

A young man and woman are shown from the chest up, facing each other in a close embrace. The man, on the left, has short brown hair and is wearing a black t-shirt. The woman, on the right, has dark hair and is wearing a black halter-neck top. They are both looking at each other with soft expressions. The background is plain white. The title 'What Are Friends For?' is written in a large, purple, serif font across the center of the image.

What Are Friends For?

JUDY ROGERS

What Are Friends For?
by Judy Rogers

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Dooley couldn't be falling in love with her; he'd known her all his life. Although, he couldn't remember a time when he'd been so consumed by erotic fantasies. Even the raging hormones of his teen years hadn't tied him in as many knots. If love felt like this, it was hell. He had married Cass to give her protection and support until the baby came, not to complicate their lives.

Suddenly, two hands began to massage the muscles just below his shoulder blades. Cass's breath whispered across his neck, "I'm sorry. I know this is important to you. I'll ask Robert to change the dates."

He didn't dare turn around. He could smell the familiar scent of her lemon shampoo. Her fingers prodded all the right places. In order to massage the top of his shoulders, she had moved close enough for him to feel the tips of her breasts against his back. His brain short-circuited under the sensory overload. *Don't turn around! Don't turn around!* The blood surging behind his eardrums drowned out the voice of reason.

With a groan, he turned to face her, his left arm slipping around her waist, pulling her against him. His right hand swept behind her head and pulled her face forward until his lips met hers. As kisses went, it wasn't particularly gentle. He told himself to back off, to stay in control, but his overwrought system didn't buy it. Hungry, needy, his lips moved over hers, nibbling at her bottom lip, tugging until her lips parted, and he deftly used his tongue, teasing her, willing her to respond.

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At first she stood very still. He could feel the tension in her hands as they lay passively against his chest. Her fingers flexed, and his body stiffened, ready for her to push him away.

Instead, she sighed, and her arms slid up around his neck. "This isn't good," she whispered against his lips.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication:

To Roger: Partner, Lover, Best Friend.

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Acknowledgement

I am indebted to my editor Tori Spence for her support and encouragement as we worked together to get my first book to the final publication stage. She was invariably kind and accommodating, and made many helpful suggestions. I am proud of the birth of this baby and grateful Tori was willing to act as midwife.

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Awards:

First Place: Utah Heart of the West Romantic Fiction Contest, 2000

First Place: Southern Heat Contemporary Romance Contest, 2002

First Place: Arizona Desert Rose Romantic Fiction Contest, 2008

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Prologue

The faces of the two nine-year-olds hunkered down on the floor of the playhouse reflected the solemnity of the ritual they were about to perform. Carefully, they pressed their bloody thumbs together. The boy spoke first.

"I, Thomas Patrick Dooley, promise to be your blood brother as long as we both live. I will always be there if you need me. I will even give you a kidney if you need it." He added as an afterthought, "Or a heart." A boy in their fourth grade class had recently received a kidney from his uncle.

The girl, never taking her eyes from the boy's face, began her pledge. "I, Cassandra Jane Vocjek, promise to be your blood brother as long as we both live."

The boy interrupted. "Cass, you have to be a blood sister."

"No I don't. Whoever heard of a blood sister? It sounds dumb."

"Okay. Whatever."

Cass poked his arm with her free hand. "Can I finish now?"

He grinned and poked her back. Both were careful not to separate their thumbs.

"Go ahead. You better start over."

Cass rolled her eyes, but began again. "I, Cassandra Jane Vocjek, promise to be your blood brother for as long as we live. I will always be there for you. If your plane crashes in Alaska, I will find you and bring you home even if nobody else wants to help." That scenario had been the plot of the movie they had seen the night before.

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The sacrifices they promised to make for each other in their life long brotherhood continued and escalated to the ridiculous. Both children were laughing when Dooley's mother called him home for dinner.

He stuck his head out the playhouse door. "Can Cass eat with us?"

"She has to ask her mother."

Cass's head joined Dooley's in the doorway. "What are you having?"

Dooley's mother laughed. "Meatloaf."

"I think we're having tuna casserole. I'll go ask."

The two blood brothers, their thumbs wrapped in tissue paper, headed in opposite directions, each jumping over the short hedge connecting their yards.

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Chapter One

"Are you sure it turned blue?" Dooley asked. "Sometimes those things aren't all that accurate."

He knew it was a stupid question as soon as he asked it. Cass had shown up at his door thirty minutes earlier, looking like an accident victim—her eyes dull and red, her hands trembling.

"I did the test twice. Both times it turned blue. And they're ninety-nine percent accurate," Cass said wearily.

He glanced down at her trim, athletic body, stretched out on his ugly green couch. If anything, she looked thinner than usual.

Water from the melting ice began to drip down the side of her face and pool on the pillow beneath her head. Dooley had wrapped several ice cubes in a small hand towel and plopped the impromptu ice bag on her forehead when she'd complained of a headache.

She lifted her hand to steady the towel. "Couldn't you have at least wrapped the ice in something?" she asked plaintively.

"Like what?"

"Like a plastic bag. Then it wouldn't be dripping all over me and your couch."

Dooley snatched the soggy towel and melting ice cubes and headed into the small kitchenette. He rummaged in a drawer, and returned with the ice wrapped in a baggy and a dry towel.

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"How's the headache?" he asked, placing the towel-wrapped ice pack on her forehead and scooting her over so he could sit next to her on the couch.

He smoothed her damp hair back from her face, abstractly noting the length of her lashes, lying like dark butterflies against the paleness of her cheekbones. She smelled faintly of lemons. She always smelled like lemons.

Dooley felt a curious sense of loss. Cass was pregnant. His Cass. His closest friend; his buddy since first grade. He fought the desire to scoop her up in his arms, to cuddle and reassure her that things would be all right. For years, he'd been getting her out of scrapes, but this situation went beyond his ability to help. He had no idea what to say or do that would make a difference to her right now.

For the last twenty years, she'd been bringing her problems to him, from broken toys to broken hearts. And if he hadn't been able to fix the problem, she said it always made her feel better to talk it over with him. Now, seeing her hurt, scared and angry, he wanted to do some serious damage to the bastard who had gotten her pregnant then left town as soon as he heard the news.

Holding the ice pack against her forehead, Cass sat up, brushing her long ponytail over her shoulder. Strands of damp, dark hair stuck to her face. Her hazel eyes, usually gleaming with mischief, were swollen from crying.

"I'm a mess," she said, brushing the hair wet hair off her cheek. "I've been blubbering like a baby since I took the test."

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Unsure what to say, Dooley put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her against him. As she relaxed her head on his chest, the ice bag fell to the floor with a gentle thud.

"Cass," he began hesitantly, "whatever you decide to do about this pregnancy, I'll support you."

She opened one eye to look up at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You know."

She pulled roughly away. "Thomas James Dooley," she sputtered, poking an index finger in the middle of his chest. "You've known me for twenty years. You sat next to me in Bible study class. How can you even say something like that?"

He didn't point out the fact that he hadn't actually said anything. Hinted maybe.

"I know I'm out of line, Cass, but I have to ask—why didn't you use protection? I know you don't have a lot of experience, but you know about safe sex."

Anguish ripped across her face. "The condom broke," she wailed, then doubled over, and began sobbing so hard her shoulders shook.

He felt like a heel, surprised that the faint spark of anger he felt was directed at her. What the hell good did it do to get mad at Cass?

Gently tugging her head into his lap, he removed her ponytail holder and smoothed her glossy brown hair down her back. Murmuring soothing sounds, he moved his hands in gentle circles between her shoulder blades. He'd known she wouldn't consider having an abortion and regretted bringing it up. Things were bad enough without him adding to her stress

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level. Being a single mom, although more common nowadays, wouldn't be easy, and in a small New England town like West Sheffield, Cass's pregnancy would be all over town as soon as she began showing.

He wished he could share the responsibility—take some of the heat off her. He couldn't think of any other time in their history when he hadn't been able to help her solve a major problem. He shuddered to think of her parents' reaction. Cass enjoyed the privilege of being the youngest and the only girl in the family—the Vocjek princess. They would be devastated, and whatever affected Cass's family, affected his. Just thinking about their reaction made his stomach churn, and he hadn't even gotten her pregnant.

