off also.

When Kate awoke some time later, the pains had become sharper and longer. They had also become closer together. She had begun to time them. They were just about ten minutes apart. She decided to let the doctor know.

Trying to get off the bed without waking Mark was a feat she couldn’t accomplish. He awoke with a start.

“Is it time?”

“No, but it’s closer. My pains are ten minutes apart. I was going to give the doctor a heads up.”

“Where’s the number? I’ll do it. You stay put.”

“Mark, I am still capable of using a telephone.”

“Save your strength. I’ll call.”

“All right.” She gave in, knowing how stubborn he could be at times.

Mark wasn’t able to speak to the doctor directly. Her answering service was still fielding the calls. She did call back rather quickly, though, and told Mark to let her know when the pains were five minutes apart. It was at that time Kate should be driven to the hospital.

“What did the doctor say?” Kate asked when she saw how pale Mark looked. “You seem more nervous than I am.”

He repeated what the doctor had said and asked if Kate was hungry.

“I’m not supposed to eat any solid foods at this point. But you go ahead and make yourself something to eat. If I get hungry, there’s Jell-O in the fridge and plenty of hard sucking candies.”

“Okay,” Mark half-yawned, half-said, as he went back into the kitchen.

Chapter 26

Peter was getting used to being called William. It had no right or wrong sound to it, since he had no recollection of his real name. He liked the way it sounded when Robin said it with her southwestern accent. But he was worried.

He was going to be released from the hospital soon. All his physical wounds had healed. It was unfortunate that his mental state had not improved. He still remembered nothing that had occurred before being rescued in the desert. At this point, he was becoming desperate to discover who he was and where he fit in the world around him.

Robin had been much more than just a nurse to him. She spent all of her free time and a great deal of her days off with him. He had met her four-year-old son, Dylan, and thought he was a great kid. They had become the sum total of his world.

His worries were real. He might have a name, but nothing more. He had no home or job to go to after he was released. He had no idea what occupation he might be suitable for. He felt incomplete, like an empty shell.

When Robin came in to say good morning before she began her rounds, she noticed the concern etched into his face.

“What’s wrong, William? Are you feeling badly?”

“No. I’m not sick. I just can’t stand this not knowing who I am anymore.”

“You mustn’t give up. You can experience a breakthrough at any time. Eventually you will remember.”

“Perhaps I don’t really want to and that’s the reason I’m unable to remember.”

Shrugging her shoulders, she replied, “Anything is possible, William. Who can say for sure?”

“What will I do when they release me? Where will I go? I feel so lost, so alone.”

“You’re not, William. You’ve got me and Dylan. We both care a great deal about you.”

William raised his eyebrows.

“Didn’t you realize that? Did you think I could let you walk out of here into oblivion?”

“I...never thought...”

“William, would you like to come live with us...no strings attached? Until you got on your feet.”

“Would you...do you really want me?”

“Of course. You’re almost like family already.”

“I don’t know what to say?”

“Say, yes.”

William nodded.

“Good! Then it’s settled. Dylan will be so excited when he hears. I don’t throw or catch a baseball too well.”

“Thank you, Robin.”

She smiled. “Hey, don’t thank me so quickly. After all, I have an ulterior motive.”

“What?”

“It will be nice having another adult to talk to

around the dinner table.”

“I think I can deal with that.”

“Good,” she said, taking his hand in hers.

The warmth from her hand spread through him quickly. And he liked how it felt. He put his other hand on hers. He might have an uncertain past, but hopefully his future might not be, after all.

Chapter 27

Mark drove Kate to the hospital. He was practically a nervous wreck. If she didn't have one wave of contractions after another, she would have found the situation ludicrous and laughed.

He had taken the Lamaze lessons with Kate so he could remain in the delivery room to help her breathe and weather each wave of contractions. Wiping her face and giving her all the loving support he could, Mark acted more like a husband than a friend. But Kate was nearly oblivious to all that, focusing on one thing—getting the child out of her body and ending the excruciating pain.

She had grabbed on to his hand, holding on for dear life until he finally cried out in pain, “Kate, darling, you’re breaking my hand!”

Surprisingly as nervous as Mark had been, when the baby’s head finally emerged, he didn’t faint as many men do. Instead the magnificent sight of a new life emerging nearly brought him to tears. Silently he wished that he and Kate would be fortunate enough to do this again in the future with his own child.

When Paige Douglas finally entered into the world at

three-fifteen in the afternoon, it was a joyful relief for both Kate and Mark. She was beautiful, perfect in every way. Blond and fair-complexioned like her mother. Kate's tears of joy were tinged with sadness, for Peter wasn't there to witness such a miraculous sight.

* * * *

The biggest surprise Kate got was when Mr. Wainwright stopped by the hospital with a teddy bear for Paige.

"How's my favorite controversial teacher?"

"Tired and definitely not feeling very controversial at the moment."

"As to be expected. You women aren't made like you used to be. Able to plow the fields one minute, squatting and dropping a kid the next, and then going back to finish the plowing."

Kate laughed. "No, I guess not."

"I saw Paige in the nursery. She was by far the prettiest baby there. Just think, in five years, she'll be attending my school."

Kate laughed again. "Time flies, Mr. Wainwright, but not at supersonic speed."

The talk turned a little more serious and Wainwright filled Kate in with what news he could. She had missed only a few weeks and the school year would be over soon. The uproar concerning her pregnancy had died away after she left.

Finally as Wainwright was leaving, he said, "Kate, I have a confession to make. I was willing to ask your hand in marriage to save your job."

"Thanks for the noble gesture, sir, but that's all it could ever be. Aren't you married already?"

"I am? Now she tells me."

They both began to laugh. As tears of mirth ran down Kate's cheeks, he kissed her goodbye and wished her a healthy summer.

Then with a wink, he was gone.

Chapter 28

Kate's parents tried to call at least twice a month. They didn't want either of their daughters to think they'd fallen off the face of the earth or retired to some tropical island.

The last time they had seen Kate was after Peter had died. They were unable to attend the memorial, but came a few days later and spent two weeks with her, not wanting her to be alone in such a depressed state.

Now they were going to surprise Kate and drive to New York to see their infant granddaughter. In their telephone call they hinted at such a visit. They wanted their appearance to be a surprise and not a shock, even though being told their single daughter was going to be a mother had rocked their world, at first.

Paige's timing into the world couldn't have been better. The school term was nearly over and Kate would have the entire summer with her before she had to return to school and relinquish her care to a sitter.

Mark had become a constant fixture in her apartment after she came home with Paige. Since she was unable to get out, he became her conduit to the outside world, picking up groceries and other necessities. Some days he didn't even

bother going home and slept on the couch.

Kate was thankful that her friends from school hadn't come around to visit the first few days she was home. She was thoroughly exhausted and needed the time to herself. A few friends did call to ask if she needed any help, but Mark had everything under control.

He was truly wonderful. What would she have done without him? And the way he handled Paige, he'd make a terrific father.

She was lying in bed relaxing, as she had done most of the day at his insistence, when Mark came into her bedroom to talk. He was carrying two mugs of coffee.

"Umm, just what I could use about now," Kate said as he handed her a mug.

"I thought you might like some company with your coffee."

"Actually, I'd like to talk to you. I want to thank you for everything, Mark, from the bottom of my heart. I feel that I've abused our friendship."

"That's nonsense, Kate. Everything I've done and will do, I do because I want to do it. Nobody is putting a gun to my head."

"I know, but there are limits..."

"Not with me," he said, as he sat down besides her.

Kate reached over and hugged him. "Thank you, dearest friend," she said and kissed him.

Mark pulled away and looked into those lovely sky-blue eyes a moment and then kissed her back. "You're most welcome."

Kate leaned back against him. For the first time in such a long time, she relaxed. Mark reveled in her closeness. Unfor-

tunately the quiet time was cut short by Paige's cry from the nursery.

"Do you want me to go in and see what she wants?"

Kate looked at the time. "Aside from being wet, she's probably hungry. Until I have enough milk to fill a few bottles, you won't be able to feed her."

Kate got out of bed and went into the nursery. Mark followed.

"Hello, sweetheart," she cooed to Paige. "Do you need a changing?" she said as she peeked at her diaper. "My goodness! You are one wet baby," she said, taking off the wet diaper and replacing it with a new one.

"Would you like me to leave so you can nurse her?"

"Only if you feel embarrassed."

"I think it's a beautiful thing."

Kate sat down on the rocker and bared her breast for Paige. Almost instantly the little mouth attached to her nipple and began to suckle greedily.

"Good Lord! You're acting like you're starving," Kate said lightheartedly.

"Don't worry, Kate, I'll testify that you've been feeding her," he said, chuckling.

It didn't bother her that Mark was there with her while she nursed. After his helping her deliver Paige, there was little left to be embarrassed or shy about.

* * * *

Kate's parents arrived eight days after she and Paige had come home from the hospital. Mark answered the door since Kate was in the middle of nursing the baby.

Opening the door, Mark found the two elder Douglasses standing there laden with wrapped packages. It took a mo-

ment for the shock to wear off on both sides of the door.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Douglas," he said, as he took the packages out of Kate's mother's arms. "How are you?"

"So, where's the little one?" Kate's father asked.

"Charles! Have you no manners? We're both fine, Mark, and how have you been? From what Kate's been telling me, you've been a Godsend to her."

"Just a good friend, willing to help out."

"So where's my granddaughter hiding?"

"Kate's nursing her. She should be almost finished. That child is always hungry."

"I'll go check on her," Mrs. Douglas said. "Charles, you stay put."

Mark liked Kate's parents. Her mother was tall like Kate, but a good deal heavier. A few more pounds and she could be a serious linebacker, he mused. She was still an attractive woman, though. As for Kate's father, he was as direct and straight forward as they came, almost to the lack of tact in most cases. You never had to second guess him. He was a tall man, but possessed a large pot belly. If he grew a beard, he'd make a terrific Santa Claus. Mark thought of mentioning it to him. He'd really be a hoot around Christmas.

"Mom! Hello!"

"Finish feeding my granddaughter," Mary Douglas said as she kissed the top of Kate's head. "She's beautiful, Kate."

Paige stopped sucking and began to coo. Kate handed her to her mother.

"Hello, little one," Mary Douglas said as tears welled in her eyes.

"I'll go say hello to Dad."

"Are you driving Mark crazy yet, Dad?" Kate said as she

put her arms around her father's neck and kissed him.

His attention was diverted to his wife and granddaughter who had just entered the room.

Kate and Mark watched as the two elder Douglasses cooed over Paige, acting like typical grandparents.

Ten minutes or so later, Kate asked, "Have you two had any lunch? Mark and I were going to have something to eat."

"I can eat something," Charles said.

"You can always eat something," Mary added. "That's why you look the way you do."

"I can't help it if I have a healthy appetite."

"Is that what they call it these days," his wife replied sharply.

"Come on, you two. No fighting."

"Who's fighting?" her father asked, glaring at his wife.

"I can see nothing changes," Kate said.

Her parents disagreed about everything. It was as if they lived to argue. They were the epitome of opposites. If they didn't love each other as much as they did they wouldn't have been together as long as they were. She and Joan would worry about them sometimes. But they always seemed to know when to call a truce, long before any blood was shed.

Mark, who was no stranger to their verbal sparring, sat there with an amused look on his face.

"I'll help you make some sandwiches, Kate," he said, pulling her into the kitchen to let her parents spend some time with Paige, but secretly hoping that her parents wouldn't end up arguing.

By the time Kate called her parents into the kitchen, Paige was fast asleep in her crib and her parents were acting as if nothing happened, which was what they normally did.

* * * *

Kate enjoyed having her parents around. It felt like old times. However, like old times, after awhile their arguing would often get on her nerves. They loved Paige and would have liked to stay longer than the three weeks they were staying, but the Gypsy in their blood was calling to them, which was just as well.

There were many changes in Paige during that time. She was putting on weight and filling out. The pediatrician was thrilled with her progress. But best of all, she was beginning to sleep a little longer at night.

* * * *

Kate, her parents, and Mark were enjoying some coffee and cake after a scrumptious meal prepared by Mary Douglas, when Charles Douglas began to speak.

"Mark, I like you. Because I do, I feel I should give you some good advice."

"But you don't understand the stock market," Mary said.

"Who said anything about the stock market? Now what was I saying? Oh, yes... Be smart. Save yourself a bundle."

"Aha! I knew it was about the stock market," Kate's mother interjected.

"Mary! Will you stop it with the stock market. I'm trying to impart something really important here."

Mark and Kate were trying to keep a straight face.

"What I've been trying to tell you is that I think you should move in with my daughter."

"Charles! My word! Sometimes I wonder if your brain hears what your mouth is saying."

"Let me finish. The point I'm trying to make is that he practically lives here already. It's cheaper to keep one apartment."

"Thanks for the advice, Dad, but there's more to living together than just sharing an apartment," Kate said, still reeling from the fact her own father initiated such a subject.

"So?"

Kate rolled her eyes. She really didn't want to go where her father was heading.

"You think about it, son."

"I have, but it takes two, sir."

"Anybody for more coffee?" Kate said as she got up from the table.

Mary Douglas saw how uncomfortable Kate was and changed the subject. Kate realized what she did and was grateful.

The following day while Charles Douglas was out walking with Paige, Mary and Kate sat down to have coffee and talk.

"Sometimes I don't know where your father gets the crazy notions he comes up with. But you know he had a point last night."

"What do you mean?"

"I may not agree with having Mark just move in, but marrying him doesn't seem so far-fetched."

"It does if I don't love him."

"But you do care for him, don't you?"

"Very much. He's a dear friend."

"That can blossom into love."

"Mom, please..."

"Kate, I have eyes. I see the way he looks at you. He's obviously in love with you. He'd make a good husband...and of course, a good father to Paige."

"I know. He's told me how he feels. But I'm not ready to get involved again and may not be for a long time."

"He might not wait forever, Kate."

"I know. Where do you and Dad intend to go from here?"

"Don't change the subject."

"I really don't want to talk about this."

"I merely want to know that you and Paige will be all right."

"Why shouldn't we? We're doing just fine."

"And if Mark should find someone new?"

"I'll be happy for him."

"Will you?"

"Yes!"

"I'm sorry, Kate. No matter how old you get, you'll always be my little girl."

"I know that, Mom," Kate replied, giving her mother a hug. "But please don't worry. Paige and I will be okay. I promise."

"Am I interrupting something?" Charles Douglas said, as he handed Paige to Kate.

"No. Just a mother and daughter talk. Want some coffee, Dear?"

"Yes, I can do with a cup."

"So did you enjoy your walk, Dad?"

"Yes. Paige reminds me so much of you when you were her age."

"You remember that far back?" Mary asked him.

"I'm not senile, you know."

"You could have fooled me."

"Mother!"

"I'm only kidding, Kate. Your father has a selective memory. He only remembers what he wants to."

"You're being terrible today, Mom," Kate said with

laughter in her voice.

Even though Kate didn't know when she'd see her parents again, by the time they left, she was glad they did. Having them around for three weeks was enough time to remind her why she moved out into her own apartment in the first place.

Chapter 29

William was discharged from the hospital on a beautiful Saturday morning. Robin and Dylan came to pick him up and take him home to live with them in the apartment they rented in Tempe, not far from the University of Arizona.

Dylan came charging into William's room.

"Hiya, Sport," William said. "Where's your mother?"

"Here," Robin said, walking in soon after Dylan. "Who can keep up with him? Did you sign out already?"

"Yes. I can just leave." William was thrilled to finally leave the hospital after the long months he'd spent convalescing there. He still had no idea who he was or what would happen once he left, but he felt that if he was lucky enough to survive whatever he'd been through, things had to get better.

"Great."

As they left the hospital, a blast of hot air hit William. The thermometer was nearly at ninety and it was still morning. *Had I always lived here in this heat*, he wondered.

"It's going to be a scorcher today," Robin said, as the three of them got into her aging Jeep Cherokee. "At least the air works," she said, turning it on full blast. "Besides, we don't have to go far."

Robin had waited for this day a long time. She had stopped by the store the night before and picked up a few things for William, a few pairs of jeans, some shirts, and underwear. She had guessed his size. It wasn't hard, for she had memorized how he looked and fantasized running her hands down his lean, muscled body.

She was in love with this man without a memory. Never did she imagine she'd have such feelings again. After Chad had died, she thought she had buried her heart along with him. But when the stranger, whom she named William, was brought to the hospital, she began to feel alive once more, rediscovering the needs within her that had been so long denied.

Being with William made her feel giddy, as if she were a sixteen-year-old teenager once again. He was a blank canvas for which she had the paint. Having no past, she intended to help write his present and future.

Robin pulled into the apartment complex and drove around to where her apartment was located. "Well, here we are. It ain't much, but I call it home."

"I really appreciate this, Robin. I don't know what I would have done had you not been gracious enough to invite me to live here. But as soon as I get a job, I will pay you rent."

"We'll worry about that later on. Right now I intend to get value for my dollar by making you fix everything that is broken."

He laughed, feeling more comfortable with each passing moment.

Robin opened the door to a two bedroom apartment.

"You'll be sleeping on the futon. It's much more comfortable than it looks," she said, though she was already

fantasizing him in her bed.

William didn't mind. He'd sleep on the floor if he had to. Perhaps one day he and Robin would hit it off. She was one terrific lady and he could feel his body agreeing with that.

Chapter 30

Mr. Wainwright had been right. Time did fly by fast. Paige grew so quickly. Kate constantly took pictures so she could send them to her sister and show her parents. Kate flew to Seattle with Paige to celebrate Christmas when she was three. It was a wonderful reunion, because her parents were there also. Joan promised to try and come to New York the following year.

It felt as if Paige had just been born, yet it was time to register her for kindergarten. Kate's school had a full-day program which made things a great deal easier for Kate. She would take Paige to school with her and bring her home in the afternoon, thus eliminating the need for a sitter.

Paige loved to go to school with her mother and Mark. It made her feel so grown-up. Besides, it was really super having one of the best teachers in the school for a mom. She was even envied by many of the kids.

* * * *

One afternoon, when Mark wasn't with them, Paige was unusually quiet during the ride home. Normally she'd chatter non-stop about one thing or another. Kate surmised that something had to be bothering her.

"Sweetheart, is something the matter?"

"No."

"You sure?"

Paige pursed her lips and stared out the window. A tear sneaked out of the side of her eye and slid silently down her cheek.

"Are you sick?"

She shook her head.

"You seem very upset about something. If you don't want to talk about it, that's okay. But if you do, I'd like to try and help make it better."

The tears that Paige was so bravely trying to hold back began to flow. Kate pulled over to the side of the road and took her in her arms.

"What's the matter, love?"

"Courtney says that I never had a daddy; that I made him up."

"Why would she say such a thing?"

"She heard her mommy tell Melanie's mommy that you weren't married when I was born."

Kate always knew that one day someone would be cruel enough to say something to Paige. She merely hoped it would be later rather than sooner.

"Paige, your daddy and I loved each other very much. You were a result of our love. Unfortunately, he died in a car accident before we could get married."

Paige sat there quietly for a few minutes thinking about what Kate had just said. Then she sniffled and asked, "Was my daddy handsome?"

"He was as handsome as a prince in a fairy tale," Kate said, reaching for her wallet. "What do you think?" she said, showing Paige a picture of Peter.

“He looks like Prince Charming!”

“I told you so.”

Paige sat there beaming. Kate pulled out her compact mirror.

“Look, you have his green eyes and his smile. And do you see those adorable dimples on your cheeks and chin?”

“Uh-huh”

“You got them from your daddy. He had the same ones. See?”

“Wow!”

Kate watched as Paige grinned into the mirror, studying her face from every conceivable angle. Finally, Paige closed the mirror and handed it back to her.

“Let’s go home, Mommy. I’m hungry.”

Kate reflected back to when Paige was learning to talk. She had thought that Mark was her father. Being a constant in their lives, for which Kate was more than grateful for and would never change, she expected this. Delicately, not to hurt Mark, she explained to Paige that he was not her daddy, but a very close friend.

Eventually, when Paige was able to understand what Kate had been saying, the child replied in the voice of a six-year-old, but with the wisdom of one much older, “I have an idea! If Mark married you, then he could be my daddy! Then all the times I called him daddy wouldn’t be wasted.”

Merely thinking about that made Kate smile. *If only it were that easy...*

“Mom? You listening?”

“Sorry, honey. What did you say?”

Paige began to relate what had happened at school that day. Things were back on track.

Chapter 31

It was Kate's thirty-fifth birthday. Mark would not let her birthday go by unnoticed. Instead he had made reservations at a quiet, intimate restaurant. He felt Kate needed to get out. She had no life, never dated. She needed to get dressed up and feel like the beautiful woman she was. Not that the envious stares from other men when they saw them together had anything to do with it.

Kate had called Sandy, a former student of hers, who lived nearby and babysat. She had come a few times and Paige really liked her. Besides, she had long brown hair and let Paige brush it, which was more fun than brushing the hair on her dolls.

Paige loved to watch Kate get ready to go out. She didn't do it often, but the ritual fascinated the little girl. She'd see her mother emerge from the shower in her terry robe, with her hair wrapped in a towel. As Kate unwrapped her long, silky hair in front of the mirror and toweled it dry, she'd sometimes allow Paige to brush it if there was extra time.

As young as Paige was, she knew her mother was beautiful compared to most other women. She idolized her, wanting to grow up to look and be just like her. Men got silly around

her mother sometimes. And from the way they often looked at her, Mark especially, she knew Kate was special.

Mark came for Kate and kissed Paige hello. She knew he wasn't her daddy, but it didn't stop her from wishing he was. She liked to see them together and often heard the other girls at school call them Ken and Barbie. A few minutes later, Sandy arrived and Kate and Mark left for the restaurant.

Kate left Sandy instructions and told Paige to behave.

"She's no problem, Ms. Douglas. Don't worry about a thing and have a good time."

* * * *

It was a beautiful night. Kate paused to admire the majesty of the black, velvet sky studded by billions of diamond-sparkling stars. As she often did as a child, she selected that one star that seemed to be twinkling just for her and made a wish.

"A penny for your thoughts," Mark said, noticing the private smile on Kate's face.

"I was merely admiring the beautiful sky."

"It is a nice night. Perhaps we can take a walk later on."

"I'd like that very much."

"Did I happen to mention how beautiful you look tonight? You give the stars competition."

"Do I hear a slight tinge of prejudice?"

"You certainly do, lady."

They arrived at the restaurant before Mark could elaborate. It was constructed on a hill and looked as if it had been transported from a mountainside in Japan. A valet took Mark's car and handed him a ticket.

As they entered, a woman dressed in a formal Japanese kimono led them to a small rice-paper, paneled room. They

removed their shoes before entering.

"I guess you can't have more privacy than this," Kate said.

"Great place for affairs."

Kate laughed. "I'll keep that in mind."

The wine at dinner made Kate a little heady. She was not what one would call a good social drinker. The alcohol would break down her inhibitions, but if she had too much, it would put her to sleep. But tonight the balance was good and Kate felt wonderfully at ease. It had been a long time since she'd let herself go and enjoy the company of a man. There had been no one since Peter died. There hadn't been a need for another man in her life.