With that thought, the solution came. He grinned. The Master Problem Solver strikes again. She lay with her head in his lap, her eyes closed. He glanced down at her, his face sobering. She could be stubborn when she set her mind to it. It was the most practical way he could think of to help her, but if he knew Cass, he would have to use all his powers of persuasion.

Feeling unusually nervous, he contemplated various ways to approach what he wanted to say, finally deciding to just go for it. "Let's get married, Cass. It's the best solution to both our problems," Dooley said quietly.

Her eyes popped open and she struggled to sit up.

"Married?" Her voice squeaked. "I can't marry you, Dooley. I don't love you." She gave a rough, unsteady laugh, shaking her head. "I mean, I love you, just not that way."

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"I don't love you that way either, but I'm willing to overlook it. It'll help us both out if we get married."

It seemed crucial, all of a sudden, that he convince her. His heartbeat accelerated as he assessed the challenge. "You don't have a lot of options right now, and neither do I."

Smiling through her tears, she said, "That's sweet of you, but how can getting married help you? I'm pregnant. What's your problem?"

He frowned in mock exasperation. "Damn it, Cass. Don't you remember anything I tell you? We talked a few weeks ago about my situation at work. And this morning, Armory indicated—hell, he gave me an ultimatum—unless I get married, I'll never be promoted to plant manager." He looked at her trying to keep his expression open and earnest, so she wouldn't know he was lying through his teeth.

"Frampton's retiring next month, and the position is open. I brought that company into the black for the first time in ten years. Eventually, I want to be made a partner. I need to be married to get my foot in the door."

Not exactly a lie, but Dooley purposefully made the situation sound worse than it was. Armory had said he *wished* Dooley were married. He hadn't actually made it a qualification for promotion.

Cass shook her head. "You never told me that. That's probably against the law. How can an employer insist his employees be married?"

"When you own a small, family-run business, you get to do pretty much what you want. Armory is seventy. He believes married men are more stable."

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"What about Melissa?"

He shuddered. "That's over. Melissa's gone on to bigger and better fish."

"I'm sorry; I didn't know you'd broken up. I've been spending so much time with Paul I haven't kept track of anything else." She scooted higher on the couch so she could look at him, temporarily forgetting her own problem in typical Cass fashion. "I thought you guys were serious. Is your heart broken?"

He grinned. "Don't be a hypocrite. You didn't even like her."

She rapped his knee with her knuckle. "Well, the parrot thing was a little whack, and she has that whiny, little girl voice." She gave him a halfhearted smile. "Other than that, she seemed okay."

Grateful that Cass had stopped crying, he felt doubly grateful that Melissa and her foul mouthed bird had flounced out of his life. She'd been hinting, not very subtly, about marriage before they broke up. The idea had horrified him. He'd told Melissa he wasn't ready to settle down and probably wouldn't be for several years. Now, however, the thought that Cass might turn him down sent a cold chill through him.

She massaged her temples, then looked directly at him. "Tell me again why it's a good idea we get married."

He reached out and caught her left hand in his, meshing his fingers with hers. "You need to get married so your parents don't freak out and the baby has a good start, and the town won't refer to you as 'Poor Cass Vocjek.' I need to

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get married to get that promotion. Seems like a plan to me. We'd only have to stay married 'till the baby's born."

"But I don't want to marry you," she wailed, tears once again sheening her eyes. "I love Paul."

Once Cass committed to something or someone, she held on like a pit bull. When everyone else jumped ship, she remained steadfast. For the first time in their relationship, Dooley began to think of this as a flaw in her character.

"You said you told Paul about the baby." He lifted her chin and stared into her eyes as he enunciated each syllable. "He said 'so what' and then went off to Minnesota."

"Michigan."

"Who cares where the hell he went? He's not going to marry you. So you can marry me, or you can call up your Dad and tell him you're pregnant, and Paul won't marry you. Then your brothers will find him in Minnesota, or Michigan, or wherever, and you know that won't be pretty."

She sagged back down on the couch, laying her head on the sodden pillow. "You're right. They would kill him. I know they would."

"Yes, they would. Then, they'd have to spend the rest of their lives in the penitentiary. Can you do that to your mother?" he asked dryly.

She sat up to glare at him. "Shut up, Dooley. My being pregnant and not married will probably do her in."

Relief rolled through him as some of the light return to her eyes and her normally cheerful attitude struggled to rally. Once again, he slipped his arm around her. With a sigh, Cass

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laid her head on his shoulder and stared at the ceiling, obviously mulling over his proposal.

She constantly accused him of having a white knight complex. Dooley saw himself as natural caretaker, a problem solver. He took pride in the fact that many of his friends turned to him for help and advice, and when he was in a bind, he went to Cass. For years they had always been there for each other.

He could almost read her mind. Right now, she saw her problem as being too insurmountable for even him to be able to solve. He felt a surge of confidence, along with a physical zinging in his gut he recognized as anticipation. *Whoa, boy! We're not talking real marriage here. Cass is your best friend. You're just helping out.* When the unusual sensation lingered, he decided to ignore it. However, now it seemed imperative she allow him to make the situation easier.

"Cass, I'm sorry it didn't work out with Paul. I really am. But he's gone. Please let me help." He raised a hand from her shoulder and slid it gently down her cheek, turning her face toward him. "We can work it out, Cass. I hate to see you this miserable. We're family. I love you as much as I love my sister Kathleen, and family sticks together. Getting married would help me out at the same time." He paused, and then added, "Besides, I owe you."

She pulled away from him, her face skeptical. "For what?"

"How about because you sold your new car so I could have tuition money my junior year of college?"

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"That was years ago, and you paid me back with interest. A short-term loan doesn't require a long term commitment," Cass said, blinking rapidly to keep the tears from falling.

His finger traced the path of tears down her cheek.

"There's no statute of limitations on good deeds, babe. And I'm not offering marriage just because I owe you. I need you to help me, and I think we can make it work. It's not like it's for a lifetime. I'm offering a temporary solution to a temporary problem."

"I don't think having a baby is all that temporary. And don't call me babe."

He shrugged. "You know what I mean. We'll get married so the baby has a good start, the family doesn't panic, and I get the job I want. Then we tell people it didn't work out, but we're still friends. I'll be happy to be the baby's daddy 'till you marry again. Even after, if you want."

"Besides, we're blood brothers. We promised to always be there for each other." He held up his left thumb so the twenty-year-old thin line of scar tissue became visible in the lamp light.

That startled a laugh out of her. She touched her right thumb with the matching scar lightly against his.

Dooley felt calm, in control, reassured that he spoke the absolute truth. This marriage to Cass would be temporary. He was too young to settle down permanently.

She blinked again, her eyes beginning to clear. "Do you really mean that, or are you just being noble?"

He grinned. "I'm just being noble."

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"You've been my best friend forever, but I couldn't have sex with you. It would be like incest."

Dooley's jaw tightened. "Who said anything about sex? You're right. It would be like incest." He believed it. He really did. So why did that strange zing of anticipation suddenly feel more like disappointment?

"What kind of a marriage would we have then?" she asked, looking directly into his face. "Would you have affairs on the side? I can just see our parents going for that. My brothers would end up killing you, instead of Paul."

"Like I said, we only have to be married for a year. You have the baby. I get the promotion. Then we get a divorce and still stay friends. I can be celibate for a year." Dooley realized a lot of things could happen in a year.

Cass raised her eyebrows. "I bet you can't be celibate for a week. Then my brothers will take you out, and I'll be a grieving widow with everyone feeling sorry I married such a scumbag." She suddenly grinned. "I like it. Let's do it."

They both laughed, the tension dissolving into the deep tissue of their friendship. He wondered if he could count that as an acceptance.

Then another thought struck him. "How many periods have you missed?"

"I'm only two weeks late, but I didn't want to wait to take the test. How come you're so up on pregnancies and the tests and everything?"

He offered her his hand and hauled her up from the couch. His mouth quirked in a wide, teasing grin. "I'm a man of vast experience, and besides my sister's had three babies in five

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years. Every time she misses a period, she comes here with three of her friends, and we watch for the blue lines. It's a tradition. She doesn't like to get Doug's hopes up unless she's sure."

Cass struggled to keep the smile on her face, and Dooley cursed himself for even mentioning Kathleen and Doug. They were married and happy about each baby as it came along. He knew Cass wanted children. They had often talked about it, but she certainly hadn't considered pregnancy under these circumstances.

"So you're only about seven weeks along?" Dooley prodded. "You probably won't show for a long time." He eyed her slim body approvingly. "We can get married in a month and still have some time before people start counting on their fingers."

"Our parents won't believe we fell in love and decided to get married a few weeks after you dump Melissa and I break up with Paul. They're not retarded," Cass said.

He raised an eyebrow. "Of course they are! Look at all the things we've gotten away with in the past twenty years. Remember Florida?"

Cass laughed, as he knew she would. The summer of their junior year in high school, she had convinced him to get on a bus and go with her to Disney World in Orlando while their parents believed they were soaking up the educational experience of a school-sponsored environmental camp. They had made a secret pact never to tell anyone.

"And it's not as if we've never slept together," Dooley added.

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"We were children. It doesn't count," she said, heading into the kitchen.

Dooley followed her, watching as she removed a can of beer from the refrigerator and rummaged in his cupboard for a clean glass.

"Cass," he said gently, "beer's probably not a good thing when you're pregnant."

She stared at the can in her hand, then up at him, blinking rapidly to keep the tears from spilling through her lashes. "Damn it, why am I being such an idiot? I know pregnant women shouldn't drink. And what's with all this crying? I never cry."

Dooley leaned forward and pulled her into his arms. She ducked her head against his chest, and her hair brushed lightly against his chin. He rubbed her back soothingly. "It's normal. Kathleen cries buckets the first three months of every pregnancy. It's called the hormonal flood."

She gave a watery sigh and slid her hand down his arm to clasp his hand. Leaning back slightly, she peered into his eyes and asked, "Do you really think we can make a go of it for a year? Seriously?"

Although shaken by the honesty in her question, Dooley nodded. "We're best friends. I like you better than anyone else I know. I think we can make it. And I'm not being noble. If I get passed over for this promotion, I might as well look for another job. I love Armory's. I'm not losing that promotion just because I don't have a wife."

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He shoved her gently into a chair at the kitchen table and rooted in the refrigerator for a soft drink. Handing her a diet Coke, he settled in the chair opposite her.

"Are you sure Paul's not going to change his mind and come back? Things might get very sticky if we marry and he decides he wants to be a proud papa after all."

Cass shrugged helplessly. "When I told him about the pregnancy, he asked me who the father was."

"The bastard! I'll kill him myself."

"He apologized, said he didn't mean it, talked about bad timing," her voice wavered. "He received the offer with the Michigan Symphony that morning. It's his dream job. His suitcases were already packed when I got there."

"What an ass! Was he going to leave without telling you? How could you fall for a guy like that?"

She squeezed her eyes shut, but a tear slowly rolled down her cheek anyway. "I didn't intend to fall in love with him, I just did." Her voice wobbled. "And ...even though he's gone, even though he doesn't want this baby, I still love him."

How can you still love a creep who abandoned you and his baby? He didn't say the words out loud, knowing at this point he had to keep the sarcasm under control. Cass wasn't stupid or a wimp. She'd regroup eventually.

He realized her tears had caused something inside of him to break loose. His gut twisted with frustration, anger, and an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. In the twenty years of their relationship, he could only remember her crying a couple of times. For a few seconds, he considered buying a plane

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ticket to Michigan and beating the crap out of the son of a bitch.

But Cass didn't need macho chest beating from him right now.

He pulled her into his arms again, wrapping her in a warm hug, his fingers moving gently over her back, soothing her. "Shh, honey. It's okay. We'll get married. I'm going to be a good daddy for your baby. Even when we get divorced. You know I'm good with kids."

She shook her head. "I can't even think about the baby yet. I'm still trying to deal with the idea that I'm pregnant." She gave a weary sigh. "Your plan won't work, Dooley. No one will believe us. I might as well tell my parents the truth."

Feeling frustrated as his grand plan started to unravel, Dooley shook her, his fingers pressing into the soft flesh of her upper arms. "Stop being such a whiner, Cass."

Her head snapped up, and she glared. The tears still pooled in her eyes, matting her thick black lashes together.

He met her look head on. "I'm offering you an honorable way out of your predicament. It's the best solution for both of us. You know how much that company means to me."

He massaged her arms where his fingers had reddened her skin. "Hell, I've spent eight years of my life there. I want that job, and you can help me get it!"

He took a deep breath, knowing the risk of goading her, but she had to snap out of this self-defeating depression.

Like a fish, she rose to the bait. "I am not a whiner, and you certainly aren't up for the Sympathetic Support award," she snapped, eyeing him balefully.

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He shrugged. Dropping his hands, he moved around the table again and sat across from her. "I'd rather have you mad than hurting. It kills me to see you like this."

Cass let out a long sigh. Her smile wavered. "You're right. This is crazy. All this crying is just giving me a headache. The pity party's over." She reached into her jeans pocket for a tissue and blew her nose, then gave him a direct look. "If you're really serious about this wedding, we'd better discuss it. I can't think of anything else to do. Especially if it will help you also."

"Atta girl. I knew you'd come around," Dooley grinned triumphantly, and the twisted knot of tension in his gut relaxed.

"Are you sure about the sex? I mean about us not having it."

He smiled at her. "Good friends are better than good lovers, and best friends will be around when all those other relationships end. Sex changes things. I want our relationship to stay just the way it is." He hoped he was telling the truth, that the unexpected twinge of wistfulness he felt had nothing to do with picturing his best friend naked.

They returned to the living room. Dooley sat in the sagging recliner, and Cass stretched out on the couch again. The decision made, they eyed each other warily.

"We can't get married in the church," she said. "It wouldn't be right when we're planning to get divorced."

"We have to get married in the church," Dooley said adamantly. "If we don't, our parents will pitch a fit."

"Can't we elope? Or even better, why don't we just say we eloped and then live together until after the baby comes?"

"And whose name will be on the birth certificate?" he asked reasonably.

She sighed. "You're right. But I'm not going to lie to Pastor Phillips. You'll have to explain the whole situation to him."

"What'd you ever see in that jerk?"

"You think Pastor Phillips is a jerk?"

"No. I think Paul's a jerk!" Dooley's shoulders were stiff as he moved to the oak entertainment center spread across one wall and put a CD in the player. His shabby couch and recliner were falling apart, obviously rejects from thrift stores, but the bluesy strains of Charley Adams drifted through the apartment from his top of the line, digital music system.

The music soothed him, loosened the tightness between his shoulder blades. He had just proposed to his best friend. They were getting married, they would have a baby, and then he would bow out. Oh yes, and no sex. This was not the way he had envisioned married life. He wouldn't have even considered it if it had been any other woman.

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Chapter Two

Cass closed her eyes as she considered Dooley's question. What had she seen in Paul? He was a talented musician, intelligent and romantic, as well as movie star gorgeous. He'd had this New Age Zen thing going, and referred to her as his 'twin soul'. It hadn't even sounded hokey to her. She believed it, felt it. Still felt it. He'd been her first lover, and she'd been so glad she'd waited.

Despite her limited experience with sex, Cass realized Paul hadn't been a particularly generous or inventive lover. But she had loved him and believed they would marry some day. She felt grief stricken, as if Paul had died rather than simply left. Their six months together had been magical. She would never love that way again.

Her practical side called her foolish and delusional. Paul had rejected her and the baby. She should hate him. The pain of his rejection ate into her soul, yet her heart understood and even forgave him. She knew he loved her, but his commitment to his music overrode all other aspects of his life. He feared any responsibility which might derail his career. With time, she could have reassured him. If she hadn't been pregnant, she would have.

Although her heart ached at the bitter sadness of their parting, she couldn't wait for him to come to his senses. She flushed, remembering the voice mail and text messages she'd sent, pleading with him to call. Shoving a handful of tangled hair off her forehead, she took a deep breath and wet her

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lips, closing her eyes for a calming moment. She would be able to handle this. Instinctively, she laid a hand on her stomach as if to reassure the tiny embryo. Cass shook her head and forced back the tears which seemed to erupt upon the slightest provocation. She hoped this hormone overload wouldn't last the whole nine months.

Enough crying! She'd been foolish and careless and needed to face up to the consequences. She had once believed she'd be thrilled to have a child; that her husband would be equally ecstatic. But the reality was, at twenty-six, pregnant, abandoned by her lover; she now planned to marry her best friend.