Mark looked handsome in his dark, navy-blue pin-striped suit. He had begun to work out at the gym to tighten his sagging middle. She had noticed the difference. He had become more lean and muscular and looked good, especially in a tee-shirt. She began to note how other women would look at him when they were together. Why hadn't she been aware of that before?

"Did you style your hair differently?" Kate asked, looking at Mark.

"Yes. Do you like it?"

"Very much."

Mark smiled. "I'm glad."

The waitress returned and asked if they'd like anything else. Mark shook his head and she returned promptly with the check. He left money on the table and said, "We've got things to do, places to go."

"Like for instance?"

"Dancing. When was the last time you went dancing?"

Kate loved to dance, but she couldn't even tell him the

last time she'd been on a dance floor.

"I have a surprise for you," he said, as he took her hand and led her from the restaurant.

He drove to the marina in Freeport. He had purchased two tickets for a romantic moonlight cruise. There was a band on board for dancing and a light buffet for a late dinner or snack. Al Jankowitz, another teacher, had mentioned it to him a while back. He had suggested Mark take a special date.

Dancing so close together nearly drove Mark crazy. It was hard to disguise how he felt. He hoped it wouldn't ruin her good time. Surprisingly, she said nothing, nor did she back away.

"Mark, this was a wonderful idea," Kate said when they finally sat down to take a breather. "Thank you."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

Kate's eyes twinkled as she said, "I really am."

Mark sipped his wine spritzer and admired Kate's beautiful face in awe. He never tired of looking at her finely chiseled, high cheek bones and those full sensual lips that he ached to kiss.

"Come, I love this song," Kate said, drawing him from the table.

She leaned her head against his shoulder as they swayed together to the music. He kissed the top of her head softly, wanting the song to never end.

As the boat headed back to the dock, Mark feared that the magic would end.

"I can't believe how wide awake I feel," Kate mentioned in the car as they drove towards her apartment.

"Would you like to stop for coffee somewhere?"

"No, not really. I can always make some when we get

back to the apartment. It's getting really late and we should let Sandy go home."

"Okay. I'll walk her home."

Kate leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes, a smile on her face.

"I'd like to go on a real cruise to the Bahamas or Mexico one day," Kate said.

"They make relaxing vacations."

"Maybe when Paige is older."

Mark filed this new knowledge away for future use.

"Did you guys have a nice time?" Sandy asked when they walked in.

"Yes, we did," Kate replied, as she handed Sandy the money she owed her for sitting. "Did Paige give you any trouble?"

"Nope. She's a great kid. I have a lot of fun watching her."

Kate smiled. "Thank you. I'll call when I need you again."

"You're welcome, any time."

"I'll walk you home, Sandy," Mark said.

"Good night."

Sandy waved and Mark followed her out. While he was gone, Kate checked on Paige, who was fast asleep with a tiny smile draped across her pretty little face. Then she slipped out of her dress into her terry robe. She came out of the bedroom as Mark let himself into the apartment.

"Shall I make some coffee?"

"No. I think I'd like some wine if you have some."

"I think there's some Chablis in the fridge."

Kate brought out two glasses into the living room and handed one to Mark.

“Thanks.”

She sat down next to him using him as a back rest as she stretched out her legs.

“You looked so lovely tonight.”

“Thank you, Mark,” she said as she looked up at him.

A warm feeling began to spread through her. She suddenly had this overpowering need to feel his lips on hers and his strong hands on her body. Kate gently stroked the side of his face.

“Are you sure you want this, Kate? I don’t want you to regret it later,” Mark asked, sensing where this might be heading.

“I want you to make love to me, Mark,” she said as she kissed him.

Mark didn’t expect the night to turn out this way even though he’d often prayed that one day it would. He had no idea that Kate had changed her feeling towards him. This was a most inviting surprise.

Kate hadn’t merely changed her mind about Mark overnight. Instead, it had been a gradual change that she had been hardly aware of herself until tonight. Mark had been a constant factor in her life. Her love for him had grown slowly like wine aging. It wasn’t an earth-shattering love like she had with Peter, but a more mature, comfortable one.

Paige’s feelings towards Mark helped tip the odds in his favor. Kate couldn’t deny their close relationship. Even though Paige knew that Mark wasn’t her father, she always made believe he was.

Kate had begun to miss having a man to hold her and make love to her. As much as she thought that aspect of her life had died along with Peter, she realized now that it hadn’t.

With Mark around, she was never lonely, but just his presence was no longer enough. She needed and wanted his physical love, as well.

Perhaps it was the wine that had made her heady and finally ready to break down the last inhibitions keeping her aloof from Mark, preventing her from loving him. The actual catalyst mattered little. What truly mattered at that moment was the undeniable fact that she wanted him terribly. She hadn't felt such a sexual hunger since Peter.

"Oh, Kate," was all Mark managed to whisper before his lips crushed hers in a passionate kiss.

Kate kissed him back with intensity now that all the desire and longing she'd held in check for so long had been released. They seemed to be devouring one another with their kisses. She felt as if she was being consumed by her own raging desire. And each kiss merely stoked the flames.

Breathless, they stopped for a moment and looked into one another's eyes. Then Kate took Mark's hand and led him into her bedroom.

Falling back onto the bed with Mark next to her, she drew his head down close to hers and kissed his face, his eyes, and finally, his lips. She could feel her own breath shortening and that dull, sweet sexual ache growing deep within her.

"You have no idea how long I've waited for this moment."

Breathlessly, she answered, "I think I have. Please love me, Mark."

There was no mistaking the sexual desire in her eyes. If Mark could have saved that moment forever in a bottle, he would have. At that instant he felt as if he'd been reborn.

With such a sense of urgency, he couldn't get out of his

clothes fast enough. Within moments, Mark was besides her stroking her tender breasts. He suckled a nipple, eliciting a quiet moan from Kate's lips. Moving to the other one, he dropped his hand to her sex. Gently he slipped his finger past the tender folds. Kate rubbed against that hand. He had sensed she was ready, now he was positive.

Mark sought her lips once more and their tongues caressed one another. Kate had quickened her pace. He removed his hand and replaced it with his erection. Kate closed herself around him and they began to move at a fevered pace until they collapsed in a spent heap.

They lay like that for some time, breathing in each other's air as they looked into each other's eyes. Mark looked for any hint of guilt or remorse on Kate's part. Seeing none, he smiled and kissed her nose. That led to a kiss here, a touch there, and their passion began to build again. With the urgency behind them, they now made love at a slower pace.

* * * *

The sunlight streaming in awoke Kate. Unlike the last time she and Mark had made love, she felt wonderful. Not a hint of guilt. No remorse. Glancing at the clock on her night table she knew Paige would be in any moment. Did she want the child to find Mark in her bed? But before she could even ponder an answer, Paige rushed in and had hopped onto her bed.

Unconsciously Kate clutched the blanket tightly around her nakedness. "Good morning, sweetheart."

"Morning, Mom..." Then noticing Mark, she jumped on him and bathed his face in kisses.

"Whoa, there!" he said with laughter in his voice. "I haven't been gone on a trip or lost at sea. What's with all this loving?"

"Melanie says her mommy and daddy sleep in the same bed so that means you're gonna be my daddy, right?"

Kate and Mark looked at one another. He knew what he wanted to answer Paige, but it was Kate who held the answer and his future within her hands. He held his breath.

"If all goes well, maybe," she replied, not missing the huge smile that had transformed Mark's worried face.

"Why not now?"

"Because things like that take time."

"But why?"

"Because they...Paige, this is getting us nowhere. I promise when I decide to marry Mark you'll be the first to know. Now go run and get dressed and I'll make us all breakfast."

"Oh...okay," Paige said as she slid slowly off the bed and headed for her room.

"Sometimes Paige can be difficult," Kate said, as she reached for her bathrobe.

"Aren't all females?" Mark said.

"I hope you said that to be funny," Kate said, as she walked out of the bedroom towards the bathroom.

Mark retrieved a pair of sweats he kept at Kate's. He often stayed over and needed a change of clothing. Last night was no exception. He really didn't feel like sitting around the breakfast table in a suit. He was fully dressed by the time Kate returned.

"Do you want me to leave while you dress?"

"Only if you can't keep your hands to yourself. There's a hungry child out there waiting to be fed. We wouldn't want her to starve, would we?"

"Perhaps I'll go out and entertain her."

"Great idea. I'll be out in a moment. Oh, by the

way we were lucky.”

“What do you mean?”

“When Paige comes into my room in the morning, she sometimes gets under the blanket with me and snuggles.”

“I take it you don’t normally sleep in your birthday suit.”

“I usually wear a nightshirt or sweats.”

“Umm. Then it’s a good thing Paige didn’t get under the blankets with us. My birthday suit might have really shocked her.”

Kate laughed. “With Paige, who knows? She’d just probably want to know how it worked.”

Mark walked out laughing and found Paige watching TV.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“You.”

“Me? What did I say?”

“Nothing. You just have a funny face,” he said as he tickled her.

Paige became serious when she stopped giggling. “Are you really going to become my daddy?”

“I hope so, sweetheart. I love you very much.”

“And I love you,” she said, putting her small arms around his middle.

Kate walked in and found them that way. She smiled and thought how easy it would be to marry Mark. There would be no problem with Paige and he getting along, which was a blessing after hearing such horror stories about people remarrying with children who absolutely resented the new spouse. But she feared rushing into marriage. She wasn’t exactly sure why, either, and would have a difficult time explaining her feelings to Mark.

“Okay, who wants pancakes?” Kate asked.

She got her answer in unison and began to gather the essentials. As she made the pancakes, she tried to find the reasons for her fears. They seemed to be irrational. Did she fear losing Mark? No. That wasn't it? Deep down inside did she think she was being unfaithful to Peter? That was ridiculous. Yet...

After Paige finished breakfast, she went to watch TV, leaving the adults to linger over their coffees.

"Where do we go from here, Kate? Was last night the beginning of something real? Or was it what you needed for the moment?"

"Well, you certainly have cut to the chase. I realize that I must have acted as if I was one of the most sex-starved women in the world last night. To a great extent, I was. But I really wanted you, Mark, not just any man. I do love you. The reality hit me like a ton of bricks last night."

"Even so, my original question still stands. You seem to be avoiding it, Kate. Why?"

"I'm not sure. I know I want us to be together, but I'm afraid to rush into anything."

"I don't think we can call a relationship between us rushed. It's been simmering on the back burner a mighty long time."

"That's not exactly what I meant. Actually, I'm not sure at all what I mean."

"Kate, try and explain how you feel."

Kate put her head between her hands and shook her head. "I know I want you in my life permanently, but not right now. I mean...I need time to adjust to having a man in my life again."

"It's not that I will be making tremendous demands of you..."

"I know. But can you try and be patient with me?"

"Kate, I have been patient with you...more than patient."

"I know, but..."

"All right, what's a little more time when we have a life-time?"

Looking a great deal relieved, Kate said, "Thank you."

Chapter 32

William sat up in bed abruptly. Something he had dreamed about had propelled him into consciousness. What had it been? Damn! He could not remember this time either. It had been happening with more frequency lately.

He turned to watch Robin sleep so peacefully next to him. When they had married four years ago, she had accepted him with his damaged mind. When she did, he vowed never to cause her a moment's pain. Therefore, he got out of bed to deal with his nocturnal problems elsewhere. He padded into the kitchen and made himself a cup of instant coffee and took it outside.

It would be morning soon, but for now the desert sky was a blanket of iridescent blinking lights. No matter how many times he'd stare at the skies above Arizona, William could never tire of its beauty. The memory of the night he and Robin drove deep into the desert awhile back came to him. They had made love under an awesome sky not unlike this one. It made him smile and feel better.

William had hoped he'd get his memory back by now. But all he ever experienced were flashes of his past, like pieces from a broken kaleidoscope. Those bits and pieces never

lasted long enough for him to remember nor had they made any sense. They tormented his waking hours and invaded his sleep. If only they'd linger a trifle longer. Then perhaps he'd remember the dreams and make some sense of them.

The only thing from his past that he could almost be certain of was his skill with computers. He had discovered that by accident when he tried to play a computer game with Dylan. The computer was booting up slowly. Instinctively, he began deleting programs that Robin no longer used and checked for file fragmentation. He could not explain how he knew what he was doing. He only knew he had to free up some space on the hard drive. If that didn't help he would get more memory and add it. He began to play around with the computer, realizing that he knew things only a person knowledgeable with computers could know. This led him to eventually getting a good job with a small company. Even with this remarkable breakthrough, nothing more of his past emerged.

William felt two slender arms encircle his chest.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"The bed felt cold."

"In ninety degree weather?"

"You know what I mean," Robin said, kissing his muscled back.

"I love to look at the desert sky at night. Its magnificence thrills me every time."

"I know. There's nothing like it. Did you have another dream?"

William turned completely around to face her. "You know about them?"

"Yes. I'd have to be awful dense not to."

"I didn't want to burden you with them."

“William, don’t ever think something like that. If you need to talk, no matter what it’s about, I’m here for you. And I’ll always be here for you, for better or for worse. Remember?”

William took Robin in his arms and kissed her. “I know,” he said as he buried his head between her slender neck and shoulder.

It didn’t upset Robin in the least that William couldn’t remember his past. Secretly she feared that if he did, it might take him away from her. But for now, as long as he couldn’t remember, he was hers. She seized every moment they were together as if it were their last. Arms circling each other’s back, they walked back into the apartment.

“I want you to know, no matter what, I’ll always love you, William.”

“You have given me a life for which I shall not only always love you, but I shall be eternally grateful for.”

“Show me how much, William,” Robin said as she took his hand and led him into the bedroom.

William traced her face with his finger and she brought it to her lips and kissed it. Then she gently began to nip at it before seductively beginning to suck it.

Robin had once mentioned that she hadn’t dated much after her husband had died and sex had been practically nonexistent. Now it seemed as if she was trying to make up for all the lonely hours of celibacy. Not that he minded. He couldn’t get enough of her either. Her taste and special smell stayed on his mind constantly while her unabashed sensuality could drive him wild.

She lightly glided her tongue down his chest until she found her mark. A groan escaped William’s lips which

seemed to turn Robin on as well. He wound his fingers in her dark hair as she wove her magic. Every care he might have had vanished. All he could think about was the immense pleasure he was feeling.

Chapter 33

Though Kate had wanted to wait before getting involved in a relationship with Mark, she soon changed her mind. He was her very best friend and she liked having him around. But most of all, he was an ardent lover who had awakened all the dormant feelings inside of her that she thought had died with Peter. Now that the dam was breached, she wondered how she went all that time without being loved by a man. There was still a void in her heart where Peter had resided and she knew it would always remain, despite having another man in her life. That would never change. So she gave Mark his own space in her heart.

Mark was a realist. He knew Kate would never be completely over Peter, but he accepted that. He would take her under any conditions, for to live without her would be so much worse. He would accept graciously whatever love she gave him, knowing well enough, that if she ever married him, she would strive to be a good wife. He knew that whatever she put her mind to do, she did well.

* * * *

Kate called Sandy and asked her to baby sit for a Friday night. She had decided to make dinner at Mark's and watch a

rented movie. It would be quite a treat to be alone at his place for an evening.

Sandy walked in at five and disappeared with Paige in a matter of moments. Kate laughed to herself. Poor Sandy. Kidnapped by a doting six-year-old, wanna-be little sister. Maybe she should give her a raise.

"I left the number by the telephone in the kitchen where I'll be," Kate called into the hall.

"Okay, Ms. Douglas. Have a great time."

"Thank you."

That was exactly what Kate intended to do. She was acting just like a teenager with raging hormones all day just thinking about tonight. She began to wonder if it were a full moon or the tides that were affecting her. She couldn't remember the last time she practically wet her pants thinking about being with a guy. What a testimonial for Mark.

Then she recalled what her friend Patty, who had been hot for Mark, had told her years ago. Kate had originally set up a date between them. They had ended up in bed on their first date. Patty glowed the next day. She couldn't stop singing the praises of Mark's sexual prowess.

"Guess you were right, Patty," she said aloud to herself.

She also recalled the later accusation that Patty charged. Mark would never get interested in her or any other woman as long as Kate held on to his reins. "He's in love with you," she had spat. Kate denied it all. She hadn't realized then how Mark had felt about her even though it was obvious to others.

Sorry, Patty, she thought, but no one could fault Mark. Patty was an attractive woman who obviously offered herself to him. Mark, being a healthy male, accepted. When the sexual interest waned, there was probably nothing left to build

any relationship on, anyway.

Mark met Kate at the door and took the shopping bag out of her hands. Even before he closed the door, their lips met. Putting the bag down and closing the door, Mark took her in his arms, their kisses deepening.

“I thought about tonight all day,” he said breathlessly.

“I did, too.”

Mark cupped an eager breast already swollen with desire as his tongue slid down the side of Kate’s neck, eliciting a moan. Kate sought his mouth again, deepening her kiss so she could feel his tongue deep inside her mouth.

They kissed and fondled their way into his bedroom where they both fell upon the bed. In no time, their clothing was strewn around the bed. Mark took a breast into his mouth and sucked strongly at it, causing wave after wave of heated pleasure to sweep downward throughout Kate’s body.

She couldn’t control the wanton pleasure he was unleashing as he worked his way down the length of her body with his mouth and hands. Already halfway there, Kate needed to feel Mark within her to reach that awesome peak.

Sensing that Kate was more than ready for him, he slid into her and rode her hard. Through waves of sensation, he pounded into her. Her legs were wrapped around him so he could penetrate her deeper as she began to convulse. Before her spasms eased, she felt his body stiffen and then buck as he came. He collapsed on top of her. She could feel his heart banging against hers as she held him close.

Mark gently kissed Kate’s lips. “I love you, Kate. My life is now complete.”

Kate smiled. “You have given me a life again. I’ve been an empty shell of a woman for so long.”

“I intend to fill you with love every chance I get.”

“Mark, I know I said I wanted time, but I need you. I need to be with you.”

“Do you know how long I’ve waited to hear that from you?” Mark asked, his eyes beginning to mist.

“Sometimes you really don’t see the forest for the trees. I want you to move in with me.”

“Why not marry?”

“I don’t know.”

“I won’t press you on that. When you’re ready, we’ll get married. But for now, living together will be fine.”

“You have always been a most reasonable and agreeable man.”

“More like a realistic man who accepts what he can get. I love you, Kate, and always have. I would have sold my soul to the Devil long ago if it meant you’d be mine. I have no pride where you’re concerned.”

“I’m a very lucky woman to have such a man. I’ll try to be all the woman you desire.”

“You are, Kate,” Mark said as he shifted his body over her.

Chapter 34

Traffic was backed up. It seemed to be worse than the usual rush hour traffic. *Probably an accident*, William thought. Staring out of the window, his mind a blank, he saw trees with bright orange-red leaves at the sides of the highway. He was also in traffic, but he could see a bridge in the distance. There was somebody in the car with him. A woman. He couldn't make out her face, but he knew she was smiling. The blast of a horn brought him back to the present. The episode left him frustrated. It always did when he was teased with glimpses of who he once was.

As he inched his way past a nasty accident involving three cars, he counted two ambulances among the emergency vehicles. Lately, there seemed to be more and more accidents each week. Too many people in a hurry on crowded roads made a deadly combination. He left the grim scene behind as the road began to open up.

William came home to a candlelit dinner for two.

"Where's Dylan?"

"He's sleeping at Joey's tonight."

"Aha, so we're celebrating having an evening to ourselves?"

"Not exactly."

“Well then, what exactly are we celebrating...or did you just feel romantic?”

“I always feel romantic with you,” Robin said, fondling him.

“If you continue to do that, we’ll never have dinner.”

Robin laughed and released him.

“So tell me then, what are we celebrating?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Are you sure?”

Robin nodded, beaming. “I saw my gynecologist today.”

William’s face lit up with joy as he swept her into his arms.

“When is the baby due?”

“I’m starting my second month, so...around early November.”

“That’s wonderful news, baby. I’m so happy.”

“Me, too.”

“I hope it’s a little girl who looks exactly like you.”

“Why?”

“Because then she’ll be beautiful,” he said, embracing her again.

“I love you, William,” she said, kissing him.

The kiss led to another and before long, dinner was forgotten.

Chapter 35

Mark and Kate had been living together for nearly two years. He never regretted, not even for a moment, moving in with Kate. What he did regret, though, was the fact that they hadn't gotten married. At first Mark had figured he'd be satisfied with only living with Kate. After all, it was more than he had ever dreamed of having. He was able to love and hold the woman he adored all night and wake seeing her face the first thing every morning. But he soon discovered having this wasn't enough.

What seemed to trouble him most of all was the fact that Kate's biological clock was running out of time and he desperately wanted to have a child with her. He loved Paige as if she were his own, but he wanted another child—his own. He realized he could be devious and try to get her pregnant, knowing she'd never go through another fiasco like she did while pregnant with Paige. He'd be killing two birds with one stone. Not only would she be pregnant, but she'd marry him in a heartbeat also. But Mark loved Kate too much to be deceitful. He desired her to want to have his baby.

On the second anniversary of their relationship, Mark took Kate out to dinner and dancing.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Mark asked between courses.

"I love this place. The band is terrific. Who told you about it?"

"I have my sources."

"Who?"

"If I divulge the source, I will have to kill you," Mark said with a heavy Slavic accent.

Kate laughed and said, "I'll just have to risk it. Curiosity killed the cat, anyway."

"Well, my feline beauty, I guess I cannot tell a lie any more than I can resist a pretty face. It was Neil Serrota. He found it by accident. You're lucky I don't have the heart to do away with you."

"But I thought he hated going out."

"His wife practically dragged him. She was desperate."

"I guess we all have our breaking points," Kate replied, visualizing a mental picture of Nancy Serrota, all six foot, two hundred and fifty pounds of her dragging poor Neil by the hair.

"Yeah," Mark said, letting out his laughter, probably imagining the same scene.

"Speaking of marriage..." Mark began.

"Were we?"

"Kate," he said, reaching for her slender hand, "you know how much I love you and how thrilled I am to be living with you. To be able to hold you at night and open my eyes and see you the first thing in the morning is close to being in heaven for me."

"But you're not satisfied."

"No. I want the whole ball of wax. Marriage ceremony,

name change and all the works. I want you to have my child."

A cold front moved in around the table changing the mood instantly. Kate turned away. Mark watched as her lips quivered. They always did when she was upset.

"Look at me, Kate."

Kate turned to face him. At that moment, she looked like a little girl who had just lost her favorite doll. He had an aching desire to rush over and scoop her into his arms.

"We're not getting any younger, Kate. Your child-bearing days are almost over and I would like at least one other child. Surely you'd like more children also."

The tears that had been welling in Kate's eyes silently fell. Mark reached over and gently wiped them away.

"Damn it, Kate. He's not coming back. He's dead. I'm not asking for your soul, only that you'll become my wife. I merely want to legitimize what we already have."

"I know."

"Do you think he'd fault you for marrying me?"

"No."

"Then why don't you marry me?"

"Because I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Losing you. Of being too happy and losing you. Just like I lost him."

"That's nonsense, Kate. We're happy and neither one of us is going anywhere. Whatever jinxes you imagined having are gone."

"How can I chance it?"