She blinked impatiently, shaking off the maudlin thoughts, and stared at Dooley's back as he adjusted the volume on the stereo. His thick, reddish-blond hair, layered by an expert stylist, nearly touched his collar. Tall and lanky, he had broad shoulders which narrowed into slim hips and long legs.

One of her friends once said he reminded her of a six-foot greyhound with freckles. Cass loved his openly endearing face and bright blue eyes. When they were in elementary school, he would make her laugh by contorting his face into outrageous expressions. When they were in the sixth grade, kids began calling him 'Opey' until they realized he had a mean right hook. He also had a long rectangular face, a square jaw, and a killer smile. Most women found his whipcord muscles and mischievous half-smile a turn on. Her women friends continually pestered her for an introduction.

Although they'd never discussed details, Cass knew Dooley had enjoyed an active sex life since high school, just as he

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knew she'd remained a virgin until she'd fallen for Paul. Through the years, she'd been questioned about their relationship, and she'd always answered honestly—he was just Dooley. Her confidant, buddy, life-long best friend.

Watching him now, she realized how much she had taken their friendship for granted. How many times had she sat in this ugly orange recliner watching him adjust his stereo? In a few seconds, his bare feet would begin to beat a syncopated rhythm on the worn green carpet. Dooley loved music and would often burst into song and dance at odd moments, dragging her into impromptu moves he made up on the spur of the moment. Warmth enveloped her as the panic she had felt earlier dissipated. Once again, Dooley had leaped into the breach, rescuing her. She took comfort in believing she could help him at the same time.

She hoped she wasn't about to make the second biggest mistake of her life.

As Dooley turned around, she asked, "What will we tell our folks?"

"We'll tell them we suddenly realized we're in love and want to get married."

"They'll never believe it!"

"Yes, they will. Our mothers have been plotting this for years."

"They have not!" Cass's voice raised in astonishment. "They never once pushed us together. You're family, for Pete's sake."

"What about senior prom?"

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"You couldn't get a date, so I went with you." Cass rose and stalked across the room until they stood nose to nose.

"Nope! You couldn't get a date, so I asked you." Dooley grinned smugly and patted her on the shoulder. "I saw it as a charity date, but I didn't mind. I'm always glad to help you out, and I never brought it up all these years either."

Cass propped her hand on her hips. "I turned down three invitations because my mother said you felt bad about not being able to get a date. I did you the favor."

He grinned. "See what I mean. They worked us like carnival pitchmen. They'll be overjoyed we're getting married." Curving an arm around her shoulder, he urged her toward his minuscule bathroom. "Go fix you face. You look awful. Practice looking joyful."

She stuck out her tongue and went into the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. She started to reapply her mascara when Dooley's face suddenly appeared in the mirror over her shoulder. He towered over her five-seven frame.

"What?" she asked, as he stared intently into the mirror.

"I never really noticed before, but you're kinda cute. Except for that big blob of black stuff under your eye."

She jabbed him with her elbow. "Get out of here 'till I'm finished. This bathroom's too small for two people."

He grinned back at her in the mirror. "I'm practicing being married. You know, two people sharing a bathroom, showers, that kind of stuff."

She stiffened instantly. This wasn't going to work.

Dooley held up his hands and backed out of the room. "Hell, I'm sorry Cass. I'm joking about sharing showers."

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She turned around and faced him, her gaze locking with his. "Dooley, a year is a long time to go without sex. If you have an affair, just don't tell me about it, okay? I will understand, and it won't affect how I feel about you."

"That's pretty damn big of you!" he said, his eyes narrowing. "What about you? You planning to have affairs while we're married?"

"Of course not. I'm pregnant."

"According to Kathleen, pregnant women are very horny."

She cast him a dirty look. "I wish you'd stop acting like a pregnancy guru. You're ticking me off. I'm just trying to be helpful, or are you the only one who can make a decent proposal tonight."

He held both his palms up. "Peace. I know we have to talk about these things before we go over to see our folks. What about your job? Can you still teach the aerobics stuff when you're pregnant?"

"I can teach low impact. It will be good for me. But I'm already doing more office work than teaching. Bob is going to open another spa closer to Boston. When I get really big, I can manage the Chrysalis here, and he'll manage the new one."

Dooley's face contorted as if he were trying not to laugh.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"Chrysalis!" He laughed out loud. "It blows me away every time I think of Ricco's Gym being turned in a spandex spa called Chrysalis. Although, I have to admit it hasn't hurt your figure any. You look great." He ran his eyes up and down her body with obvious masculine appreciation.

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Cass felt herself blush, not knowing how to respond to the appreciative gleam in his eye. Dooley rarely complimented her. In fact, he usually commented about her out of control hair, or pointed out that she'd dripped catsup on her shirt.

Paul, on the other hand, had showered her with compliments, pampered her, made her feel like a queen. She shook her head, forcing herself to remain in the present. She and Dooley were getting married. They had things to decide.

She stood in the middle of his living room, her hands on her hips, and stared at his furniture. His green and yellow floral sofa clashed with the hideous orange recliner.

"Do you want to live in this dump?" Dooley asked.

Cass laughed, feeling lighter and more optimistic. She threw herself at him, hugging him around the neck. "My apartment's plenty large enough. It has a spare bedroom you can have until the baby comes. My furniture's pretty hammered, also. But if you're going to be the plant manager at Armory's, we'll be rolling in money. We can buy all new stuff."

He returned her hug until she winced, and then he gently held her away from him and stared down at her breasts. "Do they hurt?" He nodded at her chest.

She felt the heat rise up her neck and into her cheeks. "I can't believe you're asking me about my breasts. Yes, they're a little sensitive."

He led her over to the couch, pushed her gently down and sat next to her. She laid her head on his shoulder. "When we were younger, I used to think about your breasts all the time," he admitted with a self-conscious half smile.

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She sat up, giving him a horrified look. "You did not!"

"Yes, I did," he nodded emphatically. "Actually, I thought about all girls' breasts, but yours in particular because I noticed when you got them. Flat for years, then suddenly you were really filling out a bathing suit."

He smiled sheepishly and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "When I was about fourteen, I looked out my window one night and saw you changing clothes in Roger's bedroom. I saw your bra and thought I'd died and gone to heaven."

She tilted her head, surprised by the surge of heat that rushed through her. Then she giggled. Just a small snicker. "I knew you were watching that night. You didn't even turn the light off," she said. "So I pretended you were Nolan Weeks and did a little strip tease."

"Nolan Weeks! That twerp. You let Nolan Weeks see you in your underwear!" He pretended outrage.

She giggled again. "No, I let *you* see me. We were only teenagers, feeling the power." Her insides knotted as she placed a hand over her flat stomach. "Look where the power's got me now."

Dooley covered her hand with his. Both sets of fingers curved protectively over her belly. "It's going to be all right, Cass. Trust me."

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Chapter Three

The Dooleys and the Vocjeks were engaged in their usual Friday night pinochle game at the Vocjek house. They barely looked up when Cass and Dooley appeared in the front room.

"You kids hungry?" Miriam Vocjek discarded a queen. "There's some dinner left if you want to heat it in the microwave." Her vague smile indicated her concentration on the card game.

Cass stood next to Dooley in the doorway, watching their parents who had been friends and neighbors for twenty-five years. Family. She couldn't do it. Couldn't lie to them. She pulled on Dooley's arm and tried to edge back into the hallway.

He yanked her forward. "Cass and I are getting married," he said abruptly.

Both sets of parents nodded, not even looking up. Then, the information sank in.

"You're what?" Nathan Vocjek looked incredulously from Cass to Dooley.

"I said, Cass and I are getting married." Dooley slipped an arm around Cass's stiffening shoulders.

"To each other?" James Dooley's voice sounded strangled.

At Dooley's nod, both sets of parents surged out of their seats to surround the couple. The questions overlapped as both sets of parents started asking questions at the same time.

"When did this happen?"

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"When are you getting married?"

"How come we didn't know this about you and Cass?"

Cass's father clearly struggled with the information.

"I knew it would happen someday." Tears streamed down Miriam's face as she threw her arms around Cass and Dooley.

Dooley flashed Cass an I-told-you-so look.

"When did all this happen?" Helen Dooley asked, a slight frown marring her face. "Last month, both of you were seeing other people. Now, you're getting married?"

Cass shot a victorious look at Dooley. His idea, he could cope. Amazingly, he did.

"Cass and I have always loved each other. We just didn't realize it until recently. Now we want to get married. Right away. This month."

"This month," both mothers shrieked in unison.

"Impossible. Cass will need to shop for a trousseau, bridesmaids' things, and a gown. Then there's the reception. We'll need at least six months." Miriam began rummaging in a desk drawer for a pencil and paper.

"We need to get married right away, Mom," Cass said.

Everyone stilled.

Her father grabbed Cass by the shoulders, turning her to face him, the smile erased from his face. "How exactly do you mean *need to*?"

Dooley quickly positioned himself beside Cass, his arm once again around her shoulders. She leaned into him, trembling. *I might as well tell them everything.*

"It's because of my job, Uncle Nate." Dooley rushed to her rescue. "Armory told me the new plant manager had to be

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married. He's ready to hire someone else. I can get the promotion if Cass and I get married right away."

"Cass will not pay for your ambition!" Helen Dooley said with a horrified expression. "I don't know how you convinced her to marry you. But I won't allow you to take advantage of her sweet nature."

With all four parents glaring at Dooley, Cass realized she couldn't let them believe Dooley was taking any kind of advantage, when the marriage mainly benefitted her. As she opened her mouth to speak, Dooley pinched her arm, warning her.

"Cass and I are in love, and we want to get married," Dooley assured them, amazing Cass with how sincere he sounded.

"The only reason we want to have the wedding right away is because of the job. We would get married anyway, job or no job. But the timing is important to both of us." He looked down at her and winked.

Cass's nervous tension eased. Maybe Dooley was right, and it would work out. She smiled at him gratefully, lovingly, and then smiled at their anxious parents.

"Dooley's job will be important to us after we're married, especially if we want to buy a house or have a family. He hasn't talked me into anything I don't want to do. I really want to marry him. I don't need a big wedding."

All four parents visibly relaxed. The mothers fell into each other's arms once more, laughing and crying.

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"I knew it! I knew it! Since they were six years old, I knew they were perfect for each other," Miriam crowed, hugging her friend.

"All those years of throwing them together, nothing. Then, when we've finally given up, they fall for each other. Go figure." Helen Dooley grinned tearfully over Miriam's shoulder at Cass and Dooley.

"A toast," Nathan Vocjek shouted, his broad Slavic face alight with joy. "We need to make a toast. Miriam, where's that bottle we've been saving?"

Jim Dooley followed him into the kitchen. "Nate, now that we're going to be in-laws, how about letting me win at pinochle once in a while."

Everyone laughed, the pinochle rivalry a longstanding family joke.

By the time they left the Vocjek house, the wedding had been planned. Despite Dooley's assurances, Cass shook her head at how easy it had been to convince their parents they were in love. However, neither she nor Dooley could get up enough nerve to tell their parents they weren't getting married in church. In fact, Helen Dooley had offered to notify Pastor Phillips in the morning.

When Dooley parked his green Volvo in front of Cass's apartment building at 10:30, they were both exhausted. Dooley cleared his throat, then laughed. "I told you they'd buy it. Now you have to marry me, or they'll kick us both out of their wills."

She leaned back against the headrest and sighed. "I never knew deception could be so exhausting."

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Dooley picked up her hand, which rested palm up on the seat beside him, and kissed her wrist. "I know, babe. But the hard part's over. Now we can get on with it." Once again, a sharp flare of anticipation raced through him, taking him by surprise.

Cass raised one knee on the seat and turned to face him. One side of her dark hair fell in a straight swath against her neck, the rest still contained in the haphazard ponytail. She had very little makeup on, and her hazel eyes appeared enormous in her pale face. Despite their long term friendship, Dooley was struck, as he had been at odd moments over the years, by Cass's prettiness. He rubbed one finger over the pulse point in her wrist, glad she had turned to him for help. He loved her. He tried to analyze the strange feeling of exhilaration he got every time he thought about marrying her. It couldn't be a sexual thing. She was almost a sister. It felt more like ... Hell, he couldn't begin to describe what it felt like.

Although he hadn't planned this exact engagement scenario, in the back of his mind he realized he had always looked for someone like her to marry. Someone who could be his best friend, and yet someone he also found sexually attractive. His past relationships had been all heat and emotion but lacked the deeper element required for commitment.

She glanced at him. "You were right. They hardly batted an eye."

"I told you this is what they've always wanted. We've made their dreams come true."

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From the reflection of the streetlight on the corner, Dooley could see the sheen of tears in her eyes.

"Stop crying, Cass," he ordered. "I told you everything's going to be all right. You'd better believe me." He playfully shook his fist.

She gave him a small smile. "Okay, I believe you. So who's going to deal with the church issue? You or me?"

He began patting his shirt pockets. "You do it. I've got to buy rings and things. What the hell did I do with that list my mom gave me?" He dug out the folded sheet of notebook paper. "Here it is—rings, tuxedo, honeymoon ... Where's your list?"

"You're evading the issue. Should we tell Pastor Phillips the truth or not?"

He frowned. "Cass, can we deal with one problem at a time? Tomorrow morning, I'm going to tell my boss I'm getting married. I want to be able to act excited about it, so let's not talk about a divorce before we even get the marriage license.

She nodded in agreement, but she still looked apprehensive. An icy chill rippled up from his gut to settle at the back of his neck. What if it didn't work out? What if marriage ruined their friendship? Even when they were seeing other people, they always touched base by phone at least once or twice a month. They e-mailed each other constantly. As much as he cared for Cass, he had never put her in any category other than Best Friend. He hoped this marriage thing wouldn't mess up the only stable relationship he'd ever been able to maintain with a woman.

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Watching as Dooley rolled his shoulders and leaned his forehead on the steering wheel, Cass felt guilty. Poor Dooley, trying to make everyone happy and not getting much back in return. She reached over and massaged his back and neck with both of her hands. They had been giving each other back rubs for years, so she knew just where to press.

He sighed gratefully. "We need to act like we really are in love. Like you're pregnant with my baby, and the marriage is going to last forever. Can you do it?"

She nodded, wondering if she would be able to keep up the pretense. For a fleeting moment, she wished it really were Dooley's baby. Even if they weren't romantically involved, she did love him. She knew how he thought and reacted. She actually knew more about him than she knew about Paul, and she trusted him. Dooley loved children. He'd make a terrific father. For a year, it would be like having a great roommate. From now on, she would force herself to be cheerful. She'd pretend to be in love if it killed her.

Although she could hear her cell phone ringing in her purse, she remained at the bottom of the stairs to her apartment, waving at Dooley until he left the parking lot. She sighed, remembering how Paul always walked her to the door and kissed her; usually heating them both to the point she invited him in. She fumbled in her purse as she walked up the stairs and flipped the phone open just as it stopped ringing. Her brother, Ken's, photo smiled up at her. She hit the return call button, and he answered immediately.

"Cass?"

"Hey, Kenny."

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"What's going on? How come it took you so long to answer? Is Dooley there?"

As usual, her brother's peremptory tone set her back up. "We're having sex, and I can't talk now," she said sweetly.

"Damn it. Let me talk to Dooley!"

She chuckled. The family grapevine moved swiftly. "I'm kidding. Dooley just dropped me off, and it took me a while to find my phone."

"You're really marrying him? Mom just called. I can't believe it."

"Believe it, Kenny. Dooley and I are getting married one month from tomorrow."

"Cass, why are you marrying Dooley?" Kenny's voice crackled with suspicion. "Mom says it's something to do with his job. Did he con you onto marrying him so he can get a promotion? Because if that's so, this marriage is not taking place."

"Blow it out your ear! I'm twenty-six. I have a perfectly good father. You're not my keeper, and it's none of your business why I'm getting married."

"I'm coming over. See if you can tell me that to my face."

"Don't come over. I won't let you in. It's late, and I'm going to bed," she said hastily. The last thing she wanted tonight was a face-to-face confrontation with her brother.

Changing tactics, he softened his voice, "I'm only trying to be helpful, Sis. I want you to be happy. You and Dooley have been friends for years, but marriage is a big step. Truthfully, I don't think you love him enough for marriage. If it doesn't work, it can make you miserable for the rest of your life."

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Cass adored her three brothers, particularly Ken, the closest to her in age. However, she resented their continual interference in her life. In their eyes, she would always be the little sister. But she understood Ken's reservations about marriage. He hadn't yet recovered from his own heartbreaking divorce. While he had been working construction jobs out of town last year, his young, bored wife had met someone else, filed for divorce, and moved out with their two children.