"Chance it for me, because I'm asking you to. Marry me, Kate. Let me adopt Paige," he said, kissing her hands. "It's time to put all those irrational fears behind you."

Kate looked into Mark's eyes. They were filled with love

and longing. Could she really deny him the one thing he asked for? He had been so patient with her. She knew she'd always been selfish. He had always given her all of his love and devotion. Were her fears merely another form of selfishness on her part? Did she fear being left behind alone or fear harm would come to Mark? How could she separate the two? She would marry him, but part of her would always belong to Peter and no one or anything would ever change that.

"All right, Mark. I will marry you. Lord knows why you've put up with me this long."

Beaming, he said, "You'll never regret this, Kate."

I hope I never will, either, she thought.

The rest of the evening they discussed the kind of wedding they would have. In the end, it was decided that they would marry before the Justice of the Peace since neither of them had any family nearby.

* * * *

Mark fell asleep quickly after making love to Kate. With her mind as cluttered as it was, sleep didn't come very easily. When it eventually came, she dreamed that Peter and Mark went for a drive. Neither came back. She awoke, screaming, "No! No! No! Dear God, no! It mustn't happen again!"

Mark woke up instantly and took the sobbing Kate into his arms. "It's okay, baby, you just had a nightmare."

Kate continued to sob awhile until she fell asleep once more. Mark put her gently back on her side of the bed and kissed her head. It wasn't the first time Kate had had a nightmare. He got out of bed and padded to the bathroom. Her nightmares usually had a more disturbing effect on him than they did on her. Luckily she didn't have them too often.

Chapter 36

The pains were coming on strong now, almost ten minutes apart. Robin called William at work.

“Please come home. I’m almost ready. Wait...a sec...a...nother...pain. Hard...to talk. Okay, it’s passed. I’ll call the doctor and let him know.”

“Be right there. Hang on tight. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

After calling the doctor, Robin called her friend Karen to let her know. She had promised to keep an eye on Dylan. Even though he was thirteen, Robin hated to leave him alone for long periods of time. He was best friends with Joey, Karen’s son, so hanging out at Karen’s wouldn’t be a problem. Robin left a note for Dylan to go to Karen’s for dinner. She advised him to take pajamas, also. William would call and let him know if and when she had the baby.

Robin got her overnight bag and placed it by the door. Then she sat down to wait for William.

* * * *

William was home in half the time it would normally take him.

“My, God, William, did you fly home?”

“I didn’t want you to start without me.”

“How could I? You’re my Lamaze partner. It would take too long to get another,” she said and doubled over in pain.

“Here, let me help you,” William said as he helped her sit. “Is your overnight bag packed?”

She nodded, still not quite free of the last pain. “It’s by the door,” she said when she was finally able to speak. “I’m surprised you didn’t fall over it.”

“How many minutes apart are they now?”

“About eight. The doctor said to wait until they’re about five. We’ll still have plenty of time.”

“I’d rather head out now. What if we get stuck in traffic or the baby decides to come faster?”

“If you feel better about it, I doubt if it will make much difference in the long run.”

“Did you leave a note for Dylan telling him to go to Karen’s?”

“Yes. I’m ready when you are...”

“Another pain?”

“Yes,” Robin said as she sat down until it passed.

“Luckily I parked right outside, or you’d never make it to the car.”

There was hardly any traffic and they got to the hospital quickly. An orderly came rushing out with a wheelchair and pushed Robin inside where her doctor greeted her.

“Six minutes apart, Dr. Howard,” Robin said, still clutching her stop watch.

“Let’s get the paperwork out of the way quickly or they’ll hunt us down,” he said. “You could be dying and they’ll still insist you fill out the paperwork first.”

Robin smiled weakly. Another pain was about to overtake her. As soon as the paperwork was finished she was

rushed into the room where they hooked her up to all the machinery that would monitor the baby's heartbeat and plot her contractions. William held her hand every step of the way.

"How are you doing, Rob?"

"Surviving. Next time let's switch. I'll impregnate you and you can have the baby."

"No way. You'll have the procedure down pat by then."

The doctor came in to examine Robin and found her to be dilating and almost ready. He brushed the hair from her eyes and told her to keep up the good work and disappeared.

Another contraction began and William watched it build on the monitor. It was fascinating as it grew in depth and intensity until it crested and waned.

"That was unbelievable, Robin. I watched the entire contraction from beginning to end."

"It was very believable. I felt every bit of the pain. And it wasn't very much fun from this end."

"Sorry. I forgot it represented the intensity of your pain."

"Speaking of pain, all women who have children must have a masochistic chip built inside their heads. Why else would they go through this? Either that or we're all crazy."

If William hadn't been so nervous, he would have laughed. Instead, he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"You're doing fine," he said as he saw the monitor needle began to rise again.

Judging by its rise, it would be an intense pain. Perhaps Robin was correct in her assessment that women have to be crazy to have kids. Peter knew he couldn't take such an intense barrage of pain.

The doctor came back and rechecked Robin. With a big grin he said, "You're just about ready," and signaled the nurse

and orderly. "Showtime!"

Pushing Robin into the delivery room the orderly tried to make light conversation. "Is this your first time?"

"No. I'm....crazy.... This is my sec...ond."

"Ah, that's just a drop in the bucket compared to the woman who was here last week. She was on her eighth."

"Was she on furlough from a mental institution?"

"Hah, hah, that's very funny. I have to remember that."

Robin rolled her eyes at William as if to ask where did they find that guy? William nodded, understanding what she was thinking as if he'd read her mind and to show they were on the same page, gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

The pains were becoming unbearable the closer the time came. William helped her with her breathing exercises as they had been taught. It was hard, though, to get Robin to cooperate even if it was for her own good. William wished it was over quickly for her. She did try to push when the doctor and nurse asked her to amidst the screaming and tears. It was never enough and they demanded more.

"I can't!" she cried.

"Yes, you can, Robin. Now push! That's the girl," the doctor said. "Come on, one more. I see the head. Push!"

"Come on, Robin, you're doing fine," the nurse said, mopping the perspiration off her brow before it trickled into her eyes.

Suddenly, at twenty-four minutes past twelve the following morning, all the pain and discomfort was forgotten as the tiny, dark head emerged before Robin's eyes and the mother-child bonding had begun to form.

The doctor held the baby in his arms and handed her to the nurse. "You have a beautiful little girl," he said,

smiling. "I just love this part."

William kissed Robin and held her hand. The nurse cleaned up the baby and brought her back to Robin to hold. Tears of joy and relief stung her eyes as the proud father stood by.

"She is beautiful, Rob, and looks just like you," William said.

"Are we still decided on Ashley as the name?"

William nodded and touched the baby's small hand.

A few minutes later, the nurse took the baby and William kissed Robin goodbye before he headed home. He'd be back later in the morning so she could get some rest.

Chapter 37

Mark and Kate were married on a Thursday afternoon in November with a few friends in attendance. Kate wore a lovely creme colored dress and held a large orchid bouquet. She looked like a beautiful model who had just stepped off the pages of Vogue. Mark wore a dark-blue pin-striped suit that accentuated his broad shoulders and narrow waist. All those hours at the gym finally paid off. The other couple waiting to be married stared in envy as they watched Kate and Mark walk into the Justice's chamber.

Afterwards everyone went to lunch at a quiet restaurant in town to celebrate with the happy couple. Not one person was surprised at their marriage. Everyone figured it was only a matter of time before it eventually happened.

Mark had made reservations at a hotel in the Poconos for the weekend. He and Kate would drive to Pennsylvania after school on Friday. It would be a mini-honeymoon. The real one would be a cruise later on when they had vacation time.

With the help of Mr. Wainwright, Kate's class got together with Peter's class and planned a party for them on Friday afternoon. Neither one of them had any inkling and were totally surprised and touched that their students would go to

such trouble for them. To the kids, Kate and Peter were the Barbie and Ken of the school.

* * * *

Soaking in the tub, a few nights later, trying to relax from the frantic pace of the previous days, Kate did a lot of thinking. She realized that Mark was right; they weren't getting any younger. She'd soon be thirty-eight. He wasn't being unreasonable, but pragmatic. If she wanted to have any more children, she was going to have to start trying soon.

She found the idea of having another child inviting. It would certainly make Mark ecstatic. And why shouldn't she make him happy? He has been a loving companion and would make a wonderful father. He loved Paige and treated her as his own child. Why not give him what he wanted so badly?

As she thought more and more about it, she knew it was the right thing for both of them and Paige, who always wanted a baby brother. She was old enough to be a big help with the baby, too.

"Hey, are you still alive in there?" Mark called.

"Sorry. Do you have to use the bathroom?"

"It isn't at the critical point yet, but the need is edging towards it."

"I'll be right out, dear. I was thinking and lost track of time."

"Don't tell me thinking can't be dangerous. I guess it beats trying to get into the Guinness Book of Records as the first human prune."

The door opened and Kate was practically face-to-face with Mark who was leaning on the jamb. He experienced the same catch in his breath as he always did when he saw her first emerge from a shower or bath with her skin so

soft and rosy from the heat.

“I thought you needed to use the bathroom.”

“I did—do,” he said, going in and shutting the door behind him.

When Mark came out Kate was sitting in front of the mirror brushing her hair. He stepped behind her and kissed her neck.

“I love the way you smell after a bath,” he said, slipping his hand inside the front of her robe and cupping a breast. Kate responded by turning her head to meet Mark’s lips and giving him a deep kiss. That was enough of an invitation for him. He immediately swept her up into his arms and carried her to the bed.

Before they got totally carried away, Mark reached in his night table for a condom. Kate stopped him from putting it on.

“Are you sure?” he whispered.

She nodded and smiled.

“I love you, Kate.”

“Show me how much.”

“With pleasure, madam,” he said, as his lips sought hers.

No matter how many times he made love to her, Mark always found it exciting. The taste and texture of her skin, her special smell wrought havoc on his senses. Sometimes he found it hard not to lose himself. That night seemed to be one of those times. He was more than ready when Kate guided him into her. As Kate cried out in pleasure, he let himself go, secretly hoping she’d conceive.

She kissed him and whispered, “I hope I conceived.”

Mark smiled when she said that. They were finally on the same page in the same book. Soon sleep overtook them both,

each dreaming their own special dreams.

Some time towards early morning, Kate felt Mark's hardness against her. She repositioned herself so he could glide in and they made love once more.

* * * *

By the time December rolled in, Kate had already noticed certain subtle changes in her body. She knew she was pregnant. All that remained was to take a test to confirm it. She wanted to surprise Mark with the news. Conveniently, Mark's birthday was in a few days. She'd take him out to dinner and give him all his presents when they got home. On top of the pile, she'd put a congratulations on your new arrival card. She should get a rise out of him with that.

Unfortunately, not everything works out according to plan. Instead of spending the evening in a restaurant celebrating his thirty-ninth birthday, Mark sat in a county jail cell, waiting for his lawyer to come by and get him out.

Chapter 38

Earlier that afternoon, Melissa Wells, one of Mark's students, stayed back from music to talk to him. He had noticed that she was visibly upset all morning. If she hadn't come to him, he would have probably taken her aside and asked what was wrong.

"Mr. Winters, I really don't feel like going to music today. Would it be all right if I stayed behind with you?" she said in a voice quivering with emotion.

Normally Mark would head for the teachers' lounge and have coffee, but Melissa seemed to need to talk to someone.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"It's not me. It's my little brother, Jeffrey. He's very sick and I'm afraid...he's going...to die."

Melissa began to cry and Mark put his arm around her sobbing shoulders to comfort her.

"I'm so very sorry to hear that, Melissa. I really am."

"Then you won't mind if I stay here with you?"

"Of course not. Would you like to talk about it? Sometimes it makes you feel better."

"All right," she said and got a chair and sat down close to him.

For the remainder of the period, Melissa poured her

heart out to Mark. Neither one of them had realized that they were being spied upon by Laurie Barnes. Laurie noticed that Melissa had remained behind and wanted to know why. Laurie was jealous of Melissa and her pretty blond hair and blue eyes. She hated her own ordinary-looking brown hair and eyes.

Seeing Melissa with Mr. Winters gave her a chance to get even with her and get some attention for herself. After watching the two of them for most of the period, Laurie went to the nurse's office and spun her tale. Jean Riley, the nurse, could hardly believe what Laurie said she saw happen between Mark Winters and Melissa Wells.

"Are you certain of what you saw? These are terrible things to say a person did, if they didn't happen."

"I saw it. I really did!"

"All right," Jean Riley said and sighed. "Let's go speak to Mr. Wainwright."

After listening to what Laurie had to say, he sent her out of the room so he could speak to Jean Riley in private.

"This sounds crazy."

"I agree, but she said she saw it."

"I don't know whether or not to believe the child. We can't take the chance. We'll have to notify the parents."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wainwright, I understand that this has to be checked out, but I still don't believe Mark Winters would touch a student in an inappropriate way."

"I agree, but we can't just ignore this. I doubt if it would go away."

"Should we question Melissa about it before we notify her parents?"

"From what Laurie said, she's upset enough. We'll

let her parents talk to her.”

Mr. Wainwright keyed Melissa’s name into the computer. Almost instantly her personal data was on the screen. He dialed her mother who was a receptionist at a local doctor’s office.

Trying to be as delicate as possible, he asked, “Would it be at all possible for her and Mr. Wells to come speak to me at a convenient time that day or evening to discuss a problem that has occurred at school?... No. Melissa is fine. It is difficult to discuss over the phone... Yes, I realize I’m being somewhat cryptic. I apologize, but you will understand when you come... Yes, I’ll expect you both at four. Thank you.

“That was not an easy thing to do. Please send for Melissa and keep her with you until her parents come.”

“Do you want me to question her about what happened?”

“No. But if she brings it up, go ahead. After all, Laurie did mention that she’s upset. I just don’t want to make matters worse.”

Nothing was mentioned to an unsuspecting Mark, who went home with Kate. Laurie Barnes also went home, quite pleased with herself for the commotion she had caused.

Mr. Wainwright explained to the two anxious parents all he knew of the incident. They were outraged that a teacher would do such a thing.

“Has Mark Winters ever done anything like this before to another student?” Charles Wells asked.

He was a large man who obviously enjoyed eating. The vest of his three-piece suit was straining around his middle threatening to burst at its seams. His face had a reddish hue, but it was difficult for Mr. Wainwright to discern if it was from being upset or from the abuse of alcohol.

"No. I assure you he wouldn't be teaching in my school if there was any hint of it. Actually, Mark Winters has been here for nearly seventeen years and has a fine record and good rapport with the children."

"Obviously too good a rapport, it would seem." Mr. Wells sneered.

"You mentioned that another student observed Mr. Winters touch my daughter," Lorraine Wells said. "Is she here?"

Mrs. Wells was just as beefy as her husband. If she were a man, they could be matching bookends. It was mystifying to Mr. Wainwright how two such physically unattractive people could produce such a pretty little girl. He chalked it up to the saving grace of recessive genes.

"No. We allowed her to go home. I'm sure if you decide to contact the police, she will be available for a statement."

"But how do we know this girl is telling the truth?" Lorraine Wells asked.

"Why would she make up such an incredible story?" her husband replied.

"Shouldn't we talk to Melissa?"

"What for? You know your own daughter. She'll do anything to avoid conflict or someone's disapproval. Do you really think she'd tell us if her teacher touched her?"

"No. I guess you're right. We should call the police and get that man out of the school before he harms another child."

The police arrived at the apartment to arrest Mark at five o'clock that evening. He was just about to jump into the shower and get ready for dinner. Their reservations were for six thirty.

Kate answered the door. Seeing two uniformed policemen standing there immediately set her on edge. The police

never made social calls.

"Is there a Mark S. Winters residing here?" the taller of the two men formally inquired.

"Yes. I'm Mark Winters, Officer. May I help you?"

"You're under arrest for child molestation."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Mark practically shouted.

"This is crazy! Mark didn't molest any child," Kate added just as strongly.

The officer ignored their outbursts and began to recite Mark's rights. "You have the right to remain silent. If you give up the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney and to have the attorney present during questioning. If you so desire and cannot afford one, an attorney will be appointed for you without charge before the questioning begins.

"Do you understand your rights as I read them to you?"

"Yes," Mark said between clenched teeth. "But this is ridiculous."

"Do you waive and give up those rights?"

"No. May I call my attorney now?"

The shorter policeman nodded. Mark began to leave the room to look for his wallet. The taller policeman stopped him.

"Where are you going? The phone is out here."

"To get my lawyer's number out of my wallet if that's all right with you. I'm not skipping out of here, if that's what you're worrying about."

Mark came back into the room holding a business card. "By the way, who's the kid that I'm supposed to have molested?"

"A Melissa Wells. What's your connection with this kid?"

"First of all, that preposterous. I never laid a hand on the kid. She's one of my students. I'm a six-grade teacher."

"Not according to this warrant," the shorter policeman said. "Besides, we're only here to arrest you, not try your case. Now make that call."

With shaking hands, Mark keyed in Abe Saperstein's number. He had known his father and told him whenever he was in a jam to give him a call.

No one was in the office and Mark was forced to leave a message on Saperstein's answering machine.

"Tough luck," the taller cop said with little compassion. "Your wife can take care of the details when your lawyer calls back. Right now, you're going bye-bye with us," he said, roughly pulling Mark's arms behind him and cuffing them.

"Where are you taking him?" Kate asked, trying to control the emotion in her voice.

"To the third precinct. Wanna do him some good, get a hold of that lawyer," the taller policeman said.

Tears were fighting for release in Kate's eyes, but she refused to cry in front of the police. She didn't want to give them the satisfaction. She kissed Mark and hugged him.

"I love you, sweetheart."

"I know," he said, as they pushed him out the door.

Tears finally streaming down her face, Kate collapsed in a chair. It was like a nightmare. How could something like this happen to Mark? He'd never touch a child.

She thought of Paige then. Luckily she had gone straight from school to a friend's house, where she was going to spend the night. Mark had never touched Paige. He was no pedophile. Why would he touch a student? It was a preposterous

notion as he had said. There was nothing she could do until Abe Saperstein called her back. What if he didn't because he was away? Yes, this truly was something you read in a lurid tabloid, not something that happened to ordinary people like Mark.

Chapter 39

It took nearly forty-five minutes worth of coffee and pacing before Abe Saperstein finally returned Mark's call.

"Okay, take it from the beginning," he said.

* * * *

While Kate was relating the problem to Mark's lawyer, a jubilant Laurie Barnes wanted to share her triumph with someone else. Somehow she wasn't getting as much satisfaction from her deed as she thought she would. She decided to call Stacey Fiske and share the news with her. Stacey couldn't believe what Laurie had just told her about her favorite teacher and passed the news on to Jennifer Mauro. Within no time, half the girls in Mark's class had been told about what had happened between him and Melissa and with each retelling, the story became more embellished.

* * * *

Melissa had gone home with her parents. She had no idea why they had been called to school. She reasoned it was because of Jeffrey and what she and Mr. Winters had talked about.

Finally, after dinner and Jeffrey had been put to bed, her parents sat down to discuss the situation with her.

"We know what went on between you and your teacher today," her father began. "Do you want to tell us about it?"

Melissa shook her head. What was there to tell? They didn't care about how she felt. They were too worried about Jeffrey. And before Jeffrey got sick it was her father's business. It was always something else. She seemed to be invisible.

"You realize that what he did was wrong, don't you?" her mother said.

"Why?"

"Because men teachers shouldn't do that."

She was confused. *Why should it be wrong for Mr. Winters to listen to her feelings?*

"Why?" she asked again.

"Don't you know anything?" her father asked with his annoyance beginning to show.

"I don't know what I did wrong."

"You did nothing wrong. It wasn't your fault," her mother said.

"Don't you get enough love here?" her father asked.

"Charles, we know what happened wasn't her doing, so why bring that up?"

"Because she was obviously receptive and mistook it for affection."

Melissa wasn't really sure what her parents were talking about, but felt she had to defend Mr. Winters.

"I love Mr. Winters. He's very nice to me..."

"I told you!" her father shouted.

"Melissa, what he did was wrong and he will go to jail for it," her mother said, realizing that they may have a bigger problem than she had originally thought.

"Jail?"

"Yes. That's where people like him go," her father said.

"Nooooo!" Melissa wailed, tears beginning to flow.

"We better start looking for a good psychologist," Lorraine Wells finally admitted.

"I don't want to go to one."

"It's for your own good," her mother said. "You need someone to talk to."

"But I already did with Mr. Winters?"

"What did you say?" her father asked.

"I already talked to Mr. Winters and told him about Jeffrey. I was sad and he said I'd feel better if I talked about it."

"All he did was talk to you? He didn't touch you?" her mother asked.

"Only once..."

"Where did he touch you?" Mrs. Wells demanded to know.

Melissa wondered what had gotten into her parents. "He only put his arm around me when I cried."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

"Laurie Barnes said she saw him touch you on your privates."

"No, Daddy. He never did that—ever!"

"I have a dreadful feeling that we've made a terrible mistake," Mrs. Wells said.

"One that could be costly. Do you realize that Mark Winters could sue us for false arrest and probably win?"

"What are we going to do?"

"We could call the police and tell them the truth and throw ourselves on Winters' mercy or...Melissa could change her story a little bit."

"No. I won't lie."

"You will if we tell you to," her father said.

"We couldn't," Lorraine Wells said. "It will ruin him. He'll never be able to teach again, anywhere."

"And us? What about us? Can we afford a lawsuit?"

"But why should he sue us? Maybe he'll be so glad that the charges were dropped that he'll just walk away."

"Come on, grow up. He's human, isn't he? And humans are greedy."

"It won't work. We can't depend on Melissa."

Charles Wells turned to look at his daughter and reality set in. His scheme would probably never work. All a lawyer had to do was look at Melissa and she'd spill her guts.

"You're probably right. Call the cops and get it over with."

The wheels of justice turn very slowly. Mark wasn't released until nearly dawn. Saperstein had called Kate to let her know that all the charges had been dropped. The entire affair had been a mistake, seemingly based on the fabricated story of another child. At that point, she didn't care about the details. All that mattered was the fact that Mark was coming home.

* * * *

Mark was so exhausted by the time Abe Saperstein dropped him off that he was out by the time his head hit the pillow. She'd been quite upset when she saw his neck. It had purplish-colored bruising on both sides.

"Did the police do that?"

"No, one of my charming cell mates. Pedophiles are the lowest member of the food chain."

Seeing how tired he was, Kate left all her questions for later and let him sleep.

Kate had already called the school to let them know that he wouldn't be in. She was tempted to call in sick also, but had too much planned to do with her class that day.

She left a note for Mark, telling him that she loved him. She also told him to select a restaurant and make reservations for that evening. She still wanted to celebrate his birthday. He was also still unaware that he was going to be a father.

* * * *

Mark's class was in an uproar when he didn't show. They were worried that he had been fired for doing terrible things to Melissa. Melissa hadn't come to school, either, but Laurie Barnes did. She told anyone who asked what she had seen.

When Mr. Wainwright walked in with a substitute, practically every hand shot up in the air.

"Where's Mr. Winters?"

"Was he fired because of what he did?"

"Does Ms. Douglas know?"