Cass's heart ached for him. "Please don't worry about me, Kenny. I want to marry Dooley. I love him. We're going to have a really good marriage." She nearly choked on the lies.

"I'm coming over anyway, I'm lonely."

"All right," Cass sighed. "But it better be in the next ten minutes, because I'm exhausted, and I want to go to bed."

In exactly ten minutes, her doorbell rang. Ken was compulsive about punctuality, and it became one of the many issues he and his ex-wife, Sharon, fought about. Unshaved, dressed in old cutoffs and a ripped t-shirt, he looked like a derelict. With his usually cheerful face drawn and morose, his eyes brooding, he looked worse than he had the last time she'd seen him. She bit the inside of her mouth to keep from saying anything.

Ken hugged her close, taking, as well as giving, comfort.

"So how's the bride-to-be?" he asked, leaning away from her, his hazel eyes searching her face.

"Excited. Nervous. Like you said, marriage is a big step. But Dooley and I are committed." This was as big a test as facing her parents. As close as she was to Ken, even he didn't

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know her as well as Dooley did. She'd never been able to fool Dooley about anything. "I understand why you're down on marriage, but please don't rain on my parade." She plastered a wide smile across her face, pleased her voice remained steady.

He flopped onto her couch and asked for a beer. When she returned from the kitchen, he had stretched out, turned on the television, and tuned in an old Star Trek rerun.

She handed him the beer, then pushed his feet onto the floor and used the remote to turn off the television. "Excuse me, brother, but I thought you came to talk. If you want to watch television, go home."

He sat up, raked a hand through his dark hair, and glared. "Hell, Cass, I can't believe you and Dooley are getting married."

"Why? You've always liked him."

"Sure, I like him. He's like a kid brother. I just didn't realize you had anything going with him. It feels like you're marrying one of the family."

"Better than marrying a stranger. I know everything there is to know about Dooley."

"Knowing everything isn't any guarantee. I thought I knew everything about Sharon, and look what happened."

"Ken," she said bluntly, "what happened to you is not going to happen to me. Dooley is nothing like Sharon. She flirted with every man she met and was totally into herself. Everyone knew it. We all tried to warn you before you married her, but you still went ahead."

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He flinched, and she felt immediately contrite. "I'm sorry. I know you're hurting, but it will get better." She eyed him up and down, her earlier determination not to say anything forgotten. "You need to get a grip. Look at yourself."

He looked down at his torn shirt, and the corner of his mouth quirked. "What's wrong with me?"

"You're a mess. You need to shave. Stop looking like a bum. I'm not having any bums at my wedding."

He gave her a full-fledged smile and nodded. "Only for you, baby sister. I didn't even clean up for my own wedding."

After he left, Cass lay in bed pondering the vagaries of fate. Ken had truly loved Sharon, and their marriage hadn't brought either one of them happiness. Maybe love actually interfered with happiness. Being in love with Paul hadn't brought her happiness. If it weren't for Dooley, she might be feeling a lot more miserable. She'd practice looking on the bright side. Dooley had asked her to pretend to be happy, and by damn, she was going to pretend her heart out for him.

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Chapter Four

Dooley paced back and forth in the foyer of the rectory, surprised at how anxious he felt. Cass sat quietly on a wooden bench, her hands folded in her lap like a seven-year-old. His gaze targeted her still figure. She wore a peach dress made of some kind of silky material which whispered when she moved. With her long hair combed smoothly away from her face and secured with hand-painted barrettes, she looked cool and composed, except for her clenched hands and the faint circles under her eyes.

He sat beside her. "How ya doing?" he whispered. "You look good."

A slight smile curved the corner of her mouth. "I'm nervous. I've never lied to a minister before. We'll probably end up in hell."

A chill rippled through him. "We're not lying. We're going to tell him we're getting married to give the baby a name and a good start. That's not lying."

He undid the collar button under his tie. Despite his assurance to her, Dooley wondered how tough it would be to avoid mentioning the divorce. The pastor had known them since they were toddlers.

Just then, Pastor Phillips entered the foyer, dressed in his golfing clothes. "Mrs. Shumacher said you wanted to talk to me. Should I change?" He grinned broadly at both of them.

When they both shook their heads, he ushered them into his office, and seated them at a small round table before

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sitting opposite them. Smiling benignly, he asked, "What can I do for you, children?"

Dooley cleared his throat. This was a lot harder than he'd thought. Instinctively, he sought for Cass's hand. Her fingers felt cold against his palm.

"We'd like to get married, Sir. A month from today."

The minister's face showed an instant of surprise and then bland interest. "Well, well. Isn't that lovely. Why don't you tell me about it?" He reached across and patted their clasped hands gently. At his touch, Cass burst into tears, and laid her head on Dooley's shoulder.

Pastor Phillips looked steadily over her head at Dooley, who felt his face begin to redden. For a second, he had trouble clearing his throat. "Cass is pregnant, Sir. We want to get married as soon as possible so neither of our families or the child will suffer."

The minister's wise old eyes gentled. He stood, walked around the table and laid his hand lovingly on Cass's head. "There, child. You are certainly not the first person to be in this situation. Tell me about the wedding."

Dooley felt a strange flutter in his stomach as Cass lifted her head, her tear-drenched face beautiful and sad.

With a soft sigh, she said, "Dooley is not the father of my baby. We're marrying to give the baby a better start than it would have if I were a single parent."

Pastor Phillips looked directly at Dooley and asked, "Thomas, do you love, Cassandra."

"Yes, Pastor, I do." Dooley didn't lie to the minister. He did love Cass. He just wasn't *in love* with her. Although he found

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it increasingly more difficult to explain to himself exactly what the difference was.

"Cassandra, do you love Thomas, even though he is not the father of your baby?"

Dooley held his breath as Cass turned to look at him.

"Yes, I love Dooley," she said softly.

"Then everything should work out just fine. I will put you on the schedule for Saturday, the twenty-eighth."

The minister asked about their parents, then walked them to the rectory door, smiling genially.

They both sighed in relief as they moved down the walk toward Dooley's car.

Just as Dooley opened the passenger door, Pastor Phillips called to them from the rectory steps. "I would like to see you individually in my office next week for some premarital counseling. Please make an appointment with Mrs. Shumacher."

Dooley swore under his breath.

Cass pinched his arm and hissed, "Don't you dare swear at a man of God, Thomas Dooley."

"I didn't swear at him, exactly," Dooley said. He knew if they met with him individually, the wily old cleric would have Cass spilling her guts in less than a minute.

He opened the door to the Volvo wider. "He wants to make sure we know what we're doing. If you tell him we're planning to get a divorce, he may not let us get married in the church."

"I know that. I think we should get married by a justice of the peace and then we won't have to lie." Cass's voice wavered as she sat in the car and buckled her seat belt.

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Dooley didn't know why the idea of getting married by a city official bothered him so much. Theirs wouldn't be a real marriage, and he certainly didn't look forward to being celibate for a year or so. But as strange as it was, since he wasn't the real father, he already felt protective toward Cass's baby. He wanted it to have the best possible start in life. If they didn't get married in the church, everyone would know about the pregnancy. Some people, knowing how close they were, might even sniff out the real reason for the hurry-up wedding. It was nearly impossible to keep a secret in the small, gossipy town of West Sheffield.

"No kid of mine is going to be labeled," he said. "So we do things by the book to avoid anybody counting on their fingers."

"They'll probably count anyway." She gently laid a hand on his leg. "You're going to be a terrific dad, Dooley. Right now, I wish you *were* the baby's father."

Dooley felt the faintest twinge of sexual awareness as he gazed at Cass's hand innocently resting on his thigh. It caught him by surprise, and he fought it off. Leaning forward, he kissed her lightly on the cheek and moved his leg away from her hand.

"Things will work out, babe. I'm probably getting carried away with this husband-father thing. Anyway, I told Armory we were getting married."

Cass leaned toward him. "What did he say?"

"He said he hoped he'd be invited to the wedding." He slanted her sly grin.

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She swatted his arm, "Come on. What about the promotion? Are you going to get it?"

He nodded, and she threw her arms around him in an exuberant hug. "We're going to be rich," she sang in his ear.

He laughed. "Don't start spending the money yet," he warned jokingly. "I'm sure he won't make anything official until I show him the marriage certificate."