"Whoa, quiet down class!" Mr. Wainwright said. "And I'll answer all your questions before I leave Ms. Gallo with you. No, Mr. Winters was not fired. A terrible mistake was made yesterday which could have hurt him very much. Isn't that right, Laurie?"

"I saw it. I tell you I did," she exclaimed, her small dark eyes flitting from side-to-side.

"No, you didn't, Laurie. Melissa and Mr. Winters were just talking. Either you are mistaken or making up a terrible lie. I think you owe Mr. Winters a big apology when he returns tomorrow. If you'll come with me now we'll discuss the matter.

"As for the rest of you, I expect you to give Ms. Gallo your undivided attention and cooperation as you would Mr.

Winters,” he said, as he left with Laurie Barnes in tow.

* * * *

The entire school was buzzing about what had happened or supposedly happened yesterday between Mark and Melissa and Kate got an earful. It was amazing how things can get blown out of proportion so quickly. Kate got the actual facts from Mr. Wainwright who had just finished with a conference with Laurie Barnes and her parents. A thoroughly repentant Laurie gave her word she would never do something as awful as that again. She also promised to apologize to Mark when she saw him.

* * * *

Mark awoke by twelve, showered, and sat down with a cup of coffee and two English muffins on which he spread a generous amount of butter and jam. He had missed dinner last night and was starving. He had read Kate’s note and made reservations as she had asked, but not exactly where she had suggested. Instead, he booked a room in a mid-Manhattan hotel for the weekend. He needed to get away. He thought Kate would enjoy spending the weekend in the City. They could perhaps take in a show and do some early Christmas shopping. Paige could stay at her friend Allison’s or Jessica’s if Kate didn’t want to leave her home by herself. Being ten, she was at that age where she was too old for a babysitter, yet not really quite old enough to be left on her own for more than one night.

His thoughts wandered back to the night before. What an experience it had been. He hoped he never got arrested again. It may be written in the Constitution that a person is considered innocent until proven guilty, but he strongly doubted that anyone had told the police. He felt like a criminal and was

treated like one. He also discovered that on the crime ladder the worst offense to commit was child molestation. Everyone hates you, especially the criminals.

Mark had been put in a cell with the slimiest of characters. One was an aging biker with tattoos on every conceivable spot. He had a nest of long salt-and-pepper hair pulled back in a ponytail. In his left ear dangled a silver cross. He looked as if he was still wearing the same leather jacket he wore in the sixties. There was more dirt under his nails than in the pot Kate kept her cactus in. Yet he was clean compared to the other guy.

The police must have picked the second man up for vagrancy. He looked like he was swept up off the streets. There were more holes in his stinking clothes than Swiss cheese and he had stuffed them with newspaper. The man reeked like rotting garbage and permeated the cell with his stink. He had been arrested for urinating on the sidewalk and felt that his rights had been infringed upon. "I'll shake my snake wherever and whenever I damn please. This is America, ain't it?" he said to anyone who came by.

The two men began to play criminal show and tell. They talked about why they were arrested and compared notes. Mark didn't want any part of the conversation. He hadn't told either man why he'd been arrested, yet the vagrant had found out somehow, probably overhearing the policemen discussing it when he was first being processed. He told the biker who became instantly enraged and went for Mark's throat.

Mark was no match for this guy as he tried to pry his filthy fingers from his throat before he blacked out. The vagrant was urging the man on.

"Hey, you!" the cop on duty called as he wrenched the

biker off Mark. Luckily for Mark, Abe Saperstein had just arrived and a policeman had been sent to the lockup to get him.

"I thought you'd never get here," Mark said to the lawyer, as he shook his hand, while massaging his bruised neck with the other.

"We'll get that looked at. What hot water have you gotten yourself into to?"

"You won't believe this—I don't believe this. I've been accused of abusing a student. I swear to you that I never touched this student or laid a hand on any other student."

"Why would this child make up a story?"

"I doubt if she did. She avoids all confrontations in the worst way. A real sad-sack of a kid. It had to be someone else."

"Have you had an argument with anyone recently or went out with a kid's mother and dumped her?"

"No to both. In fact, I just recently got married to a woman I'd been living with for the last two years."

"Finally tied the knot, huh? Proud of you. Your dad would have been thrilled. He always wanted grand kids in the worst way."

"So what did you tell the cops?"

"Nothing. They fingerprinted me and took mug shots. Then they returned me to the hell hole you found me in with those splendid dregs of society."

"And one of them had his hands around your throat. I guess I arrived in the nick of time."

"Now what?"

"We've got to get you in front of a judge and try and make bail so I can get you out of here."

"That's not an option. You've *got* to get me released."

The phone rang and brought Mark back to the present.

“Hello? Hi, sweetheart... Yes, I’m fine. I’m eating as we speak... Yes, I made reservations... It’s a surprise. I’ll tell you later *if* you’re good. Though, sometimes, I like you better when you’re bad,” he said and chuckled. “I love you, too. See you later.”

Chapter 40

“We’ve got to do something about Dylan’s behavior, William,” Robin said.

It was the first time all week that they sat down together at the same time to have dinner. Ashley had just gotten over a bad respiratory infection and William had to work late to finish a project that needed to go out. As if Robin wasn’t stressed enough with the baby being sick, Dylan had been getting himself into fistfights at school on the days he decided to show up and finally had gotten himself suspended from school altogether.

He had gone from being a B-student to one who was in danger of flunking all his subjects practically overnight. At first Robin thought he might be jealous of his new sister, but she feared it might be something much worse.

“He’s going to be left back if he doesn’t get his act together at school. The attendance office called to let me know that he wasn’t in school again today. I hadn’t even known he was suspended last week for three days.”

Shaking his head in wonder, William asked, “Did you ask him where he was?”

“Yes. He said he went to the mall.”

"Did he say why?"

"No. He went into his room and shut the door. I followed him in, but he ignored me. Do you know how frustrating it is to talk to a child who totally tunes you out?"

"What the hell's gotten into him lately?"

"Do you think he's on drugs?"

"Drugs? I'd never.... I hope not. Is he in his room?" William asked.

"I think so. Are you going to try to talk to him?"

"Yes. He's a good kid. We've got to try and help him."

William got up and knocked on Dylan's door. He got no answer and knocked again, wondering if the kid was asleep.

"Dylan, it's William. I'd like to talk to you."

Still no answer. William opened the door. Dylan was lying on the bed, wide awake, wearing headphones. William went in and motioned for him to turn off his stereo.

Dylan took his headphones off and waited for William to speak.

"Dylan, what's going on?"

"Nothin' man. Just sitting here and chilling."

"I meant what's going on with you. You've gone from a kid who loved to go to school to one who hardly ever shows up and when he does, he gets into fights. Is there something wrong that maybe your mother and I can help with?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just don't want to go to school. It's boring and my teachers hate me."

"I don't think your teachers hate you. They may be annoyed with how you've been behaving lately, but you can change that."

"What for?"

"Don't you care about your future and what you will do

when you become an adult?”

“No, and what I do is none of your business. You’re not my *real* father, you know.”

The sharp words stung William, who was hardly prepared for it. He’d always thought they were close. “That may be true, but I still care very much about you, Dylan.”

“Mind your own business.”

“You are my business. I pay most of the bills around here and maintain your upkeep.”

“It always boils down to money, doesn’t it?”

“Only if you want it to. What happened to the happy boy who once inhabited your body?”

“He split and so should you.”

“I’m not going to get off your case until I find out what’s eating you.”

Then it occurred to William that it was nearly stifling outside temperature-wise lately, yet Dylan was constantly in long-sleeve shirts. William reached out and took one of Dylan’s arms. The boy tried to pull his arm away, but William was stronger and managed to roll up the sleeve. Sure enough, there were small pin-hole tracks on his inner arm.

“Damn it, Dylan! How long have you been using drugs?”

“It’s recreational. I can stop whenever I want.”

“You want to kill yourself? Do us all a favor, take a gun and shoot yourself. It’s faster and more economical.”

Dylan rolled his eyes. The gesture annoyed William who finally lost his patience and grabbed Dylan by the front of his shirt.

“You want to kill your mother? Is that what you want?” he nearly screamed at him.

“It’s my life.”

"Don't you see you're pissing it away and *that* will kill her? You think Ashley can replace you? Think again. No one could replace you. Your mother adores you and you don't deserve her love."

A little emotion began to show on Dylan's face. William hoped he was getting to him.

"Get out of here! Leave me alone!"

"Why? The truth hurts?"

Dylan turned his face away trying to save whatever shred of composure he could. The attempt was a waste of time.

"I thought I could control it. Recreational drugs. But they took over. I'm scared, William, really scared," Dylan said, turning back to face him.

The tears were genuine and William put his arms around the boy and held him while he released all the pent-up tears he had kept tightly bottled inside for so long.

"Your mother and I will see that you get all the help you need. But you must promise me that you'll really try to fight this."

"I promise I'll try," Dylan said, wiping his nose. "And William..."

"What?"

"You may not be my real dad, but you're a cool guy."

William smiled and patted Dylan's shoulder. "I'd better go let your mother know. She's the one who suspected you might be on drugs."

A look of shock replaced the thin smile that had occupied Dylan's face a moment before.

"She knew?"

"Uh-huh."

"Shit! She must hate me."

"She doesn't hate you. She's your mother and loves you

no matter what you've done. When she's told that her suspicions are correct, she'll feel let down and be disappointed in you, but she won't stop loving you, now or ever."

"I know this will sound stupid. Lately everything I do or say is stupid. But...I didn't want her to know... I'd rather die before I hurt her." Dropping his face into his hands, Dylan cried, "I really fucked up, didn't I?"

William placed his hand on Dylan's shoulder. "I know you love her. And yes, you really 'fucked up' as you so aptly put it, but you can still turn this all around. It's not too late."

Robin, who had been in the kitchen all this time wondering how the talk was going and what it had been about, let her curiosity get the better of her patience and knocked on Dylan's bedroom door. "May I come in?"

William looked at Dylan, who hesitated a moment before nodding. "You tell her," Dylan pleaded.

"Come in, Rob."

"Dylan is in trouble and needs our help."

"I really messed up, big-time, Mom."

Robin's face had already drained of color as she was preparing to hear the worst.

"Drugs?" she asked, in a hoarse whisper.

Dylan nodded, tears already streaming down his face. He reached for the safe shelter of Robin's arms and she held him, her tears mingling with his.

"What kinds?"

"Huh?"

"What drugs are you on?"

"Coke and heroin."

"Mainlining?" she asked, her face devoid of all emotion except a lone facial tick in her left cheek.

"Yes."

Oh, dear God, Robin thought. You heard about good kids fooling around with drugs to try them out and ending up hooked. But it was always someone else's kid. Give me the strength to deal with this, I beg You, please.

"I've got to make some calls," she said with a catch in her voice as she fled from the room.

"She's upset, isn't she?" Dylan said, already knowing the answer.

"Did you expect her not to be?" William asked.

"Why didn't she scream and hit me or something?"

"And what would that have accomplished?"

Robin fled into the bathroom. She had to get a grip on herself. She would be no good to Dylan unless she did. She washed her face, wondering where she had gone wrong. Then she caught herself, realizing that it probably wasn't her fault. She had tried to be a good parent. No, she shouldn't blame herself. This would have probably happened anyway.

Robin hated having to do it, but she had little choice. In order to get Dylan into a good rehab center quickly she had to call in a few favors. However, everything depended upon Dylan himself and whether he was committed to kicking his habit. No rehabilitation program on earth would work if he wasn't.

* * * *

The weeks that Dylan was gone were empty ones. She merely seemed to be sleepwalking through the paces of each day. Her weight dropped and if it hadn't been for Ashley needing to be fed and clothed, she would have not gotten out of bed in the morning. Nothing that William did or said helped ease her pain. It was involuntary withdrawal for her. Even though she knew it was necessary, it didn't mean she had to like it.

Chapter 41

By the time that Kate had come home from school, Mark was dressed and ready to head out for Manhattan.

She kissed him hello. "My, you look nice," she said, eyeing the ugly purple bruise on his neck. "How does your neck feel?"

Answering in a hoarse voice, Mark replied, "Happy to be here and not in prison. As for my neck, it's been better."

She shook her head. "Kids can be so stupid sometimes, not realizing the harm their antics can cause."

"Don't remind me. Say, shouldn't you change?"

"Where are we having dinner, by the way?"

"The Holiday Inn in Manhattan."

"Couldn't get a reservation closer?" she said, stifling a chuckle.

"I felt we needed to get away. For how I was feeling when I made the reservation, the moon would have been a better choice, but it was unavailable."

"It will be fun. I'm glad you decided to do that."

"We can try to see a show and go shopping. Christmas is coming."

"Speaking of presents, did you open yours?"

"I completely forgot about it. I had a little distraction, you know."

Kate walked over to the small pile of gifts on the table and took the envelope with the special card and placed it into her purse when Mark wasn't looking. She wanted to save that surprise for later at the hotel.

"I'm going to take a quick shower and change."

When she came out of the shower, Mark was sitting on their bed.

"Thanks for the terrific sweater and wallet, babe."

"You're welcome. I'm glad you like them. You needed a new wallet desperately, but we have a more important problem to deal with at the moment."

"What's that?"

"What am I going to wear?"

Mark's face lit up immediately. "The red dress."

"Why, the red one?"

"Because you look gorgeous in it and I want every guy who sees you with me to eat his heart out."

"Well, it's your birthday and I did ask...all right."

With the baby coming who knows when she'd be able to wear this clinging dress again. *It doesn't hurt to give into the little things and make him happy*, she thought.

Kate slipped into the dress. "Zip me up, please."

Mark got up, but instead of zipping up the dress, slipped his hands inside.

"Hey, I said to zip up, remember? If you start that we'll never get out of here."

"If it wasn't for the traffic..."

They still hit traffic on the Long Island Expressway. It wasn't too bad, though. The real traffic occurred within Man-

hattan itself. They found the hotel and pulled into its parking lot. Parking was at a premium in the City, so if they drove in, they usually made it an overnight stay at a hotel or used the Long Island Railroad.

After they checked in, the desk clerk called and reserved two tickets for them at Lincoln Center. They had just enough time for dinner.

Mark told Kate all about his unforgettable experience in jail, leaving nothing out. She found it incredible that a fabricated story could go so far without being questioned. She told him all that she had found out at school that day and they compared notes.

It soon became obvious to them what must have happened. Laurie Barnes must have seen Mark and Melissa discussing her problem. For whatever reason, she concocted the story about seeing Mark touch Melissa inappropriately and told it to the nurse who, in turn, told Wainwright. And Wainwright had no choice but to call Melissa's parents who decided to call the police.

Obviously no one talked to Melissa to ask her what had happened until after Mark was arrested. Of course, the charges were dropped after they did. The whole incident could have been avoided. Such stupidity.

"Hey, we're here to celebrate my birthday and be cheerful, remember?"

"Yes," Kate said, smiling. She lifted her glass of wine and said, "Happy Birthday, Mark. May next year's be better."

"I'll drink to that," he said.

Eroica Trio, one of the few all-female ensembles in the top echelons of their field, was performing that night. They were known for bringing classical music to all audiences, es-

pecially school children. It was a wonderful experience which Kate and Mark thoroughly enjoyed.

Mark had ordered a bottle of champagne delivered to their room. Kate was glad that he did, for he'd really be celebrating when he opened the envelope she had left for him before leaving the room for dinner.

She went to the bathroom and changed into a negligee. Hopefully Mark would have found the card and opened it. As she was coming out of the bathroom he did. The entire hotel must have heard his reaction.

"Kate! Is this true?" he practically screamed, waving the card.

"Yes. You'd better quiet down before we're asked to leave."

"Oh, Kate!" he said, swooping her into his arms and kissing her deeply.

"How's about breaking open the champagne, Papa?" Kate suggested after he finally released her.

"You have no idea how happy I am," he said, popping the cork.

"I might have a hunch."

"When?"

"Early July."

"Here's to my new son—or daughter," he said, as he gently clinked Kate's glass.

Turning serious for the moment, Mark said, "My parents would have been happy. At least, we've got yours to thrill."

"You can say that again. How long has my mother been on my case to have another child?"

"I put her up to it."

"You did? Why you..."

“Only kidding, honestly.”

“I love you, Kate. And tonight you’ve made me the happiest man alive.”

“You’re welcome. I guess you like this present more than the sweater.”

“Yup. Do you want to see how much?” he asked, taking her glass and putting it down on the night table next to his.

“I’ve got the time,” she said, opening her arms.

Mark glided into her arms. Now he had it all, Kate and a baby on the way. He couldn’t ask for anything more.

Kate read it all in his eyes. She knew how happy he was and he truly deserved it. He had given her so much.

Mark hungrily sought her mouth, as he ran his hand down her back drawing her to him. After leaving her breathless, he slid down her body assaulting it with his tongue and hands, leaving no area safe until he reached her thighs and buried his head between them. Kate grabbed a fistful of his hair, guiding him, until the first bolt of pleasure shot through her. After the last earth-shattering sensation had passed, she drew him up so he could enter her. It didn’t take long for him to reach his release as they nestled together enjoying the afterglow of their loving.

Chapter 42

Dylan returned home after spending two months in rehab. He had put on weight and his color had returned. Ashley was walking and greeted him with a hug and a kiss. For the first time, he felt like a big brother and realized that he actually liked the feeling.

At dinner that night, they were a complete family again. Robin had stopped living as if she were a Zombie and had rejoined the human race. William had tried everything, but it was Dylan's return that truly accomplished the feat.

"How do you feel, Dylan?" Robin asked.

"Fine, Mom. For the first time in a long time, I can honestly say that."

"That's good to hear."

"To avoid falling into the same rut, I'm going to stay close to home for a while. I'm not going anywhere but school."

"That's probably a good idea. And stay away from kids you know use drugs," Robin added.

"The last thing I want to do is go through withdrawal again. I thought I was going to die."

"Perhaps going through that saved your life," Peter said. "Now you know the real consequences and what's at stake."

"I know one thing."

"What's that?" asked his mother.

"I don't want to die."

"Lilan," Ashley called out. She had a little trouble with his name.

Dylan thought it was cute and laughed. Ashley liked the response and said his name again and again. She had been feeding herself and looked like a clown. There was more food in her hair and all over her face than on her plate.

Dylan was exhausted and watched some TV in his room before falling asleep. Robin checked on him after giving Ashley a bath and shut off his TV.

Ashley was in her crib in the far corner of the master bedroom babbling to her toys. She was going to need her own room soon. William and Robin had been looking at houses, but hadn't decided exactly where they wanted to live. They were going to have to make a decision before Ashley began to pay attention to what they were doing on their side of the room and decided to take notes.

"He looks wonderful," Robin said to William as they got into bed.

"Yes, he does. I only hope he doesn't start using again. With all the temptation on the streets, it will be tough for him to stay clean."

"That worries me too."

"Well, we've done all we could. It's all up to him now," William conceded as he gently swept the hair from her eyes with his hand.

"I pray he's strong enough to stay off the stuff. I doubt if any of us can go through all that again."

"That's for sure. It's good to have you back also," Wil-

liam said, as he pulled Robin into his arms and kissed her.

“Umm, I’ve missed you.”

“I don’t know why you put up with me sometimes.”

“Cause I love you,” he said, kissing the hollow in her neck.

In a few moments the world around them was forgotten and all they saw and felt was each other.

Chapter 43

"I got a letter from my parents yesterday," Kate mentioned to Mark on the way to school. "I had meant to tell you last night, but it slipped my mind."

"How are they?"

"As fine as two antagonistic vagabonds can be," I guess.

"Where are they camped?"

"South Florida."

"Are they going to hibernate there for the winter?"

"They're undecided. They may go to Arizona or New Mexico."

"Can't say that I blame them. Last winter was a doozy."

"They want to spend Christmas with us."

Mark rolled his eyes. "Break out the boxing gloves."

"Hopefully they'll behave. My mother's calling tomorrow night to talk to me about their trip here. I'll tell her that she and my father can't fight because it will upset the baby. Of course she'll ask what baby and I'll tell her I'm pregnant. That should get a rise out of her."

Mark laughed. "I hope she isn't in a phone booth with a low ceiling. Honestly, I like your parents, but they do live to argue. If your father says one thing, your mother must con-

tradict him. Then an argument ensues and they go at each other until it's time to eat or someone yells at them to cool it. They're like two children sometimes."

"Maybe we can get them to change their routine or write new material for them."

"No offense, Kate, but that will be the day and you know it."

"I guess you're right. They're too old and set in their ways to change. Look on the bright side. We don't have to see them that often."

"So when exactly are they rolling in?"

"They intend to be here the week before Christmas so Mom and I can take Paige into the City to see the tree. You and Dad are invited to come along, of course, but knowing you guys, you'd probably be happier in front of the TV watching football."

"Good. That means I don't have to chase after three females on a shopping spree."

"Who said anything about shopping?"

"Oh, come on, Kate. Three women in Manhattan before Christmas with all the beautifully decorated stores..."

"One of us is still a minor."

"Not when it comes to shopping. That ten-year-old daughter of ours is just as lethal as a thirty-five-year-old woman."

"Paige does love to go shopping."

"Aha! I rest my case."

Kate shook her head. "Men."

They pulled into the school's parking lot. Mark shut off the engine and reached for Kate before she got out. "I still love you, despite the fact that you're a woman," he said.

"I love you, too, even though you're a border-line crazy."

They walked towards the building, laughing.

"I'm glad to see that some people are happy in the morning," Neil Serrota said, walking from his car.

"Why, aren't you happy?" Kate asked.

"Nancy wants to go out for a fancy dinner on Saturday to celebrate our tenth anniversary."

"That sounds very nice."

He shook his head.

"Is it because you hate going out to dinner or is it because you've been married ten years?" Mark asked in a joking manner.

"Both," he said, but he wasn't smiling.

Mark was only kidding when he asked the question and didn't expect the answer he got. He never thought that Neil might not be as happily married as he thought.

"What's wrong, Neil?" Kate asked.

"I guess it's because we never had any kids. Nancy feels that she's half a woman. We've had testing done, but there doesn't seem to be a physical reason why she hasn't conceived."

"Perhaps you're trying too hard. Put the idea of having a baby on the back burner. Enjoy being with each other and re-discover why you married in the first place. Then when you least expect it, it happens."

"Thanks, Kate. I'll go home and surprise Nancy by telling her I'd love to go out and celebrate our anniversary."

"Hey, you never know, Neil. You might really have a good time," Mark said.

"Yeah. See you guys later. And...thanks."

"No, problem," Mark said and Kate nodded.

After Neil walked away, Mark said, "I never heard Neil open up like that before. He must truly be hurting."

"It's a shame. I feel so guilty that I'm so happy," Kate admitted.

"Never feel that way," Mark said, as he kissed her.

A student passed and made a funny remark.

"Whoops! Forgot where we were for a second," Mark said.

They walked into the office and punched in. After gathering their mail, they said goodbye, each going to their classroom.

Chapter 44

Paige hadn't seen her grandparents in almost a year. Since they always spoiled her whenever they came, needless-to-say, she was thrilled when they arrived laden with gifts.

"Honestly, Dad," Kate chastised, "it sometimes takes a full month after you and Mom leave for her swelled head and appetite to abate."

Her father chuckled. "Don't you know by now that the true function of a grandparent is to spoil the grandchildren?"

"But did you and Mom have to turn it into an art form?"

As a reply, he thrust out his chest and patted himself on the shoulder. Realizing she was engaged in a losing battle, Kate dropped the subject and gave her father a hug.

"When your mother told me we were getting another grandchild, I was thrilled. You know—the more the merrier."

"Mark and I are very happy about it too, to say the least."

"I heard my name mentioned," Mark said, going to shake his father-in-law's hand. "Where's your other half?"

"She ran off with Paige somewhere. They should turn up eventually."

Actually Paige had gone into the house with her grandmother to try on a few of the things that she had just been giv-

en. Paige would never be mistaken for a patient ten-year-old, not that there were such things in existence.

To celebrate her parents' arrival, they all went out for dinner that night. Paige wore a new sweater that her grandparents had given her. Kate looked at her father and shook her head. He broke into a wide grin in acknowledgment.

Kate and her parents compared notes about Joan and her family. They were hoping for a family reunion the following year with Joan coming to New York. All this was tentative, but still pleasant to discuss.

Paige had been quiet and listened to the adults speak of people she hardly remembered. It would be nice to get to know her aunt and uncle and their kids. Practically everyone at school had big families and talked about going visiting. She had always been different and was tired of it. She wanted to be like everyone else and have brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, and lots and lots of cousins.

"When are we going to see the tree?" Paige asked.

"How about this weekend? Is that all right, Mom? I have to work until Friday," Kate said.

"That's fine with me. Once your father parks himself in front of the television to watch football, he'll never notice I'm gone."

"I figured on that and only got three tickets for the Sunday matinee show at Radio City Music Hall."

"So we'll be staying overnight in the City?"

"Yes, I figured that would be the easiest thing. I'll leave my car at the railroad station and we'll take the train in. That way we won't have to worry about parking."

"Did you make reservations at a hotel, yet?"

"I figured the City would be packed with tourists and

Christmas shoppers so I started calling around the hotels nearest Radio City Music Hall the moment I hung up with you when you called to tell me you were coming. Believe it or not, most of the places were all booked already.”

“Where did you finally reserve a room?”

“At the Midtown. They’re in the process of renovating it, but still taking guests. Anyway, I was glad to get a room for us.”

The waitress came by to ask if they wanted dessert. Kate’s father had already eyed the Napoleons as he walked to his seat, so they all had coffee and cake, except Kate and Paige. Paige had ice cream and Kate had pineapple chunks.

* * * *

The week was filled with Christmas parties and excitement at school as the kids looked forward to their Christmas vacation. Paige didn’t take the bus home on Friday as she normally did to be with her friends. Instead, she rode home with her parents.

“And to what do we owe the pleasure of your company, Paige?” Mark asked out of curiosity.

“I miss you guys.”

“Really?” Mark asked, inferring that she wasn’t being completely honest with them.

“I just figured you guys needed company.”

“Paige, that sounds a trifle far-fetched,” Kate said. “Do you want to tell us the real reason? Did you have an argument with someone?”

“No.”

“What’s wrong, kid?” Mark asked.

“I didn’t want to listen to everyone’s holiday plans. I hate hearing about them visiting their cousins or having a million

people come over to their houses.”

“You have your grandparents visiting you,” Kate offered.

“Yeah, but that’s it. And how often do I see them?”

Mark and Kate looked at one another as the realization hit them. Paige was lonely. She wanted to be part of a large family. Unfortunately with the way things were, it was nearly impossible to change the situation.

“Look on the bright side, Paige. You’ll soon have a brother or sister,” Mark said.

“I know... And I’m real happy about it, honestly. Only I hate to hear about everyone else’s family. It kinda gets to me.”

“We understand, Paige, honestly, we do,” Kate said. “I wish we could change things for you, but we can’t.”

“At least I can get to ride with the best two teachers in my school,” Paige said and the subject was dropped.

Mark and Kate went to a Christmas party that night at one of the teacher’s houses. Most of the teachers whom they worked with were there, including Neil Serrota, who seemed to be in better spirits.

“You know, you guys were right, worrying about the baby situation wasn’t worth it. If it happens, it happens. I had a long talk with Nancy. I told her she was still a goddess to me, no matter what.”

“That’s great, Neil,” Mark said, trying to stifle a chuckle in case he was being serious.

Nancy Serrota came over at that moment and the topic was dropped.

“Congratulations, you two. I haven’t seen you in such a long time. We really must get together.”

“You two ladies decide on a time and place and we’ll be there,” Mark said, answering for both Neil and himself.

Before anything further was discussed, another teacher came over with her husband. They all talked awhile and Mark decided to get a refill on his drink.

"What would you like to drink Kate, soda or water?"

"Some diet soda, if they have it, thanks."

It was a nice party and they had a good time, but left early when Kate began to tire. Since Mark had been drinking, she drove home. As she buckled the seatbelt around herself, she laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"I was envisioning having to lengthen the seatbelt again to an elephantine size."

"You weren't that big."

"Yes, I was."

"Whatever," Mark agreed, knowing he'd never win.

"Thanks for staying home with my father this weekend."

"You don't have to thank me. Football takes precedence over shopping any day. What time are you leaving?"

"We'll be taking the nine-ten train."

"I hope you all have a great time. Come home with a couple of bucks left to your name, though."

Kate laughed. "Are you accusing me of being a shopaholic?"

"Would I call you any names?"

"I promise I won't refinance anything."

"Whew! That was a close one," Mark said, making believe he was mopping his brow.

Kate elbowed him. "You're lucky I'm driving."

* * * *

Mark awoke early the following morning, but didn't dare get out of bed for fear of waking Kate. She tired so easily now

that she was pregnant and never seemed to get enough rest. She was facing him, her long, reddish-blond hair fanned out across her pillow, obscuring one eye. Even like that she looked so beautiful that he longed to kiss her. She must have sensed he was watching her because she opened her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Early. Go back to sleep."

"How early?" she asked, a wicked little smile forming on her lovely face.

"Early enough," Mark said, drawing her closer and kissing her.

"Hold that thought, I'll be right back," she said, putting on her robe and heading towards the bathroom.

"Glad to see you're still here," she said when she returned. "Now where were we?" she asked, as she got into bed and kissed him.

Feeling totally wanton, she began to plant little butterfly kisses down his chest.

Mark's reaction egged her on as she slid down his body. Reaching her goal, she heard him moan and smiled. A few minutes later Mark reached down and lifted her up and she eased herself down on top of him.

"That feels nice," she whispered, moving nice and slow.

"Anything to please my honey."

The teasing soon was forgotten as their pace quickened. It wasn't long before they climaxed in turn and fell asleep once more.

Chapter-45

Kate knew her mother loved to cook, so whenever her parents came to visit, she gave her mother free reign in the kitchen. By the time Kate had woken and taken a shower, her mother had already whipped up a batch of pancakes.

Finishing breakfast and saying their good byes, Kate left with her mother and daughter for the train station. The train rumbled into the station ten minutes after Kate bought three roundtrip tickets. Paige took a window seat and her grandmother sat next to her. Kate sat facing them both.

The train pulled into Penn Station right on time. It was a beautiful, crisp December day brilliant with sunshine. Normally Kate liked to walk, rather than take the dingy subway, but they had suitcases with them. As a rule, the farther you walk, magically the heavier the suitcase tends to get.

The Midtown Hotel had been there for ages. As she neared it, Kate could understand why it was undergoing a facelift and massive renovations. She hoped that the inside of the hotel wasn't as bad. She consoled herself with the fact that most of the hotels in the vicinity were booked solid. She half-expected Paige to come out with, "What a dump!" Surprisingly, she didn't, probably because of her

excitement of being in the City.

After checking in at the desk, they rode an ancient elevator to the fourteenth floor.

"Is this elevator going to make it, Mom?" Paige asked jokingly.

"You can walk up and down the fourteen floors if you're nervous about it," Kate replied.

"Nah, I don't want to leave you on your own. I mean, what if you get lost, Mom?"

"Grandma will be with me to make sure that I don't."

"Forgot about Grandma."

"How can you forget about me?"

"I better end this conversation before I get into trouble," Paige said.

"Good idea. See if you can find our room," Kate said as the elevator doors opened.

"Okay," Paige said as she scouted ahead.

A minute later, "I found it!" was heard echoing through the hall.

Kate and her mother eventually reached the room, finding Paige waiting impatiently by the door.

"Boy, are you two slow!"

"Sorry. Next time we'll wear our roller blades," Kate said, opening the door.

The room was spacious and clean-smelling. Because it was an old building, she had feared it might have a musty odor. Looking around, she noticed two large full size beds and a large color television. There was an oversized dresser and ample space to hang their coats and clothes.

Kate put her things down and walked into the bathroom. It was clean and the fixtures looked new. She was satisfied

with the room and would survive the one night.

After the clothes were hung up and put away, Kate's mother suggested that they have lunch before venturing out to see the tree and go window-shopping.

"Mom, do you realize that your life revolves around food?"

Her mother laughed and said, "Now that you mention it, yes, I guess it does."

"Do you two want to eat here in the hotel or go some place else?" Kate asked.

"We're here already. Let's stay and eat," her mother replied.

"Okay. I know that Paige can't wait to see the tree, so why waste any more time in looking for another place to eat?"

Paige gave her mother a quick thumbs up sign to show her approval. They went down to the restaurant and ordered sandwiches. As soon as they were finished, Kate asked for the check and they were off.

Outside there was a crush of people rushing about. Many had come into the City, like Kate and her family, to see the tree and shop. They increased the volume of traffic to the already usually crowded Manhattan streets and sidewalks. But there was nothing like Christmastime in New York City, with the fat, bearded Santas standing on street corners and inside the department stores ringing their bells for charity and the gaily decorated storefronts beckoning the shoppers.

The magnificent tree stood overlooking the Rockefeller Center and the ice skating rink. The rink was crowded with ice skaters of all ages, bundled in their sweaters and hats, gliding around the rink singularly and in pairs.

"What do you think of the tree, Paige?" her grandmother asked.

“I’m glad I don’t have to decorate it.”

The two adults laughed.

“I’m serious, you two.”

They watched the skaters for a while then began to walk down Fifth Avenue peering into the holiday-adorned store windows.

Stopping into a few stores along the way, Paige used her allowance and some financial help from Kate to buy some gifts. She got sweaters for both her father and grandfather.

Kate had picked up a few items for Mark. She had already done the bulk of her shopping, never leaving it for the last minute. She always feared that something might happen to prevent her from getting to the mall. Her vivid imagination included physical environmental forces like tornadoes and earthquakes, as well as internal disasters like accidents and sickness. Of course New York is not known to have tornadoes and earthquakes, though there have been isolated instances and that was enough to spook Kate.

Kate’s parents had bought presents for the family and had them wrapped and waiting in their motor home. But that didn’t stop Mrs. Douglas from picking up a few things, either.

By the time the trio returned to the hotel, they were each carrying at least one large shopping bag filled with holiday-wrapped gifts.

Entering the hotel room, Kate dropped her two bags of gifts and dropped into a chair. “God, this feels good,” she said, kicking off her shoes and stretching out her legs.

“I feel as if I walked across country and back.”

“It was fun, though, wasn’t it, Mommy?”

“Yes, it was, sweetheart. I just wouldn’t advocate doing too much of it.”

“Well, I’m hungry and ready for dinner. Anyone else?”

“Gram, you’re always hungry or thinking about food. Doesn’t Grandpa feed you at home?” Paige asked.

After she finished laughing, her grandmother caught her breath and said, “Worrying about eating is just a thing grandmothers do. Nothing to concern yourself with, dear. I eat very well all the time.”

“I could go for dinner now, too,” Kate said, “but the farthest I’d like to travel is down the elevator to the hotel restaurant.”

“That’s because you’re walking for two,” Paige said thoughtfully.

That brought on fresh laughter from the other two women, who both hugged Paige, ignoring the look of confusion on her face.

Mrs. Douglas became serious a moment, not disguising her motherly concern. “Did you overdo it, Kate?”

“I’ll be fine in a moment. I just need to get off my feet for a little bit. I really feel fine.”

Her mother nodded and brushed the hair from Kate’s face. “We’ll go downstairs to eat when you’re ready. In the meantime, go wash up for dinner, Paige.”

Kate smiled up at her mother. “Still your baby, huh?”

“You’ll always be my baby,” she said, kissing the top of Kate’s head.

* * * *

The following morning, after calling home to let the men folk know that their women were all right, Kate, her mother, and Paige took the elevator down for breakfast.

After they were seated and their order taken, Kate mentioned to her mother, “I’m glad I soaked in a bath last night. I

feel rejuvenated—not that I want to walk as much as we did yesterday.”

“Probably a wise decision. Now I’m doubly glad we have the matinee this afternoon.”

“You mean we can’t run around and see more sights?” Paige asked, teasingly.

“Nope,” Kate told her daughter.

“Too, bad. We’ll just have to come back next weekend,” Paige added.

“You are joking, aren’t you?” Kate asked, not too sure.

“Uh-huh,” Paige said.

Kate nodded, feeling better. She really didn’t want Paige to be disappointed.

Towards the end of the meal, Kate said, “I’ve got to run back up to the room for a sec.”

“Anything wrong?” her mother asked.

“No. I forgot to take my vitamins and I have to take them with food or they repeat on me. I don’t have to tell you how wretched they are. I’ll be right back.”

Paige grabbed another cookie and chattered away as her grandmother poured herself another cup of coffee.

“I’m so happy you and Grandpa are here. I wish you could come more often.”

“I think we can manage that, Paige,” Mrs. Douglas said, gently sweeping the hair from her granddaughter’s face, noticing how beautiful she was becoming.

Suddenly their conversation was interrupted by a thunderous bang.

Chapter 46

People began to run in the direction the noise had come from.

“What was that, Gram? Do you think it was a bomb?”

“I don’t know, Paige, but I’m sure it can’t have been good.”

“Where’s Mommy?”

As she realized Kate hadn’t returned prior to the noise, all colored drained from Mrs. Douglas’ face.

“I wish I knew, Paige, I wish I knew.”

Like Zombies, they were drawn to the crowd. It was hard to see through the throng of people. In the background, the cacophonous wail of sirens could be heard approaching the hotel. Mrs. Douglas detected an acrid stench of burning insulation or rubber as they got closer. She knew that smell from traveling so many thousands of miles with the motor home, when hoses or wires eventually wore out.

Holding Paige’s hand tightly, she asked a man dressed in coveralls if he knew what had happened.

“The safety brakes gave out on the elevator.”

“Anybody in the elevator?”

“No one knows for sure. They can’t get it open.”

A team of rescue workers ran into the hotel carrying axes and pneumatic tools. They were soon joined by a few teams of medics, expecting the worst judging by the equipment they'd brought with them. There were stretchers, ready and waiting.

Tears began to well in Paige's eyes. In a small voice choked with emotion, she asked, "Do you think Mommy is in the elevator?"

"I don't know..." Mrs. Douglas replied, trying not to react to what she'd been thinking. Kate should have been back by now.

"Maybe she saw that the elevator was broken. Maybe she didn't want to walk all those floors." Tears were slipping from the child's eyes despite what she was saying.

"I...I don't know, Paige," the older woman she replied, once more, holding her granddaughter's hand tighter.

Something told Mrs. Douglas that her daughter was on that elevator. Call it motherly instinct or intuition, whatever. It mattered little what it was labeled. She just knew. Her insides were turning over in fear as she felt her breathing becoming more and more constricted.

"Hey they've got the elevator opened!" a male voice shouted from the front of the crowd.

The police, who had arrived to prevent any obstruction to the rescue attempt, held the crowd back so the people could be removed from the elevator.

Mrs. Douglas saw a policeman standing off to the side. She approached him, still holding Paige's hand.

"Officer, my pregnant daughter might be on that elevator. Can you find out for me?"

"Come with me," he said, pushing through the crowd. "Make way! Give us room!" he ordered as he went with Paige

and her grandmother in tow.

“Do you see her?” he asked, pointing to a number of stretchers that were now occupied.

“Mommy!” Paige screamed as she rushed over to the stretcher that Kate was lying on.

“I’m okay, baby,” Kate forced herself to say and even that hurt. “Don’t cry.”

But, even as young as she was, Paige saw through Kate’s bravado and knew that she really wasn’t. Her face was pasty, devoid of color. But the scary part was that the lower half of her body was bloody. There was a lot and it had seeped through the thin blanket they had covered her with.

“Do you know this woman?” the technician asked Mrs. Douglas as she rushed to Kate’s side.

“She’s my daughter. The baby?”

“She was pregnant? That would explain all the blood. Okay, let’s get her to the hospital, now!” he barked at another man also wearing an emergency jacket.

“May we please accompany her?” Mrs. Douglas practically pleaded.

“Ah...all right. We’ll squeeze you in. Hurry!”

The ride to the hospital was difficult with all the holiday traffic. Paige clung to her mother’s hand the entire way, silently crying. A sniffle every now and then gave her emotions away. But Kate didn’t notice. She kept slipping in and out of consciousness.

Mary Douglas was battling her own demons. As worried as she was about Kate’s condition, she had to steel herself in order to enter Bellevue. She hated hospitals. If Paige wasn’t with her, perhaps she wouldn’t fight as hard.

* * * *

Suddenly the years melted away and Mary was a young child again. She and her cousin, Warren, were playing stick-ball. The ball was hit hard and sailed through the air. Warren chased the Spalding into the street. The driver of the car had dropped a burning ash from his cigarette in his lap. He didn't see Warren—until it was too late.

Mary watched as Warren was taken to the hospital. She accompanied her own parents to the hospital when they went to see him. Warren looked like a monster. His head was swollen and his eyes were blackened. There was hardly a spot on his face that wasn't purple or red. They had put him in a body cast and he lived only a day before slipping into a coma and dying.

Each time she had to walk into a hospital it meant someone close to her was dying. First it was Warren. Then her grandfather had been brought to the hospital because of a respiratory infection and had a fatal heart attack. He was followed by her grandmother and an uncle. Then her favorite Aunt Sally, Warren's mother.

She hated the antiseptic smell that clung to her nostrils long after she'd leave and the nondescript greens or burnt orange shades that covered the hospital walls.

Entering the emergency entrance with Kate was difficult. No, she was positive, had Paige not been there holding her hand, she wouldn't have found the courage to enter at all, as she wiped the beads of sweat that were threatening to drip into her eyes.

The medical attendants left Paige and Mrs. Douglas standing outside the examination room as they rushed Kate inside. They found two seats in the crowded emergency waiting room and sat down.

Mrs. Douglas held Paige close to her as the child sobbed. Her own tears began to fall as well. She knew well from her own experience how terrible it was to lose a child no matter at what age. It hadn't been easy losing her son to war. She still thought about him and became inconsolable on his birthday every year.

She knew that Mark and her husband would be there soon and was aware of how devastating the news will be to both of them, especially Mark. They must have hit heavy traffic, she thought glancing at the large black and white clock on the wall.

Well over an hour later, a doctor dressed in green scrubs, soiled with what looked like dried blood, approached them. Paige lifted up her head.

"You can see her now, but she may not be too responsive. We had to sedate her. Basically she's lost the baby..."

"Noooo!" Paige wailed.

Mrs. Douglas merely shook her head as she bit down on her bottom lip. She had already surmised that having seen all the blood. Now she knew why they had to sedate Kate.

When Paige quieted down the doctor continued. "She also had two cracked ribs. Someone substantially heavy must have fallen on top of her in the elevator. A few of her internal organs were lacerated as well. She'll have to remain here for a few days. As soon as a room is ready for her, we'll admit her."

"Thank you, Doctor," Mrs. Douglas said, as she and Paige went inside to see Kate.

Kate's eyes were closed. Coming closer, Mrs. Douglas could see a tear lodged in the corner of one of Kate's eyes. She was awake and upset.

"Kate, dear, how do you feel?"

Kate's eyes fluttered open at the sound of her mother's voice. The tear slowly slid down the side of her face.

"I lost the baby," she said as more tears began to flow. "Mark wanted this baby so much...and I lost it."

"You'll have another."

Kate shook her head, but her mother didn't pursue the baby issue.

"Mommy, when are you coming home?"

"As soon as I can, sweetheart." Turning to look at her mother, she asked, "Did you call Mark?"

"Yes. He and your father should be here shortly."

"Does he know about the baby?"

"Yes. I called him after I spoke with the doctor. He's stuck in traffic, but almost here."

"Poor Mark."

"Kate, you're the one who's hurt here. It's more important for you to heal and come home. Mark will be fine."

But Kate hardly heard a word she'd said. All she could focus on was Mark's traumatic disappointment. She closed her eyes wondering why she was such a jinx. Why did all the people around her always have to be hurt?

* * * *

Mark rushed into the room with his father-in-law behind him. He looked at his mother-in-law with frightened eyes. "Is she all right?"

Mrs. Douglas took him aside and said, "With a little mending and a great deal of understanding. She is very upset over the loss of the baby. She feels it's all her fault and that she's let you down."

Mark squeezed his eyes shut. When he reopened them he said, "I'll be honest with you. I'm devastated over the loss of

the baby, but it was an act of God. If he wants us to have another, we will. If not, I'll—we'll deal with it."

Mrs. Douglas nodded and hugged Mark. Then she kissed her husband hello and held his hand a moment as if to reassure him that Kate was going to be all right. Paige went to her father and put her arms around his waist. He kissed the top of her head. "Hello, princess."

"No brother, Daddy," she said, tearfully.

"Sorry, love, I knew how much you wanted one," he said, gently stroking the side of her face. "I'm just as disappointed as you are."

"Mark, Dad and I are going to take Paige downstairs for a bite to eat while you talk to Kate."

"All right," Mark said, as he managed a weak smile to show he was appreciative of his mother-in-law's consideration.

As soon as they left, Mark went quickly to Kate's bed and bent down to kiss her.

"I'm here, Kate."

Kate opened her eyes and her tears spilled out like rain.

"Don't cry," he said, his own voice thick with emotion.

He kissed her face and her hands. "Just get well and come home to me. I love you."

"I'm so sorry..."

Mark gently placed a finger on her lips. "It's not your fault. If we can, we'll have another."

"What if we can't? It meant so much to you."

"You mean more," he said, putting his head on the pillow next to hers. "What if I had lost you, also?"

Her tears continued to fall. Mark lifted his head. Tears had covered his face.

"I'm disappointed, but I accept what happened. We have to go on with our lives."

"I can't. It was growing inside of me. It was a part of me. How can I make believe it never existed?"

"No one is asking you to do that, only accept the loss. It was God's will, Kate."

"God's will? You're telling me it was God's will to murder an innocent child growing within me?"

"Murder is a harsh word, Kate. It was an accident. But He felt he had to take the child. If you accept that it will give you some solace."

"Call it whatever you want, but how can it give me solace? How many more people I love will God take from me? No one is safe. Not you, Paige, or anyone I love."

"Kate, you're upset. It's understandable."

"I'm not upset. I'm pissed. I want to know how a merciful God could do such a terrible thing. Or is He just away on an extended vacation?"

"Kate, getting yourself worked up, can't be good for you."

"Oh, Mark, why can't I just wake up and discover this is only a nightmare?"