But Dooley knew the promotion was in the bag. Old Stoneface Armory had almost smiled when Dooley informed him of his upcoming nuptials.

Cass sat back, still grinning. "I'd better tell them at the Spa I'm getting married in a month. I bet they won't give *me* a promotion for getting married."

Dooley chuckled as he started the engine. "Once you start showing, you probably won't want to teach anymore."

"Sure I will, just not high impact. I always have a few pregnant women in my classes. Besides, Bob's letting me handle nearly all the office stuff now. I'm only teaching a few classes a week. I'm lucky my associate's degree is in Business Management."

"Do you want to quit working?" Dooley glanced over at her as he skillfully guided the Volvo through the narrow streets. She looked far more relaxed and happy than she had in the week since they decided to get married.

She gazed thoughtfully at him. "Dooley, I can't quit my job. I'll need it after the baby comes." At his blank look, she added, "After the divorce."

"Oh yeah." He smiled sheepishly. "For a moment I forgot about that." He reached over and laid his hand on top of hers,

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twining their fingers. "Could we not talk about the divorce until after the wedding? We both know this isn't a real marriage, but it is my first one, and I'd like to enjoy it."

She tightened her fingers around his, and smiled dryly, "I never realized you were such a romantic."

He pretended to be offended. "Who stayed up all night on Valentine's eve making you a giant chocolate chip cookie? If that's not romantic, I don't know what is."

"That's being competitive, not romantic." Cass scoffed. "You only did it because I told you the valentine I baked for you was way bigger than the one you made me."

They both chuckled, reminding Dooley once again of the exclusive nature of their friendship. Being with Cass always felt comfortable, like wearing old slippers or sweats. Right now he felt confused by his body's response to her touch on his leg. They'd always had their hands all over each other—playful pokes and punches, even tender hugs. He'd never felt any sexual vibes with her before. He'd have to be more careful.

Intending to move his thoughts to safer areas, he glanced once more at Cass, who relaxed against the seatback with her eyes closed. His gaze, as if controlled by a malevolent genie, moved down to her breasts.

Hell, except for his early adolescent days, he'd never thought of Cass's breasts. Now his eyes were riveted to the smooth, uplifted curves outlined in peach silk. Even covered, she had beautiful breasts. In the year they would be married, he would probably see them change with pregnancy—get

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fuller, more womanly, ready to suckle a child. The thought of her with a child at her breast made his groin tighten.

He moved uncomfortably behind the steering wheel, suddenly terrified. He couldn't start having libido problems around Cass. She loved Paul. They were just doing each other a favor. This wasn't a real marriage. He'd better get himself under control before they began sharing an apartment.

The next day, Cass ran into the spa fifteen minutes late for her seven A.M. aerobics class. Glancing through the studio's glass window, she found Gerry Miller teaching for her. She gave Gerry a quick wave and went to the locker area to leave her shoes and street clothes. This morning, she'd suffered her first bout of morning sickness, just a mild queasiness, but she recognized it immediately. She pulled a denim skirt over her leotard, and went downstairs to the main office to gather the mail at the front desk. The large office had two small, open cubicles off to the side which were used to sign up new spa members. The walls were decorated with posters of attractive, highly-toned men and women using various gym equipment. A large desk, and a smaller one with a computer terminal on it, was the only regulation office furniture in the room.

Robert Cavelli, the spa's owner, sat at the larger desk, reading the latest issue of *Fitness* magazine. He lifted an eyebrow as she slid into the chair in front of the computer terminal and turned it on.

"Sorry I'm late, Bob. It's been a bad morning."

"You okay?" he asked as he stood and walked toward her.
"You look a little pale."

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She nodded, then turned to look at him over her shoulder. "I'm getting married in three weeks."

Surprised flashed across his face. "You're kidding. I thought you and the musician broke up."

"I'm marrying Dooley." She forced a smile, then turned back to the computer as it chimed a greeting.

"You and Dooley are getting married? That's great."

Surprised, she turned back to him. "You really think it's great we're getting married?"

He nodded. "You have the best relationship of any two people I've ever known. If anyone can make it work, you guys can. You've always been friends." He leaned back in the chair and flexed his fingers. "That's been the problem with all my marriages. Great sex, but nothing else to build on." His voice sounded mournful.

Cass liked Bob and felt sorry for him. He and her brother Ken were in the same boat. Her usually cheerful boss had been depressed for more than a month, ever since his third wife filed for divorce in a jealous rage. He'd met all of his wives at the spa, and Cass often wondered if his criteria for falling in love depended solely on how a woman looked in spandex.

She and Bob had dated a few times when she had first started working at the spa. But with absolutely no chemistry, they both agreed their working relationship was too valuable to jeopardize.

Bob looked at her more closely. "You sure you're not coming down with something? Gerry can do your classes

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today. When you get the payroll done, go home if you need to."

Cass felt guilty. She should tell him she was pregnant. It would be obvious soon enough, but she decided to wait until after the wedding. "I'm fine. If Gerry can teach the ten o'clock while I get the payroll done, I think I'll be able to handle the afternoon classes."

He nodded and went back to his own desk where he had a full view of the lobby. The folder with his expansion plans for Chrysalis lay open on the desk. He'd already offered her the job of assistant manager for his next fitness spa, and she was grateful for the offer. Her experience as a certified personal trainer and aerobics instructor, coupled with her associates degree in business management, made her a perfect candidate for the job. She would need the income when she eventually became a single parent.

Order and organization were Cass's forte and her passion. Now her life bordered on complete chaos. She felt curiously numb as if her emotions were on hiatus, waiting for some verification of how she felt about Paul. Did she still love him? Had she ever loved him? Maybe Dooley was right. He believed she had only loved Paul's music and by extension had transferred this feeling to Paul himself.

Suddenly the words on the computer screen blurred, as without warning, the emotional anesthesia wore off, and a flood of memories threatened to overwhelm her. She refused to blame Paul for her misery. She'd been naive to believe he felt as committed to their relationship as she did. Handsome, and gifted, he had swept her away, and she loved him so

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damn much, she had visions of them happily spending their lives together. During the six months they dated, he'd made her feel cherished. He told her often how much he loved her. Even discovering her pregnancy hadn't thrown her into a panic. She'd been so certain of their love, she had viewed the baby as a minor glitch in the plans for their future.

Grief rolled over her in a dark wave as the memory of their last time together cut through her. When she arrived at his apartment, he had greeted her exuberantly and thrown his arms around her. "Michigan came through, Cass. A nine-month contract with a further option if the season is strong. First Bassoonist!"

She had gazed blankly at the two, neatly-packed suitcases lying open on the double bed before blurting out, "I think I'm pregnant." He'd dropped his arms and backed away so quickly, she had stumbled and nearly fallen. After observing her silently for a long moment, he had finally shrugged and turned back toward the bed where he methodically began folding the last dress shirts and placing them carefully in the suitcase.

Shaken, she had stared at his back. "Paul, look at me," she begged, "I'm pregnant."

He didn't turn around as he asked in a gentle but distant voice, "Whose baby is it, Cass?"

The words hit her with such force she staggered back as if he had struck her. Feeling herself slipping further from reality with each passing second, she stammered, "It's ... it's ... yours. I haven't been with anyone else. You know that. I- I- love you. We love each other. "

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He turned around then and led her to the edge of the bed so she could sit down.

With all emotion carefully erased from his face, he kept his tone cautious and kind, as if he were placating a fractious child. "That was rotten of me, Cass. I'm a bastard. I know you haven't been with anyone else. But I have to leave for Michigan in about three hours. I'm sorry you're in trouble, but I can't deal with it right now." He paused, then added with a cool finality, "If you decide on an abortion, I'll split the cost with you. That's about all I can do."

I'm sorry you're in trouble. The words hung in the air, until Cass finally absorbed the impact. She had no recollection of leaving Paul's apartment or driving back to her place. The next day, she had gone weeping to Dooley.

Cass stared blankly at the invoices on the desk in front of her, Paul's last words still echoing in her head. She wasn't a coward, and ordinarily had no trouble standing up for herself, but his rejection of her and their baby had her doubting herself and everything she thought she knew about people. She shuddered as the memory of his last words ran in a nearly continuous loop through her brain; *I'll help with an abortion.* And despite everything she remembered about that horrible last day, she still loved him. Still hoped he'd call or come home. She should hate him. She'd tried, but it only made her heart ache. She needed to buy one of those self-help books—*Stupid Women Who Love too Much*.