"I wish it were, but it's not. You've got to get well and come home. Paige and I need you."

He kissed her and then looked into her eyes. He saw the despair she felt and knew his nearly matched it. But he'd have to disguise his and keep it to himself in order for her to recover. The loss of the baby that he had wanted so badly was devastating, but her mother was right. He could have lost Kate also. This fact would be his solace. He'd learn to live with and eventually accept what had happened.

"I love you, Kate," he whispered.

Kate had turned away. He saw the trembling of her lip and knew she was crying.

"We brought you some coffee, Daddy," Paige said, entering the room ahead of her grandparents.

"Thanks, sweetheart."

"Everything okay?" Mrs. Douglas asked Mark, while her eyes were asking much more.

"As could be for now. Kate needs a great deal of rest and time to get better."

Kate's father went over to say hello to her. He touched her hair and stroked her arm.

"How are you feeling, Katie?"

Kate turned to face her father. "Oh, Daddy..." was all she managed before she broke down in sobs again.

She had always gone to her father when her doll was broken and he was always able to fix her. He had the knack to make everything better when she was feeling down as well. But he couldn't fix things for Kate this time.

Her father kissed her tear-stained cheek. And as if he was reading her mind, he said, "I wish you could sit on my knee while I kissed the boo-boo away. In time the pain will lessen, you'll see."

"Why don't we let her sleep?" Mrs. Douglas suggested. "We can come back later."

After her family left, Kate was alone with her thoughts. Perhaps she was the harshest of critics at the moment, but it didn't prevent her from viewing her life as if it were a roller coaster ride. There were so many ups and downs along the way that she was beginning to feel that maybe she was being held prisoner in an amusement park.

She knew that Mark wasn't being completely honest with her. He wasn't a saint. He had wanted a child much too badly to take it as well as he did. He might not be sharing all the emotions she was feeling, but he was probably hurting almost as much. Deep down inside he'd resent her for the loss of the child. And if she couldn't bear him another, it would be worse. The pain would always be there like a thorn in his side.

Damn him! Why didn't he listen when she warned him that she was a jinx? He had told her she was being silly. Well, what did he think now?

* * * *

A short time later, Kate had fallen into a restless sleep. She dreamed she was in court watching trial after trial of all the people she's ever loved. Their crime was their acceptance of her love. She was tied to her seat, forced to watch as each person was found guilty and sentenced to death. When she cried out, they taped her mouth shut. It was one of the most hideous nightmares she'd ever had. When they placed her unborn child on the witness chair, she felt an agonizing pain rip right through her. It brought her to consciousness instantly. Fully awake, she realized the pain was real and not part of her dream. It was unbearable. Kate pushed the buzzer for the nurse.

"Is there something wrong, Mrs. Winters?"

"I...have a...terr...terrible pain. It hurts so, I...can hardly...breathe."

The nurse put the light on and saw that Kate was lying in a pool of blood. She gasped and ran out of the room. It was then that Kate noticed the blood. She knew that whatever was happening to her now would have dire consequences. Her life had turned into one never-ending nightmare.

A doctor rushed into the room followed by the nurse. He pulled the blanket and sheet from Kate and began to examine her. Another severe pain wracked Kate's body and she gave out an involuntary moan.

"We've got to get her to OR immediately. She's hemorrhaging badly," the doctor said. "Get a gurney. There's no time for an orderly."

The nurse nodded and was gone. By the time the doctor reached the OR, they would be ready for them. Kate was met by a trauma team of doctors and nurses who were trained for most types of emergency.

She was examined quickly. The cauterization that had been done earlier hadn't held. Too much damage had been done to her uterus for that stop-gap method to work. They needed to give her a hysterectomy. That was the last thing that Kate wanted. Yet, the pain had become so overbearing...

The doctors were insistent that they had no other choice. The bottom line was simple. If she wanted to live, she'd let them go ahead.

Almost three hours later, Kate was rolled into the recovery room. Mark and Mrs. Douglas were pacing Kate's room waiting for her to be brought back up. The other bed in her room was still unoccupied, so they were able to remain there.

"The doctor said she'd be right up. Where the hell is she?" Mark asked his mother-in-law, knowing the question was a rhetorical one.

Putting a hand on his shoulder, she replied, "She'll be all right."

"Enough, already!"

Understanding his pain, she said, "Life is a mixture of happiness and pain. Unfortunately sometimes the balance is

upset and there seems to be only pain. But that quickly changes, you'll see."

Mark shook his head in disgust.

"When my son was killed in Vietnam I nearly died. I hated that war and didn't understand why we were there fighting in the first place. Why did my child have to go to that God-forsaken country I asked over and over again when he was first drafted? And when he died, I was inconsolable. The pain never goes away, but it does lessen to the point you can accept it and deal with it. That's living. If you don't, you're as good as dead—to yourself and everyone your life touches."

"Why must life be a compromise? In order to get my Kate back, I have to give up the dream of having children of my own?"

"I have no answers to that. I just know we're often forced to make decisions and compromises not of our own choosing."

"I hear something—they're coming."

"Mark, despite how much you're hurting, keep this in mind. Kate may feel less of a woman now for reasons you'll never fathom. Try to be understanding no matter how disagreeable she may act."

He nodded, rushing to Kate's side as soon as she had been transferred to the hospital bed. She was groggy, but awake. Her face was the color of blanched stone, as if all her blood had been drained from her body. When she recognized Mark she turned away.

"Kate, don't turn from me. Please!"

"Remember what I said, Mark," his mother-in-law reminded him.

"Sweetheart, I just want to know if you're all right."

Without turning her head, Kate said, "I'll never be all right again. Leave me alone."

"Don't shut me out. I love you," he said, tears starting to slip from his eyes.

"Go away!"

"Mark, let's leave her by herself for now. I know my daughter. Your staying won't accomplish anything. Maybe after some sleep she'll feel better."

"I...I hope you're right..."

The family returned later that day. Kate was still unresponsive, even to Paige, who didn't quite understand why her mother was acting in such a disagreeable manner. Mark decided that his in-laws should take Paige home. She still had a couple of days left of school before the Christmas vacation began. Kate's car was still at the train station so they could drive it home. He'd remain in the hospital with Kate until she was ready to come home.

* * * *

The next day was a duplication of the previous day. Kate refused to talk to Mark no matter what he said or did. She would turn her head away from him and cry until she fell asleep. Her behavior was disturbing him and breaking down his resolve to be as understanding as he could. He found her being selfish, caring about her own feelings and not giving a moment's thought about his anguish.

Finally on the third day, he exploded.

"I've been watching you lay there all day licking your wounds. Well I've got a scoop for you, madam. You don't have a monopoly on pain. I'm hurting too. Do you have any idea what you've put me through? Have you given one thought to anything or anyone else other than yourself? You

could have died the other night. You're alive, though you're acting as if you're dead. You could have been more civil to your daughter. She doesn't understand why you acted the way you did and is very hurt. But what does that matter compared to the traumatic experience you went through? Right? Nothing can compare. We lost a baby. Must we lose our marriage, too?"

Kate turned to face him. "Why can't you leave me be?"

"Because I love you. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Kate. We all understand your pain and want to help you, but we can't unless you allow us to."

"I want to be alone. I have nothing to say. I feel nothing. Why can't you understand that?"

"Is this a temporary thing or will you make it permanent?"

"I don't know. Why can't you just drop it for now and get off my back? I don't know what hurts more, my body or my soul. Can't you get it through your head I gave up my membership to motherhood the other night?"

"Is that what this is all about, Kate? Because, if it is, it doesn't change my feelings for you. Nor does it make you any different. You're still the beautiful woman that you were. And I emphasize the word 'woman.' Having a hysterectomy doesn't make you less of a woman. Do you hear me, Kate?"

"I hear you and that's what you say."

"Do you think I'm telling you one thing and feel differently?"

When she didn't reply, he angrily asked, "Well do you?"

Her eyes answered him adding to his fury. He grabbed her shoulders and spoke through clenched teeth. "If you think so lowly of me that I would love you less because of all this,

then you really don't know me at all."

He let her shoulders drop back down and stomped out of the room, afraid he might say or do something he was sorry for. Angrily, he left the hospital and went back to the hotel. He called home to let them know that there was no change in Kate's behavior. His mother-in-law tried to be optimistic, but it didn't help. Perhaps she was right, though, he thought after he hung up. Maybe it is too soon for Kate. Maybe she does need more time before things go back to normal. Maybe he wasn't being as understanding as he should be. He wished he knew all the answers—or any answers.

Chapter 47

The nurse had given Kate a sedative to help her sleep, but it wasn't working. She was so wound up inside that she felt she might snap. This, coupled with the pain that had become a constant dull ache, was keeping her from sleeping.

She had thought Mark, of all people, would understand how she felt. But then, hadn't he lost the one thing he had desired most for such a long time—forever, if he remained with her. Perhaps he did want an end to their relationship. He had mentioned something about her murdering their marriage also.

Things were getting out of control. She heard herself saying things she really didn't mean. She had even lashed out at Paige. Talk about misplaced aggression. It had to be the pain speaking. Even so, she had to get a grip on things before it was too late, if it wasn't too late, already. It all depended on how much Mark wanted his own child. Was he really willing to spend the rest of his life with a woman who couldn't have any more children or seek out one who could?

* * * *

Mark couldn't sleep either. He walked the floor, confounded by Kate's irascible attitude. How could she even

doubt his love for her after all these years? No matter how much he wanted his own child, he'd never leave her. Hadn't he told her many times that she was the only woman in the world for him? What did he have to do in order to convince her? "Damn that woman!" he said, heading downstairs to the bar.

* * * *

The phone rang, waking up Mark. He looked at the clock radio sitting on the night table in the hotel room. It read five o'clock. *My God! I've slept the day away*, he thought, as he lifted the receiver.

"Mark, are you all right? I just called Kate to check on her and she said she hadn't seen you all day," Mrs. Douglas inquired, not masking the concern in her voice.

Trying to sit up, Mark realized he had a massive headache. "I'm not sure. My head is pounding. I must have a hangover."

"As in from drinking?"

"That's usually the way they're acquired. To be honest with you, your daughter literally drove me to drink last night. I remember going downstairs to the bar, but have absolutely no recollection how I got back to the room."

"She sounded upset that you hadn't stopped by to see her. She thinks you deliberately didn't."

"After our conversation last night, I don't blame her for thinking that way."

"Perhaps you should call her and try to explain."

"That is, if she lets me. You know Kate. She can be damn stubborn, at times."

"She must take after my husband, of course."

"Of course," Mark said, recognizing her touch of humor.

“Give her a call. Good night.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Mark dialed the hospital and asked for Kate’s room.

“Hello.”

“Kate—” click!

Mark slammed down the phone, muttering to himself. His head was killing him, but he had to get to the hospital to try and explain to that impossible woman whom he happened to love. Trying to make himself as presentable as possible, he took the elevator down and went to the concierge in search of aspirin. Luckily he had and gave him some, which he promptly took, after snaring the first glass of water he saw. Within minutes, he was heading towards the hospital in a cab that the doorman had hailed for him.

The florist next to the hospital was still open. He went inside and picked out the nicest arrangement he could and then proceeded to the elevator. *If she says something—anything she shouldn’t, I’ll brain her with these flowers*, he decided.

He began talking as he entered the room. He hadn’t even realized that Kate wasn’t in the bed.

“Who the devil are you talking to?” she asked, coming out of the bathroom.

“What...the...you weren’t in the bed?”

“Have you lost your mind?” she asked as she gingerly got back into bed.

“You mean I was apologizing to a pillow and an empty bed?”

“It certainly seems that way.”

“Why did you hang up on me?”

“Why weren’t you here?”

“You really missed me?”

"That wasn't the question?"

"I was sleeping off a hangover which I got because of you."

"Oh, and now I forced you to get drunk."

"No, you didn't force me to get drunk, just drove me to it."

Kate raised an eyebrow, giving him a disapproving look.

"Don't you give me that look, madam."

"And what kind of look do you want?"

"A loving look," he said, putting his lips on hers. "I love you, even though you're acting like an idiot."

"Who's calling whom an idiot?"

Mark kissed her again. He smiled as she returned his kiss.

"I don't want to quarrel with you. All I want is for you to come home."

"Do you honestly mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"The doctor said I can go home for Christmas if I continue to heal as well as I am."

"That's wonderful news."

"I'm such a mess, though. Half the time I find myself crying and I don't know why."

"It goes with the territory, I've been told. That part sometimes takes longer. But I'll be there for you to lean on. Perhaps there's a support group you can join near home."

"There is. I have the numbers of a couple of them. The nurse gave them to me this morning."

"Oh, by the way, this is for you."

"They're beautiful."

"I know. I picked them myself."

"It's going to be hard. I can be difficult at times."

“No...”

“I’m being serious here.”

“I’m sorry, honey. Go ahead and finish what you began to say.”

“All I’m asking is for you to bear with me while I work this all out.”

“No problem there.”

Kate took a deep breath. “That’s quite a load off my mind. I just hope you don’t change your mind.”

“Change my mind about what?”

“Wanting to stay with someone who can’t have your children.”

“Kate, please...try not to even think about that.”

“It’s so hard.”

“When I looked at you before all this happened, I didn’t see a baby-making machine. I saw a woman whom I loved and adored. I still do.”

“It’s easy to say that now, but what about tomorrow or next year?”

“Kate, this is becoming most annoying. You’re just going to have to believe me.”

She began to say something, but Mark kissed her, not giving her the chance.

Mark raised his arms in defense. “The subject is dropped, Kate.”

Though she still didn’t quite feel one hundred percent certain that Mark was speaking from his heart on the matter, she dropped the subject and didn’t speak of it again.

* * * *

By Christmas Eve Kate was home. She still needed to rest and let her body recuperate, so her mother continued to take

care of the apartment and look after Paige. This time her parents' visit had been a God-send and they decided to extend their stay. Kate realized that no matter how crazy her parents' antics could get, they were there for her when she needed them the most. She felt lucky to have them.

Christmas for Kate and Mark turned out to be much more than a holiday to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. It was also a new beginning for them. Kate had to learn to accept the loss of her child and the changes to her body. Mark had to learn when to back off and just let her alone. Sometimes he thought this was more self-preservation on his part if he wanted to keep his head on his shoulders and not be sniped at. Kate experienced a great deal of melancholy during that time and he prayed it would pass quickly. He would sometimes find her sitting by herself crying, when minutes before she had seemed to be happy. Crazy mood swings. Something else he'd have to learn to live with.

Chapter 48

Across the country in Arizona, William and Robin celebrated Christmas in their new condo. Ashley had become old enough to be a disruptive element to their privacy. There was virtually no way for her to share a room with Dylan, either. It wouldn't have been fair to either kid. So until they closed on the condo and moved in, Ashley either slept in the living room or on the patio.

They had a great deal to be thankful for. Aside from being able to afford a bigger place to live, Dylan had enrolled at the University of Arizona and was now a sophomore. He had turned his life around and was headed in the right direction.

Robin had prepared a candlelight dinner. Ashley had eaten earlier and had gone to bed thinking about Santa and all the presents he would bring her.

"We have a great deal to be thankful for this Christmas," William said, across their worn kitchen table that had been transformed into an elegant one by a white linen tablecloth.

The burning candles gave off a heady scent that permeated the room, producing both an elegant yet sensual effect. This effect wasn't lost on either of them.

"Yes, we do."

"I especially do. Eleven years ago I was found crawling out of a ravine in a desert with no life. You have given me a wonderful life," he said, kissing her hands.

"I must confess. I had an ulterior motive. I fell in love with you from the first moment I set my eyes on you."

"Because I reminded you of Mel Gibson?"

"It helped."

"What else?"

With that sexily impish smile of hers, she replied, "I'll tell you later."

"Oh, before I forget, we were invited to a dinner party at Denise and Jim's next Saturday."

"You really like working for Jim, don't you?"

"Yes. He's a fair man and is always willing to listen to suggestions. I'm lucky he gambled on me."

"He's just as lucky to get a computer programmer as skilled as you."

"A marriage made in heaven."

"Uh-uh. Ours was."

William laughed and lifted his wine glass in a toast. "To us!"

Robin clinked her glass against his and repeated, "To us!"

She had been unnerved a couple of times in the past months, afraid that William might regain his memory. He had spoken out in his sleep on more than one occasion, calling for a Kate. Not knowing who this Kate was sent shivers down Robin's spine. She'd never do anything that might prevent William from regaining his memory, yet she wouldn't actively help him in his quest. She was much too terrified that she might lose him—especially to the mysterious Kate.

Robin had loved her first husband, Chad, very much. It

must have been written in the Great Book of Life when the two of them were born that they were destined to marry. After all, they had grown up together and began dating as soon as they were old enough. Neither one had ever dated anyone else and knew only each other intimately. When he died of cancer she was devastated.

For the first year or so following Chad's death, she had no desire to be with another man, but loneliness can become a strong motivating factor. She began to go on dates, but it seemed that all the men ever wanted was sex, especially after they discovered she had been married. She soon realized that these men equated the cost of the meal with a roll in the sack and she soon desired only hamburger. After all, that couldn't be worth more than a little groping in her book. Whatever happened to getting to know the person and having meaningful relationships before jumping into bed she'd wonder time and time again? The entire dating scene turned her completely off. Then she came to work one day and saw William.

He had been brought in earlier that morning after being discovered in the desert by two men. He was badly dehydrated and had terrible sun poisoning. That turned out to be the least of his maladies, for he'd been shot. One bullet had come close to his spine, while the other one had creased his skull. In addition, there were other bruises and contusions. It was remarkable that the man was alive at all.

As gruesome as he had looked that day, Robin was drawn to that stranger lying there in the bed so helpless. From the expensive suit that he had worn, now tattered and useless, it was obvious that he wasn't merely a homeless person who had become the target of some sick person with a grudge. Unfortunately, there was no identification on him when he was

found. Obviously the person who had done this to him and left him for dead in the desert had taken his wallet and any other form of identification.

When the man finally regained consciousness and spoke, by his accent they knew he was from the northeast. However, Arizona was a growing state economically and many people from all over the country were settling there. There was no telling whether he was in Arizona on business or lived there. His fingerprints weren't on file with any agency. Thus the identity of the man remained a mystery.

By the time the stranger had taken on the name of William and left the hospital, Robin had already memorized every inch of him, from the long toes that constantly needed clipping, to his strong-muscled back. This was the result of having to sponge-bathe him. He was quite different from the withered old men that she'd often get. She'd often dream about the stranger at night, finding herself in his strong arms and being loved by him. When William became hers, she thanked Heaven. How could she let him go now that he shared every breath she took?

Robin knew that William wanted to at least remember his name. If nothing else, he'd have that. In the beginning when he had moved in with her and Dylan, regaining his past was the single most important goal he had. But as he grew to love her, it became less and less important. He merely adopted the named William that she had given him and added her last name, 'Billings,' to it, when they married. He felt it was much nicer than Doe.

Yes, she thought, she had a great deal to be thankful for, especially now that Dylan seemed to have straightened out. Yet, she worried about him, too, for it was so easy to trip and

fall back into drug abuse.

Putting the last pot on the rack and washing out the sink, Robin felt the presence of William behind her. He kissed the side of her neck as he slipped his hand inside her blouse. This was all it generally took for Robin's insides to become enflamed with desire. He was like a drug. She didn't need alcohol or other stimulants to get high. One touch from William and she was in overdrive. She had never been with a man like him whose love making could bring her to heights most women dreamed about. Sex with Chad couldn't even compare.

Drying her hands on a dishtowel, she turned her head to meet his hungry lips and all her fears and worries dissolved.

William adored this passionate woman whom he carried into the bedroom. She hadn't just given him a life, she had given him a wondrous journey where each day took him to a new place. She was spontaneous and lived each day to the fullest. It was as if she feared tomorrow wouldn't come. He'd often find himself wondering about that, but never could get her to talk about it.

Now running his hands down her silken skin, he wondered how he ever lived without her and her love. He could so easily lose himself when he was making love to her. The outside world would fade away. It mattered little when all he needed was Robin. Whatever life he had, whomever he had been in his past life mattered little now. He had a new life.

Chapter 49

The Christmas vacation over, Mark returned to work. Kate wasn't quite ready, physically or emotionally. She needed more time to heal. Her parents heard the call of the open road and were ready to leave, but before leaving, Mrs. Douglas had one last heart-to-heart talk with her daughter over lunch at a small restaurant in town.

"I don't know when Dad and I will be back. We'd like to head up towards Washington to visit a while with your sister."

"I'm glad you and Dad were here. I doubt if I would have gotten through everything that happened without you both."

"You underestimate yourself, Kate. There's an inner strength deep inside you."

"You always see the cup half full, don't you, Mom?"

"No. I guess I'm just a realist. There's a difference between being a realist and an optimist, you know."

"I have this pain inside. I don't even know if it stems from the guilt I feel losing the baby or the loss of the baby itself. Will it ever go away?"

"I'd love to lie to you, Kate, and tell you it does, but it doesn't. Instead it's merely tempered by time. I still wake up thinking about Hal and imagine him walking through the

door, even though your brother has been gone so many years. It's one of life's little quirks."

"I'm glad we're having this talk. I'm going to miss having you around."

"You don't have to. Whenever you need to talk, you can call me on my new cellular phone. What a most thoughtful gift."

"Don't forget that you get to pay the phone bills, though."

"If I'm able to hear more from you and Joan, it will be worth every cent."

"Thanks for everything, Mom," Kate said, reaching across the table to hold her mother's hand.

"Hey, I did nothing more than was covered under my job description," her mother said, trying to lighten the moment.

"You know what I meant."

"I know," Mrs. Douglas said, giving in to the tears she had been fighting. "Your father and I love you very much, Kate. When you hurt, we hurt. It's a fact of our lives. It's what makes us parents. No matter how old the child gets, the pain remains the same."

"I think I can relate to that now that I have Paige and have gone through the miscarriage. I just wanted you to know how wonderful I think both of you are."

"We know we have succeeded as parents when we see you and Joan. We couldn't ask for anything more."

The waiter came and asked if they'd like more coffee. It broke up the seriousness of the moment and the conversation over their last cup turned to Paige and how quickly she was growing up.

"If you don't come back quickly enough, the next time you see my daughter, she'll be a woman."

Mrs. Douglas laughed. "She's already a thirty-five-year old woman trapped in a child's body."

"You're right," Kate said as she laughed along with her mother.

"She's going to be a beautiful woman, Kate. No one can deny she's your child. In fact, she could be your clone."

"Do you really think so? I often see Peter's face when she smiles."

"No. She definitely favors you. You're going to have your hands full keeping the guys away from her."

"Thanks."

"Your father and I had to go through it. It seems only fair."

"Come back soon, Mom."

"We'll try."

* * * *

The following week Kate went back to school. She was greeted with a few words of sympathy from her fellow teachers, but no one attempted to get her to talk about the accident or miscarriage at length. She hadn't wanted to and for this she was thankful. Perhaps Mark's returning to school a week before her was a contributing factor.

Getting back into the routine of teaching helped her in her healing. Seeing her class grasp the concepts in the lessons she was giving day after day was worth its weight in gold. Teaching was also a bond that she and Mark shared. They often prepared lessons together and discussed certain problems that popped up from time to time with some of their students. The kids at school still referred to them as Ken and Barbie, which they both found amusing.

Most important, Kate began to deal better with her inner

turmoil and pain. Her nightmares lessened and she was once again receptive towards Mark. She had shut him out. It hadn't been done intentionally, but nevertheless, the pain he felt as a result of it was the same.

They were in the middle of writing lesson plans one evening. Paige had gone to bed and the apartment was still, except for the occasional turning of a page or the scratching of a pen across a sheet of paper.

Kate put her pen down and was watching Mark who was thoroughly engrossed in what he was writing. She studied the lines of his face, wanting to trace them with her finger. Suddenly she had an overwhelming desire to kiss his lips. Realizing she had been staring at him, Mark looked up.

He looked into those expressive blue eyes and saw the passion that had been lacking for the last month or so. He smiled, knowingly. The smile was returned. Without a word being said, they both got up and walked into the bedroom.

Kate fell back on the bed and reached for him. He was in her arms instantly, his lips on hers. Tears of joy welled in his eyes, as he whispered, "Hello, stranger, it's been a very long time."

"Too long," was all Kate said before they became lost in one another.

Chapter 50

Kate saw her mother's prediction come to pass. Paige had passed her thirteenth birthday and seemed to have a different boyfriend every week. She'd be telling Mark and Kate how cool one particular boy was and how great it was to hang out with him, only to dump him for another even more cool guy. They couldn't keep the names straight. The telephone became nearly exclusively Paige's, and then there were the endless parties every weekend. The two of them had become chauffeurs.

Lying in bed one night, Mark said to Kate, "Maybe we should marry off Paige. That way, we'll save wear and tear on the cars."

"You mean let some unsuspecting guy chauffeur her around?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Why not sell her into a white slavery ring while you're at it, and make some money at the same time?"

"Now that's a thought."

"I was only kidding, you know."

"Now she tells me," Mark replied and got bopped on the head with a pillow for his trouble. "Honestly, that girl changes

boyfriends like underwear. No guy is safe.”

“She’s just discovering how to use her feminine wiles to the best of her ability,” Kate replied.

“Is that what you call it? Speaking of which, did you talk to her about...you know...”

“About you know what?” she asked teasingly.

“Sex.”

“Why? You want her to start?” Kate asked, trying to suppress a giggle.

“No, silly. I just think she should know all about it. Ignorance causes accidents.”

“You don’t have to worry. She approached me on the subject. One of the girls she knows is already taking birth control pills.”

“Dear God, she didn’t ask to take them, did she?”

“No. But she was curious to know what it was all about.”

“What did you tell her?”

“The truth. I told her it was the most beautiful thing a man and a woman in love can do together.”

“That’s a mouthful. What if she thinks she’s in love?”

“I also mentioned that it was usually best to wait until you were married.”

“She didn’t buy that, did she?”

“Nope. I could tell she remembered that she’d been born out of wedlock.”

“So how did you handle it?” Mark asked.

“I finally had to admit to her that sometimes it does happen between two consenting adults in love. And I accentuated the word adults.”

“Did you talk about pregnancy and its prevention?”

“Of, course, silly. We talked about condoms and birth

control pills,” Kate said.

“You don’t think she intends to put any of this new knowledge to the test, do you?”

“I hope not. But with kids today, who knows? You try to teach them what’s right, yet they do what they want anyway. We just have to trust her.”

“With a face and a body like hers, I’ll have to pull the boys off of her.”

“All you guys have only one thing on your mind.”

“How can you say that?” Mark said, as he drew Kate towards him. “Now tell me, what do you think I have on my mind?”

“Well, if that certain organ, attached to your lower extremities, that is now poking my thigh is indicative of what you’re thinking, I rest my case.”

“Very funny,” he said as he rolled over and kissed her.

A second or two later, Kate called out, “Guilty as charged. Case closed.”

Chapter 51

“Can I borrow your car, William?” Dylan asked.

“What’s wrong with yours?”

“It keeps stalling out and I don’t have the time to bring it in to get it looked at until Tuesday when I have no classes.”

“How will you get to school on Monday?”

“My friend Jamie can pick me up.”

“So where are you going tonight that you need a car?”

“Out, of course. I have this date with a really hot girl from my Soc. Class.”

“I see...”

“So...can I borrow the car, please?”

“I guess so, but don’t bring it back on empty.”

“I promise I won’t, and William...thanks.”

“Just be careful...and don’t get her pregnant.”

“Very, funny.”

“I thought so. Have a good time.”

Dylan shook his head, smiling. “Thanks.”

A few minutes later, Robin walked in, carrying two bags of groceries.

“Was that Dylan who just passed me in your car?”

“Yes, he’s borrowing it to take a hot chick on a date.”

“What’s wrong with his car?”

“He says it stalls.”

She shook her head. “Never a dull moment. Is Ashley in the house?”

“Yes. She’s watching TV in her room.”

“Good. I’ll start dinner.”

“What are you making?”

“I figured I’d barbecue some steaks.”

“Okay. Call me when dinner’s ready. I’m going to try to debug a program.”

“Want some Raid?”

“Very funny.” *Everyone is a comedian*, William thought and smiled.

After dinner Robin and William had their coffee on the patio. It was a beautiful evening. Every star in the endless sky seemed to be competing with one another in proving its brilliance. He loved nights like these where you could almost hear the individual stars twinkle. Then without warning, the peacefulness of the night was suddenly shattered by the squeal of sirens heading in their direction.

“Now what?” William asked as he and Robin went back into the apartment and walked out the front door.

Two police cars and an ambulance came to a screeching halt in front of the next apartment.

“I hope Carolyn’s all right,” Robin said, worriedly.

“It was only a matter of time before Hank landed her in the hospital. Why didn’t she leave him?”

“Where would she go with the kids? That’s what kept her there, I just know it.”

“But how could Hank hit the poor woman in the first place?”

“She said that he only went after her when he was drunk.”

"You know that's not an excuse. And how many days of the week did he get drunk?"

"Unfortunately, way too many."

Without warning, a man's face flashed before William. It had a crooked grin—almost a sneer.

"William, are you all right? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"I think I just may have from my past, yet I don't know where he fits. It was a man with a sinister grin."

"Perhaps, he's the one who left you for dead."

"It's possible. It's the first time I've caught any of the momentary flashbacks. Maybe this is the beginning of my breakthrough."

Robin's thin smile froze on her face. Silently she prayed it wasn't. It would be too much of a gamble, one she definitely didn't want to chance.

"They're taking Carolyn out on a stretcher. She looks pretty bad. At least they've got the bastard in cuffs and they're taking him in," William said. Then as an afterthought, he added, "I wonder where the children are?"

Robin was lost in her own thoughts and hardly heard a word he said. Instead, the tears that had threatened to fall began to slide down her face.

"Rob?"

William thought maybe she was worried for Carolyn and the kids, but soon realized that Robin was miles away.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head.

"You looked like you were a million miles away."

Smiling, she said, "I'm okay. What were you saying about Carolyn's kids?"

"I wondered what would happen with them, while Carolyn is getting medical help."

"They'll probably go to her mother's. I hope Carolyn speaks to a psychologist also. She needs to find the strength to break free from the cycle of abuse she is tethered to."

"That won't be easy," William said.

"It never is. It's easier to stay with an abusive husband and endure the beatings than it is to leave him."

"Seeing something like that happen humbles me and makes me even more thankful that you found me. I could have ended up a useless drunk."

"I don't think you have the makings to become one. You're too gentle. Besides, what makes you think you're the only lucky one?"

William smiled and squeezed her hand.

"Besides, you don't have to tether me to keep me near, since I'll never leave you, William."

"Nor I," he said drawing her closer to him.

I can only pray that what you say is true, Robin thought. Lord only knows what will happen when you regain your memory and find out who this Kate was. Hardly a night goes by that you don't call out for her.

* * * *

Still somewhat upset by the small breakthrough that William had made earlier, Robin couldn't help but fear that more breakthroughs would follow. What if he remembered more with each one? She feared the answer to that and tried to memorize all the wonderful things about him that she loved, from the way his raven-colored hair fell in his eyes while they made love, and the hypnotic beauty of his tiger-green eyes with the brown specks. Gently, she kissed every part of his

face, memorizing the texture of his skin, drinking in the scent that was exclusively his. She ran her hands down his strong, muscled back, caressing every inch until she reached his solidly-built hips. Dwelling there a moment, she retraced her path and slowly began an erotic trail down his chest, entwining her fingers in his tightly curled chest hairs.

Robin doubted she'd ever forget a thing about William. He was too much a part of her being, body and soul. No, if he left, there would never be another man who could ever take his place. Of that, she was certain.

Chapter 52

Dylan made the Dean's List. Both Robin and William were ecstatic. William suggested that Dylan choose a restaurant and that they'd have a dinner celebration. The restaurant he chose was a steak house off of Mill Road in Tempe. Robin had made reservations for six the following evening.

At the last minute, right before William was about to leave for the restaurant, the program that he had been working on needed some important changes. Normally he'd leave the work for the next day, but he had promised the client that the program would be ready for their meeting scheduled for ten the following morning. He was able to complete the changes and test the program to make sure it was free of bugs, but he was definitely going to be late.

William tried to call home, but his family had already left for the restaurant. He tried Robin's cell phone, but it went directly into voice mail. He left a message that he was on his way. Feeling terrible that they'd have to wait for him, he jumped into the car and peeled out of the parking lot like a crazy man.

He started out on one route to the restaurant, but the traffic was so heavy that he switched to another. That road

proved to be just as slow-going. At the rate he was going, Dylan would graduate before he got there.

Finally turning on to Mill, he soon discovered that it was backed up as well. Too many people on the roads. Too much damn congestion. Probably another fender-bender, he thought. Lately, between the road rage and the driving while intoxicated, along with the unprecedented heat wave they were experiencing in the valley, he wondered if the Arizonians were trying to kill each other.

The traffic was moving at a snail's pace, but at least it was moving. Getting closer to the outskirts of Tempe where the restaurant was located, he could see a number of emergency vehicles blocking the road up ahead and diverting the traffic. Normally he did not like to rubber-neck when he passed accidents on the road, but something made him turn and look at this one. He saw a car, or something that once was a car. It had been crushed into the shape of a pancake. And it was red. Red, the color of Robin's Jeep. The thought terrified him. He could feel his breath become labored as his mouth went dry. He pulled the car over and got out gingerly on rubber legs, approaching the first police officer he could find.

"Officer, is there any way you can tell me who was involved in the accident?" he asked in a shaky voice that bore little resemblance to his own.

Normally the policeman would tell the man to be on his way, but something in the man's eyes told him that he truly was worried and not merely morbidly curious. He knew if there was any chance that someone he loved may have been in an accident that he'd want to know, so he told him the little information he had.

"There were four cars involved. A red Jeep, a white van,

a delivery truck, and a pick-up truck.”

“My wife drove a red Jeep. She had my two kids with her.”

The officer diverted his eyes, as if he could no longer face William. It was at that moment that William knew he had lost Robin and the kids. He tore away from the policeman and ran towards the accident.

“Hey! Stop! You can’t go over there!” the police officer’s voice shouted at him.

“Stop that guy!” another voice shouted.

“Robin! Robin, where are you?” William half-shouted, half-cried as his tears streamed down his face.

He acted like a wounded animal, looking into the cars and ambulances for his family. When he finally found them, his cry of anguish unnerved all around him.

“Is that your family?” the officer that had followed him asked.

William nodded, too choked up to speak, tears streaming down his face.

“I’m sorry.”

“Wha...what happened, do you know?”

“Witnesses say that the van cut off the guy in the pick-up. He began chasing the van. One of them caused the delivery truck driver to lose control and he was the one that overturned on top of the Jeep. Your family never had a chance.”

“Any survivors of this lunacy?”

“The guy in the pick-up, who started the whole fiasco, is in critical condition.”

Without warning, the man with the awful grin leered at William again. He was holding a gun. Only this time William saw himself sitting in a car that he couldn’t recognize. He

wanted my car, he thought as if a cloud that had obscured part of his memory dissipated.

“Are you all right, sir? Would you like a medic to look at you?”

“No. I’ll be all right. Where are they going to take them?”

“To the morgue at St. Luke’s. You’ll have to officially identify them, you know.”

“When?”

“As soon as possible. That way you’ll be able to bury them sooner.”

“I’ll do it tomorrow. Right now, I want to go home.”

The policeman nodded and patted William on the back. “I am really sorry, man.”

William gave a weak smile and walked back towards his car. He found it most difficult to drive home, his tears obscuring his vision.

Walking into the silent house, he wondered how he’d go on without Robin. She had been his sunshine and he had loved her so. He collapsed into a chair, but he couldn’t stay seated for long. He began to pace from room to room like a lost soul, but he couldn’t find a place for himself.

The rest of the night became a kaleidoscope of discord. Memories from his past began to filter slowly through the silken barrier of cobwebs his mind had woven.

The loss of Robin and the children had been a traumatic shock. The doctor had spoken about those events and how they sometimes trigger the key that is strong enough to open the lock on the past.

As he grieved for Robin, he wondered why the Lord deemed it fit for her to die. She had been a warm, caring person in her profession as well as her personal life. Hours be-

fore, she had been in his arms loving him. Why take Robin, when she had given him so much. More importantly, she had given him a reason to live.

He found it terribly ironic that Dylan was killed after he pulled his life out of the gutter and was achieving honors. Was it God's sense of humor, an inside joke that only He could find funny? It had to be, for what humor could be found in Ashley's death? A beautiful innocent. A child born out of his and Robin's love.

William smashed his hand down on the table, nearly splitting the wood. "Why, God, why?"

But instead of an answer, he saw himself plunging to the bottom of a ravine as the man with the crooked, evil smile pushed him over the edge.

* * * *

Falling into a troubled sleep some time later, William dreamed of oak trees with brilliant orange and red leaves that made a dry, crisp sound as they crumbled under your feet as you walked. Lying on a pile of fallen leaves was a laughing woman with long reddish-blond hair that glistened in the sun. She had delicate features and deep-blue eyes, the color of a cloudless sky, not unlike those of Arizona. She called to him, arms outstretched, beckoning him. He began to walk towards her in what seemed to be slow motion.

"Hurry, Peter," she called.

He fell into her arms and kissed her. "I love you, Kate," he whispered, and kissed her again.

Suddenly a man with a crooked smile appeared waving a gun.

"I'm taking your car," he said and shot William, who began falling further and further away from the woman.

"Nooooo!" William screamed, awaking abruptly with a

slick layer of perspiration on his body.

The dream upset him so that he got up and made himself a cup of instant coffee. Sitting at the table, sipping the hot liquid, and trying to warm the chill deep inside of him, he attempted to recall the dream. To his own amazement, he was able to remember. Prior to last night, whenever bits and pieces of his past filtered into his dreams, he wasn't able to recall them, no matter how hard he tried.

William knew that places upstate in Arizona, like Prescott and Flagstaff, had trees similar to those in his dream, yet he didn't think his dream took place there. The woman had an accent similar to his. Many people had asked if he came from New York. So conceivably he had lived there at some time during his life. Perhaps the woman in the dream belonged to that particular time as well, that is if dreams could be trusted as the manifestation of our deepest thoughts. Many of the psychologists he had spoken to ascribed to that very fact.

The most exciting thing that he could recall from the dream was the dialogue he had with the woman. He could remember every word as if he had memorized it. She had called him Peter. Peter. He said the name over and over again. He liked the way it sounded. Peter what? Jones, Smith...what was his last name? He wouldn't worry about it. It will come in time. Now he was certain of it. At least he now knew his name was Peter. What a glorious name, he thought. He said it over and over again.

And the woman he called Kate, who was she to him? Surely someone close like a wife, for he did tell her he loved her. Had he been married? The thought scared him. He recalled what she looked like. She was so different from Robin. Her hair was light, reddish-golden and shimmered in the sun-

light. Robin had the deepest shade of brown with eyes to match. The other woman had deep, ocean-blue eyes. She seemed more delicate than Robin and much taller. Kate. When would the name ring bells and blow whistles? When would he possess all the pieces to the puzzle that made up his past?

* * * *

The funeral came and passed. Like an empty vessel Peter stood by the gravesides listening to the intoning of the minister, still without answers to any of the senselessness.

As the caskets were lowered into the ground, he knew he was burying his present. Now that he had nothing left, he had to concentrate on his past and bring that back into the present. Somehow he knew it was something he had to do before he'd ever be whole again. He had loved Robin and the kids with all his heart and would endure everything once more in order to have those wonderful years he'd spent with them over again. But he had always known he had to find out who he was and the man he had been.

Each day following the death of Robin and the kids became like window shades rising on the past. Little by little, Peter began to regain new pieces to the puzzle of his former identity and life. This time he wouldn't stop digging until the puzzle was complete.

Chapter 53

It was a beautiful summer's day. Mark had gone out early and picked up a half dozen bagels. Kate toasted a few and brewed a pot of coffee. Being a Sunday, there were enough sections to the paper so that they could both share.

Mark was reading the sports section when Kate tossed her section of the news down, disgusted.

"What's wrong?"

"What a crazy race of people we belong to."

"What brought this on?"

"As if we don't have enough diseases, like cancer and AIDS, to kill us, we have to try and finish the job ourselves."

"Who raped who, this time?"

"Not rape. Road rage. It's really becoming a nationwide problem. I just read about a horrific auto accident in Arizona. It was caused by some moronic driver who lost it after a car cut him off. Ironically he survived, but he wiped out six other people, including a mother and her two children, a pair of newlyweds, and a truck driver. I may have missed a person, but that's not the point. Where's the justice in that?"

"You're really upset by that article, aren't you?"

"You're damn right, I am. I hate the loss of innocent life

because of some guy's stupid macho behavior."

Mark knew why she was affected by the story. How could he forget that Peter had been killed in a car accident in Arizona years before? He didn't want to go there so he tried to change the subject.

"Want to go on a picnic this afternoon?" he suggested.

"If our charming daughter ever gets up and joins us."

"What time did she get in last night from that party?"

"Around one o'clock. Jodi's father dropped her off."

"I must have fallen asleep, because I didn't hear her come in," Mark said.

"That's because I wore you out last night."

"Don't you think that one o'clock in the morning is a little late for a fifteen-year-old?"

"Yes, but she doesn't do it that often. You'd keep her chained to the house if you could."

"It would be for her own good," Mark admitted.

"Or your peace of mind?"

"Very funny."

"Speaking of the Devil," Kate said, as Paige walked into the kitchen, yawning.

"Ms. Devil, to you two. Any bagels left?"

"In the bag on the counter," Mark said.

"You remembered to get me a sesame bagel. Thanks, Dad."

"Nothing but the best for my baby."

"Did you have a nice time at the party last night?" Kate asked her daughter.

"Uh-huh. I hung out with this cool looking guy. He had a great tattoo and a nose ring."

Both her parents groaned at the same time.

"Only kidding," she said, laughing. "I knew I could get a reaction out of you both."

"And you took a few years off our lives, also," Mark told her.

"Take some juice," Kate said as she handed Paige the carton.

"Thanks, Mom."

"So really what happened last night?" Mark asked.

"I met a nice guy who asked for my number. I'll probably hang out with him next Saturday."

"How old is he?"

"Older than you, Dad."

"Paige!"

"Seventeen, and yes he drives, but I didn't get the number of his Swiss bank account, yet, though."

"Can't you be serious for more than five minutes?" Mark asked.

"I think she gets it from you, dear," Kate said, grinning.

Paige loved to get a rise out of her parents. And she did it so well. You could almost say she had developed it into an art form.

"The guy I met last night will meet your rigid standards. He has no tattoos that I can see. As soon as I get to know him better, I'll give you an update on that."

"Paige..." Kate prompted her not to continue in the direction she was heading.

"He's graduating in June and going to Albany on early admissions. So he's got smarts. He wants to be a lawyer like his dad. Oh, his name is Ian Greene. Okay, you both can take a deep breath now."

"He sounds like a very nice boy," Kate said.

“He really is. And he’s really good looking, too.”

“Just before you walked into the kitchen, your mother and I were thinking about going on a picnic this afternoon. Would you like to come?”

“No. I have a lot of work to do on an English project. I’ll probably go over to Jodi’s and do it there.”

“Will you be home for dinner?”

“I’ll call and let you know. The person who makes the most enticing meal will get me. By the way, what are you making for dinner?”

Kate laughed and kissed the top of her daughter’s golden head as she brought her dirty dishes to the sink.

Even though Paige had become a handful, Kate wouldn’t have wanted her any other way. She was spontaneous and sure of herself. She knew where she was heading even at her age. She had spoken often about becoming a lawyer and then going into politics. It was time for a female president in her book and she was going to fill the bill. With Paige, who could guess?

Chapter 54

It had been a hectic week. Between playing chauffeur for Paige and taking her class on a trip to the Museum of Natural History along with Mark's, she barely had time to breathe. She truly welcomed the weekend so she could unwind. Mark had a luncheon to go to and would be gone most of the day and perhaps the evening since it was in Manhattan. Paige would probably be at Jodi's so she had the day to herself. Glorious!

She spent most of the morning lazing over coffee and the newspaper. Then she showered and threw on some sweats, not having a soul to impress. Coming out of the bedroom, she heard a knocking at the door. Probably a solicitor, she thought as she opened it.

Prepared to say 'no thank you' and be done with it, she stood there staring after opening the door. Her breath caught as her heart began to thud against her chest. Her brain was finding it most difficult to believe what her eyes were seeing.

"No, this is not possible," she said aloud, shaking her head. "I am not seeing this."

"Kate..."

"You're dead, damn it!" she said, tears flowing.

“Don’t do this to me.”

“Kate, I’m not dead. I’m real. Touch me,” Peter said.

“No,” she said, backing into the apartment.

Peter came in and shut the door behind him. “I didn’t want to shock you. When I finally remembered who I was, I had to come back.”

As the initial shock faded, Kate reached out and touched his face, gently caressing his skin with her fingertips. “Peter, Peter, oh, Peter,” was all she managed to say.

“You’re as beautiful as you were when I left. Time has been good to you,” he said, drawing her closer.

Kate began to run her hands through Peter’s hair. Time began to slip away. Her Peter was standing there as if he had never left. No words could express what she was feeling. For the moment she forgot who she was and where she was. All that mattered was Peter.

Peter looked into those blue eyes as he had done in his past and saw the love they had once shared. He longed to share it once more. He tenderly kissed her. That kiss ignited a fire that had been smoldering deep beneath the surface all the years he had been gone. Soon they began to practically devour each other with their kisses. Hands roamed and touched, bringing back all the sensations that were never truly gone.

“My God! What are you doing, Mother? How can you do this to my father?”

“Paige!”

“Why are you shocked to see me? I live here, you know. Do you always entertain strange men when my father is away? Is that how you gain extra income or is it for fun?”

“Paige, this is not what you think this is.”

“Oh, they call it something else now?”

“If you stop being so antagonistic for a moment, I will explain.”

"This better be good."

"First of all, this is your father."

The blood drained from Paige's face. Her mouth opened, but not a sound came. She shook her head in disbelief. She had been told her real father had been killed in a car accident in Arizona. What gives here?

"It's true, Paige. And nothing happened that we have to be ashamed of."

"My mother is in the arms of a strange man on the couch and she tells me nothing is wrong? Tell me another one."

Peter had a look of shock on his face when Kate had said he was the girl's father. He had no idea that he had a daughter with Kate. She must have been pregnant when he left for Arizona. *My God*, he thought, *she was practically a woman*.

"Even he doesn't believe you. Look at him."

"Paige, he never knew. He left before I found out."

"Your mother is telling the truth," Peter said.

"Who's talking to you?"

"Paige, don't be fresh," Kate admonished.

"This is coming from a woman who has no respect for what that gold ring around her finger means? Drop it, I've heard enough," she said and walked into her room and slammed the door.

"I'd better go. That was some way to meet the daughter I never knew I had."

"I guess it's quite a shock for the both of you."

"I'm sorry I came barging in here like this. I never considered the fact that you might be married. I was much too wrapped up in discovering my past and that you existed."

"How would you have known? We didn't get a chance to talk. I'll try and talk to Paige. She loves Mark a great deal..."

"Mark? You married Mark Winters?"

"When Paige was around eight, but he was there from the day she was born."

"That certainly explains her reaction."

"There's so much I need to ask you."

"I do, too. Can you meet me somewhere? Obviously my coming back here was not a good idea."

"The Seascape Diner tomorrow at one."

"That place is still there?"

"Practically unchanged since you left," she replied.

"All right. Until tomorrow," he said, kissing her.

The kiss seared her lips. "Oh, Peter, I'm so confused. I don't know how I feel. I still love you; I've never stopped loving you, but..."

"You're married. I know. But do you love him?"

"Yes. Not the same way I loved you, but I do."

"I still love you, Kate...I'll see you tomorrow," he said and was gone.

Kate stood there leaning against the door. Her feelings were in such a chaotic state that she felt immobilized. She began to cry once more. She loved Mark. That was true. He had been a good husband and a better friend. He had been with her through all the good times as well as the bad ones. But Peter was her soul mate.

During the years he had been gone there had always been a void within her that no other man could ever hope to fill. Miraculously Peter had come back to her. His touch still set her ablaze. She still wanted him with every fiber of her being. What should she do? What would she do?

That terrible look of condemnation on Paige's face flashed once more in her mind. Could she risk losing her daughter's love and respect? Why did things have to be so difficult? No matter what, she thought, she had to pull herself

together and try and talk to Paige.

Kate knocked on Paige's bedroom door. "Paige, may I please come in?"

Though her only answer was a silent one, she wouldn't give up that easy and repeated her plea. Still Paige refused to answer.

Finally, frustrated enough to barge in without permission, Kate pleaded with Paige one last time. "Paige, I need to talk to you. Now please open this door now."

"What's the matter with Paige?" Mark asked, coming up behind her.

"Mark! I didn't hear you come in. Why are you home so early? I expected you some time tonight."

"I got bored and decided to leave early. Now, what's wrong with the Princess?"

"Daddy!" Paige called as she opened the door and flew into Mark's arms.

"What's the matter, Paige?"

"Your wife..."

"Do you mean your mother? Show some respect."

"Uh-uh, not in this case. No way. I came home and found her in the arms of another man. Things were getting hot and heavy. Had I not come home and interrupted them, God only knows what they might have done."

"Nothing happened. I was trying to explain that to her when you walked in."

"Yeah, sure."

"Paige! Keep quiet a minute," Mark demanded.

"Who was the man, Kate?"

"Peter. He's alive!"

"Peter?" Mark said, the color draining from his face as he collapsed into the nearest chair.

“Yes.”

Mark took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “So he’s come back from the dead. This was one surprise I could have lived without.”

“Talk about surprises! You should have seen their faces when I walked in. I could have taken notes had I not said something.”

“Paige, please stop. I’m sure you’re exaggerating.”

“No matter what you think, I’m not exaggerating. If I had walked in ten minutes later, she would have been fucking him.”

Without thinking, Kate slapped Paige across her face. She had never done that before and was appalled that she had lost control.

“I...I’m so sorry, Paige, I didn’t mean to do that.”

“Like you did nothing with that guy...”

“Enough, Paige! Go into your room so I can speak to your mother.”

“She’s not my mother. My mother wouldn’t do that.”

Mark started to say something, but Kate stopped him. A moment later they heard Paige’s bedroom door slam.

“Kate, what really happened this afternoon?”

“Nothing. I guess we did kiss and hug. People tend to do that when they haven’t seen each other for such a long time.”

Mark turned away a moment. “What’s going to happen to us?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to hurt anyone. So help me, I love you both.”

“You never did stop caring for him, did you?”

“You know I couldn’t.”

“I used to dream about being with you. I wanted you so that when he was out of the picture I saw my chance. And when you finally became mine I felt I was the luckiest man

alive. Even then, I knew, though, that I'd never completely have you. There was a certain part of you that belonged to him and always would. But, damn it, Kate, how can that man walk into our lives after being dead to us for so long?" Mark added, his tears threatening to fall.

Kate's face was already wet with tears. The thread that held her world together was unraveling about her. There seemed to be no way out. She felt as if she were suffocating.

"Where was he all this time?"

"I don't know. Paige walked in before he could tell me. I'll find out tomorrow. I'm meeting him at the Seascap tomorrow."

"You're telling me this?"

"I won't lie, nor will I cheat on you."

"Is that why you chose a public place to meet him?"

"Mark! That's totally uncalled for."

"I'm sorry, Kate. You've never given me any reason to distrust you, yet..."

"You're worried because it's Peter."

"Yes, I'm damn worried."

"Did you see the hate in my daughter's eyes because she thought I cheated on you? What would she think of me if I left you? I'd lose her altogether. I don't think I could live with that."

"So you're telling me that you'll stay with me to keep Paige?"

"No, though that's a part of it. Talking to you I realized that I married you and made a life with you, no matter what."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I shouldn't have phrased it that way. Just leave it. I'm going to send Peter away tomorrow for good."

"Are you sure you mean that?"

"Yes. Now please leave me alone," Kate said, fleeing into the bedroom.

Mark knocked on Paige's door. "I'd like to talk to you, Paige."

"Come in."

Paige was lying across her bed surrounded by a half dozen used tissues.

"I'm not exactly sure where to begin here. Somehow things got a little carried away between you and your mother. You do realize you were most disrespectful...let me finish," he said, holding up his hand to stop her from interrupting. "Your mother happened to have loved Peter very much and still does. You're a product of their love. When he supposedly died, part of your mother did too. I know because I was there. You were always special to her because you were a part of him. She loves you more than you'll ever imagine and is upset because you thought so little of her. I know what you saw. Yes, it probably looked like she was cheating on me, but I know your mother and I know she wouldn't have done anything to hurt me. She intends to remain with us and is telling Peter that tomorrow. I'd like to see peace between the both of you. Do you think you can manage that?"

Paige nodded.

Mark put his hand under her chin. "Thank you, Princess."

Mark put his arms around Paige and hugged her. He could feel her sobbing. "It's going to be okay. I promise."

He certainly hoped so, but he couldn't be too sure. Kate might remain with him, but where would her heart stay?

Chapter 55

Kate woke up with a lousy headache. Her stomach was in knots and her heart was in shambles. She knew she told Mark she would remain with him and she intended to keep her word—even if it killed her. She showered and thought about what she'd tell Peter. She couldn't wait to see him again and yet she didn't want to, knowing it would have to be her last time. She didn't want it to be to this way. Instead, she longed to have his strong hands caress her, yet she knew she couldn't. Not so much because it was wrong, but because if she did, she knew she'd never be able to let him go.

Paige and Mark were already having breakfast when she entered the kitchen.

"Good morning, dear," Mark said.

"Mom, about yesterday..."

"Let it go, Paige. I really don't want to talk about it now."

"Are you feeling okay, Mom?"

"No, not really. I didn't sleep well."

Mark's eyes met Kate's. He knew why she didn't sleep. It wouldn't be easy for her to do what she intended to. He knew he was the victor, yet the victory didn't feel sweet. He

only hoped it wouldn't be a Pyrrhic victory, either.

He knows how I feel, Kate thought. He knows how much it will cost for me to say good bye to Peter. I can't fool him one bit.

"Have some breakfast. You'll feel better," Mark said to Kate as he poured her some orange juice.

"Thank you," she said, her voice quaking, "but I can't."

Mark watched her flee from the table. He got up and went after her.

"Kate, are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes. I told you I was sure. Why can't you just accept it and leave me be?"

"Because your actions tell a completely different story."

"Ignore them."

Mark took her in his arms. "Look at me, Kate. I want you to be happy. You mustn't do this because of my feelings."

Tears streaming down her face, Kate said, "I'm doing this for us. I love you, Mark. You are my husband. I'm just a trifle upset seeing him after all these years. I lived without him for fifteen years and can do so for the rest of my life."

Mark held her while she sobbed. He loved her with all his heart. He didn't think he could give her up now or ever. She was the only woman he ever truly wanted. There would never be another like her.

"If you're going to meet him at one o'clock, you'd better get ready."

She nodded and walked into the bathroom. She came out twenty minutes later and said good bye to Mark and Paige. She felt as if she were going to her own execution.

Chapter 56

Peter was already there sitting in a booth waiting for her. A cup of coffee sat on the table in front of him. He got up when he saw her and she slid in across from him.

“You look like you’ve been crying all night,” he said. “I didn’t come back to upset you.”

“Why did you come back?”

“Because we were unfinished business. I still love you.”

“Did you think I’d wait forever for a dead man?”

“Look, for all intents and purposes, I was dead. I was car jacked by a crazy man and left for dead.”

“He must have been the one that the Phoenix Police found in the car rental, thinking it was you. I buried him.”

“He was killed? I never knew. He had shot me and left me for dead. I was found by chance by two hikers. I healed physically, but not mentally. For almost fifteen years I had amnesia.”

“What brought you out of it?”

“The nurse in the hospital liked me and eventually took me home like a stray. She named me William and we fell in love. She was like you in many ways. Her first husband had died after a bout with cancer and left her with a young son.

We had a good life together and had a little girl also. They were killed in a car accident caused by road rage.”

“I remember reading about that accident. It sickened me.”

“The trauma of the accident was the breakthrough I needed to bring back my past. At first small pieces filtered through the barrier my psyche had erected, but soon the pieces became larger and began to fit. My love for Robin, as truly wonderful as I thought it was, paled in comparison to what I had with you, Kate. As soon as I realized this and where I belonged, I flew back to New York to be with you. But I’m not so sure I belong here anymore.”

“I nearly died when you didn’t return and were supposedly killed. Then I discovered I was pregnant and my world changed. I had something of you left to nurture and love. But time went by and I realized Paige needed a father and I needed companionship after all. I always cared for Mark as a friend and he grew on me. I won’t lie to you and tell you that I don’t love him, because I do. But it isn’t the kind of love we had. I’ll never have that with another man again.”

“I’m getting conflicting messages here, Kate. What are you trying to tell me?”

The tears began to well in Kate’s eyes as she looked into those green eyes that once told her future. She bit her trembling lip.

“I love you with all my heart, but I can’t leave Mark.”

“Because you love him or don’t want to hurt him?”

“Both reasons. But most of all because I fear that I’ll lose Paige.”

“If Paige is the main reason, Kate, don’t you realize she’s almost an adult and will be leaving the nest soon anyway?”

“You don’t understand. I built my entire world around

her. I can't lose her love and respect."

"If she's willing to deny her love for you because we love each other and belong together, then you never had it at all. Besides, I doubt if she would be that shallow."

"It doesn't matter what the reason. I can't see you again. Go back to Arizona."

"Is that what you really want?"

"Yes," she said and completely fell apart.

Peter slid around the booth and put his arms around her. She sobbed on his shoulder.

"Forgive me, Peter. I'll always love you," she said. "I never wanted to hurt you or anyone."

"I know, love, I know," he said, crying now, knowing that he had lost her. "If you change your mind I'm staying at the Holiday Inn near JFK. If not, I'll be taking the eleven thirty flight back to Arizona next Saturday night."

"I've got to go, Peter. Kiss me one last time."

The kiss was passionate and long. Kate never wanted it to end. She knew she had to go quickly while she still could.

"Goodbye, Kate. I love you."

"I love you, also, so help me God, I do. Goodbye."

Kate fled from the lounge, tears practically blinding her. She knew she'd regret her decision for the rest of her life, but it was the right one.

Walking into the house, she went straight into the bedroom without saying a word to Mark. Paige wasn't there. Mercifully Mark left her alone. She cried herself to sleep.

* * * *

The next morning she went to school with Mark, but only answered when spoken to. Somehow she didn't feel much like talking. She half-heartedly taught her class, giving them as

much busy work she could.

Paige realized that her mother wasn't feeling too well and helped with dinner and the dishes. She even kept her sarcastic wit to a minimum, not wanting to upset her further.

That night when Mark made love to her she nearly cried through the whole thing. It was the first time that she ever faked an orgasm. She didn't want him to know how miserable she was.

Time. She needed time and all would be right again. After all, she lived all these years without Peter. But she had thought he was dead. When he returns to Arizona it will be like he's dead again. Time. All she needed was time. Time to forget.

Chapter 57

She got through the week, acting more like a robot than a live person. He's leaving tonight, she thought. Then I'll be all right. She cleaned up the dinner dishes and went into the bedroom. She stood staring out the window, not hearing Mark come into the room.

"He's leaving tonight, isn't he?"

"Eleven thirty," she said, trying to hide the emotion in her voice.

She continued to stare out the window, hoping he'd leave her alone with her misery.

"Damn it, Kate! I can't live this way seeing you so miserable. I thought I could, but I know now that I can't."

"I'll be fine, you'll see."

"That's a crock and you know it, lady. You love that guy."

"Mark, please don't make it worse."

"When we first got together, I knew I could never truly possess you because I was competing with a ghost. I accepted that. I also learned to live with your melancholy every Autumn. But now I'll be competing with a live person and I cannot deal with it."

"I'll never give you any reason to feel that way, Mark. I'm your wife and will remain your wife, for better or for worse."

"I know that, so instead you're willing to hurt yourself. Neither one of us expected Peter to come back alive after all these years."

Kate bit her lip and shook her head. She grabbed a fresh tissue and blew her nose.

"We can't go on this way. How can our marriage survive?"

"I'm not going to see him again. Everything will be all right after he goes back. You'll see."

"Kate, stop it! Stop lying to me and yourself. Nothing will ever be the same again."

She began to say something, but he put a finger to her lips.

"Hear me out, please. I love you more than life itself. Because of that I want to give you your freedom. You and Peter belong together. You always have and always will."

"Mark, do you know what you are saying?"

"I know exactly what I'm saying. I'm going to divorce you, Kate."

"But what about Paige?"

"Paige is a big girl and can decide for herself who she wants to live with."

"She'll never forgive me."

"Yes, in time when she understands, she will. You'll always be her mother and she loves you."

"I can't leave her."

"You're not leaving her. It's not as if you're going to fall off the face of the earth. Perhaps you'll remain in New York."

Hopefully you will, because I still need to have you near."

Mark put his arms around her and kissed her. "I love you, Kate."

"You always had all the answers, Mark. You could read me better than I could read myself."

"It's not magic. You would do the same if you were me."

"I lost Peter once. I don't think I can bear to let him go a second time."

"I know you can't."

"You're a wonderful man. Perhaps I never deserved you."

"Kate, you were a good wife and made me very happy. I will always cherish the time we had together."

"Hold me, Mark, one last time."

Mark took Kate into his arms. He kissed her head. His tears slid down and mingled with hers.

"Go and stop him from leaving before I change my mind."

If she didn't hit traffic, Kate would just about make it in time. For the first time in a week, she smiled. But what if she missed his flight?

* * * *

Paige came home shortly after Kate left. She found her father in the bedroom staring out the window.

"Where's Mom?"

"She went to the airport."

"To say goodbye?"

"To stop him from leaving."

"How could you just stand there calmly and let her go?"

"I guess it's hard for you to understand. I love your mother more than anything else in the world. Because of this love, I had to let her go."

"You're right. I don't understand one bit. In fact, I think

you're one hundred percent certifiable. If I loved somebody as much as you say you love Mom, I'd be damned before I let him leave."

"When you care for someone you want them to be happy, no matter what it takes. Your mother loved Peter as much as I loved her, maybe more. I knew I could never truly replace him, but I tried to make your mother happy. We were happy and had wonderful years together. Neither one of us ever expected Peter to be alive and return. If he hadn't, your mother and I would probably live out the rest of our lives together."

"But she married you. You're her husband."

"She knows that and was willing to sacrifice her desire and love that she had for Peter and spend the rest of her life with me if I asked her to."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because we'd all be living a lie. She'd always regret her decision with every breath she took. Besides, she belongs with Peter. I saw them together many times before he went out to Arizona. If ever two people truly belonged together, they did."

Paige shook her head in disbelief.

"Don't you realize if your mother stayed with me, I'd see her being miserable every day? I couldn't bear that."

"So you decided to be miserable without her."

"Yes. I guess that's how it'll work out."

"You *are* crazy."

"Maybe. And maybe when you're older you'll understand more clearly."

"I doubt it, Dad. At least you'll still have me."

"True enough, but don't write your mother off. She still needs you, too. She almost didn't go because of you."

"How did I fit into this crazy scheme of things?"

"She didn't want you to hate her for leaving me. You were the center of her entire life."

"I still won't forgive her for hurting you."

"You must. Someone had to get hurt in this triangle. I volunteered. She had no choice, but to go to him, any more than she could stop the rain from falling or the wind from blowing. Didn't you ever wonder why she was so melancholy every year at this time?"

"Yeah. Come to think of it, she is."

"This was the time of year that she had first met Peter and lost him. As the weather grew colder, she always became more bearable to live with."

"So what? That still doesn't excuse her behavior that day when I found her and Peter rolling around on the couch like two dogs in heat."

"Honestly, Paige, you do have a flair for description. Do you think she planned that or wanted to do that? It merely happened spontaneously."

"No, not unless it's an affair. If I hadn't walked in when I did, I know we'd be sitting here talking about adultery."

"I can't believe I'm sitting here and having this discussion with a fifteen-year-old. But then, you've always been smarter than most kids your age. I thought you might be more understanding, too."

"Why should I be? She hurt us."

"No she didn't hurt us. You can live with her and Peter if you want to. She'd want that. So would he. After all, he's your father."

"Biological father. You're my real father. You were there when I fell and hurt my knee, not him. I don't want to live with them."

"You may change your mind."

"No way. And you can't stop me from being furious with her."

"Why do you have this desire to punish her?"

"I don't want to punish her."

"Yes, you do. And it's ironic that you of all people would feel that way."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because when your mother became pregnant with you it nearly cost her job."

"How's that?"

"A small group of women began writing nasty letters demanding her removal because she was an unwed mother and therefore a bad influence on her students."

"What happened?"

"Her class made a video on her behalf and a number of influential people, including Mr. Wainwright, the principal, rallied to her defense. She was and still is a wonderful teacher."

"So what."

"Paige you're being unfair. She's a wonderful person as well."

"That, Dad, is your opinion."

Mark rolled his eyes and shook his head at Paige's obstinacy.

"Paige, give your mother a break."

"Maybe in time. Right now I'm too angry. At least I'll never leave you."

"Oh, but you will in a heartbeat when the right man comes along and sweeps you off your feet."

"That's different."

"Is it? Don't bother answering that. We've been too se-

rious. How's about we go out for a pizza?"

Smiling, Paige said, "You're on," and linked her arm in his.

* * * *

Driving like a crazy woman, Kate realized how easily she could be stopped for speeding. If that happened, she knew all would be lost and she'd never catch Peter. Yet, if she didn't hit the gas with all she had, she'd probably miss him anyway.

What a colossal joke on her it would be if Peter boarded that plane and flew out of her life again after everything she'd gone through. No! She couldn't let that happen. She *wouldn't* let that happen.

Putting her thoughts into motion, she pressed the gas pedal down further. She could actually feel her heart thudding in her chest, threatening to break its way through. A thin film of sweat formed along her back, yet she wasn't hot. Her hands began to slide around the steering wheel, even though her knuckles were white from gripping it so tightly.

She found herself praying to the same deity that she had once sworn was on an endless vacation and begged Him to let her get there in time. She'd sworn she'd never ask another thing of Him, except of course, having her daughter understand her actions and forgive her. But she couldn't think about that now.

As she drove she realized something very poignant. She had met Peter in the Autumn and he had left for the job interview in Arizona, also in the Autumn. Now it was Autumn again and he had returned to her. Was she destined to lose him again this Autumn?

Glancing at the clock on the dashboard, she realized she was running out of time. She could hardly breathe now.

Please, God, please. Please let me make it!

She reached the exit for the airport. She began the crazy road where you had to follow the colors and numbers for the airlines you were looking for. It was very confusing and everyone slowed down. She wanted to scream at the lady who kept breaking and nearly came to a complete stop when she did. She was driving her crazy and wasting what little precious time she had left.

She saw the American terminal. There was no time to park in the lot so she just stopped in front of the terminal and got out.

"Lady, you can't park there," a policeman said.

But she ignored him and ran as fast as her legs would carry her into the terminal, looking for the first departure board she could find as she heard the gut wrenching words: "Last call for flight 2085 to Phoenix, Arizona."

No. Not when I'm so close. Don't do this to me. I can't lose him again. Please let me catch him.

She located his flight and the gate and began to run towards it. An attendant stopped her.

"The plane," Kate cried, "did I miss it?"

"I'm afraid so. It's already taxiing down the runway."

"Oh, no! Not again!" Kate said, her tears choking her. She walked away slowly, the pain of losing Peter again, most likely this time forever, nearly immobilized her. What would she do now? She turned her head down, and began to slowly walk away. Bumping into a woman, she apologized.

Then she saw him walking.

"Peter!" she screamed as loudly as she could. "Peter, wait!"

He stopped and stared as if he couldn't believe what his eyes were telling him.

“Kate!”

Dropping his bag, he began to run towards her as she ran towards him. They met in the middle, both crying and laughing. She rushed into his wide-stretched arms. He clutched her tightly to him as he lifted her off the ground and spun her around him. Their lips met and melded.

“Oh, Peter, I thought I had missed you.”

“I couldn’t bear to go back without you. Not when I need you so.”

“I love you. How could I bear to lose you again?” Kate cried.

“Shut up and kiss me.”

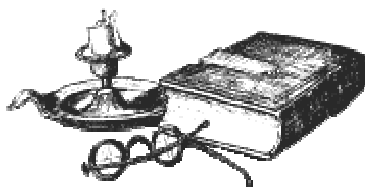
As they kissed once more, Kate knew this was the right thing. Mark had known. She and Peter belonged together. Everything would work out. It had to. Looking into those loving tiger-green eyes, she once again saw her future and this time she knew it would be wonderful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A member of RWA, LIRW and LIW, Candace has been a freelance writer for over ten years, having been fortunate to have over 200 short stories and novels in print. Her work has appeared in Strictly Romance, Woman's World, CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE KID'S SOUL, A Hint of Seduction, the publications of Sterling/Macfadden, Dorchester Media, Ocean's Mist Press, DiskUs and others. Stop by her website: www.candacegold.com

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