Realizing she'd begun to turn self-pity into a life style, she made a conscious effort to pull herself together. Paul was gone. Time to get on with her life. She'd marry her best

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friend instead. She did love Dooley in a special way, and he was trying to put the best slant possible on this screwed up situation. Even though Dooley acted excited about his promotion, he really was making the greater sacrifice for her and her baby. She squared her shoulders and vowed to follow Dooley's example. From now until the wedding, she'd pretend like crazy to be a happy bride.

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Chapter Five

"Paddy's is a good choice for a bachelor's party, Max," Dooley told his friend, acknowledging the noise and laughter coming from all sections of the sports bar.

Max, who had on a spectacularly ugly Hawaiian shirt, nodded. "We decided to have it on Friday night because of the free buffet. Too bad there's no game tonight."

Dooley glanced at the huge TV screen at the back of the room where a bunch of guys and a few women were watching Red Sox reruns.

He'd been trying to watch his liquor intake, but the array of glasses in front of him showed he'd lost the battle. Five of his friends, his brother-in-law, a few co-workers, and Cass's two brothers had showed up to help him celebrate his last days of bachelorhood. Feeling more than buzzed, he knew with just a few more drinks, he'd be totally plowed.

"Hey buddy," Max said, putting his hand on his shoulder, "Let's you and me hit the buffet before all the wings are gone."

Dooley grinned. "You're just worried I'm gonna get shick ...sick." He shook his head, trying to clear it. "And throw up on you like the last time."

Max hauled him out of the chair. "Let's get some food in you. You've never been able to hold your liquor, Dooley. You should have stuck to beer."

"Couldn't. Getting married, ya know. People keep bringin' me drinks."

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"I know you're getting married, asshole. I just can't believe it's to Cass."

Dooley scowled and pulled his arm away. "Whadda ya mean? Why not Cass? She's my best friend."

Max shrugged, grabbed a plate from the buffet and handed it to Dooley. "Let's eat. I'm starved."

"No," Dooley said mulishly, refusing the plate. "I wanna know why you don't like Cass."

"Hell, Dooley. I like Cass. I've always liked her. She's great. I just didn't know you thought of her that way."

"What way?" Dooley mumbled, looking away from Max as he picked up a plate and began piling hot wings on it.

Max followed him with his own plate. "You two have been best friends since you were kids. I just can't imagine you doing the wild thing with her. There's no vibes between you."

"There's vibes," Dooley insisted. "We just haven't acted on them before."

"Gimme a break," Max chided. "A couple months ago, when Ginger had the swim party, Cass came in that red bikini. She looked so hot, I couldn't get out of the water for a half hour. You kept eating hot dogs like you didn't even notice her."

Dooley, feeling more sober by the minute, remembered the swim party. It was the first time Cass had brought Paul to meet him and their friends. He hadn't paid any attention to what she had on. He just remembered wanting to slug the guy because he had his hands all over her. He pretended not to notice, and certainly didn't make any effort to get to know the man Cass had been intimate with. It still surprised him

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that as soon as he saw them together, he'd known Cass wasn't a virgin any more. He remembered being angry and leaving the party early with Melissa. Now, he wondered about that anger. Had he known at their first meeting, Paul would hurt her, or had his anger come from some other place he didn't want to examine?

Dooley left the buffet area and headed back to their table, weaving in and out of people who clapped him on the back and congratulated him. Max followed, a determined look on his face, obviously still waiting for a reaction to his comment about the swim party.

After they sat down, Dooley said, "Let's eat then play some darts."

Max laughed. "Okay, Mr. Ostrich, we can play darts. But don't think I don't recognize what's really going on."

That stopped Dooley cold. Max couldn't know about the pregnancy. No one knew. "What do you think is going on, Max?" He tried to sound nonchalant.

"You're trying to convince Cass to go hunting with us. You think the only way to do it is to marry her."

Dooley laughed so loudly, heads turned, and a few guys from the party wandered back to the table.

"What's going on?" his brother-in-law Doug asked. "Is it time for the stripper?"

Dooley looked at him in horror. "Tell me you didn't hire a stripper."

"I didn't hire a stripper," Doug grinned, slanting a sideways look at the rest of the guys who began surrounding Dooley's chair.

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Dooley looked around the group. "If any of you hired a stripper, I will personally kill all of you."

Amidst the general laughter and wise cracking, Dooley noticed Max raised his hand in some sort of signal to the bartender. Suddenly, lively dance music filled the bar, drowning out all other noise. Dooley groaned, and put his head in his hands. All the drinks he had that night threatened to make an inglorious comeback.

Everyone in the bar starting laughing and clapping. When Dooley looked up, he joined in.

Max, who managed a senior citizen center, had arranged for the High Steppers, a ladies dance group from his center, to dance at Dooley's bachelor party. The six women, clad in short shorts, high heels, and colorful halter tops, were all over seventy, but they had moves younger dancers would envy. They lined up in front of Dooley and sang and danced while everyone cheered. At the conclusion of the performance, the lead dancer, sweet-faced and white haired, sat in Dooley's lap and whispered suggestive comments in his ear, making him nearly choke with laughter even as he turned red.

By three-thirty, nearly everyone had left the party except Dooley, Max, and Doug, who, as the designated driver, was the only one sober. The bartender placed three cups of coffee in front of them, collected the money from Doug, and warned them the bar would close in a few minutes.

Max, in a sloshy gesture of camaraderie, hugged Dooley. "Well, old buddy. I was kidding earlier, but do you think Cass will let you go to Montana with me this winter?"

Dooley stared at him, owl-eyed. "Sh-sure, she will. We always go to Monana," he paused and tried again. "Mon-tan-ana. Cass won't care."

"But she don't like hunting. She don't like guns, and now she's gonna be your wife. I bet she won't let you go."

Dooley nodded his head. "Thas' right. She hates guns. But I take pictures. I don't shoot poor defenseless animals that never harmed anyone. Thas' your job."

Doug laughed at both of them. "I didn't know you went hunting on those trips to Montana. You told us you went to a cowboy ranch and worked as wranglers for a week. Hell, I've even thought about asking if I could join you."

"Shush," Max held a finger to his mouth. "I'm originally from Montana. We moved here when I was twelve. How'd I know Massachusetts was an anti-gun state? People act like I'm a crim'nal when I tell 'em I like to hunt. So we tell a few harmless lies. Besides, Dooley won't hunt. He jus' takes pictures."

Doug looked at Dooley quizzically, "Are you going to tell Cass the truth?"

"Nope. Are you?" Dooley made a concentrated effort to focus his eyes on his brother-in-law.

"Nope," Doug grinned, "but Kathleen might."

Dooley, with the clear sightedness given to the very drunk, suddenly realized having a celibate marriage with his often stubborn and opinionated best friend might not be the walk in the park he had envisioned.

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Chapter Six

I've got to pull myself together. I will not cry today. Cass blinked back the tears which had threatened since she opened her eyes that morning in her old bedroom. It had been redecorated since she'd moved out, but still felt familiar and comfortable. Soft gray carpet provided the perfect background for the antique rosewood furniture.

She'd had spent a lot of nights in her old bedroom in the past five years, and right now, she wanted to crawl back under the blankets, knowing that after today she would never again sleep in the ruffled bed as a single woman. She had been lying awake for nearly an hour, trying to dredge up a smidgen of positive energy to face the day. The day loomed ahead, promising to be the most difficult she'd ever faced. Everything seemed to be spiraling out of control—her emotions, her life, her love for a man who didn't love her back. She had been doing such a good job pretending to be happy, she'd almost convinced herself.

Almost, she thought mournfully.

Scooting off the bed, she opened the curtains over the window seat and looked down into the yard, which was already set up for the reception. The weather cooperated by being exceptionally fine for September. Caught up in frenzied wedding preparations for the past two weeks, both the Vocjek and Dooley families had turned the Vocjek back yard into a showplace. Row upon row of late-blooming roses lined the borders and walkways. A bar was set up along the fence

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bordering the Dooley's property. A colorful canopy flapped slightly in the gentle breeze, positioned over the table where the wedding cake would be on display. Following the church ceremony, they expected about a hundred guests to attend the back yard reception.

Cass's heart felt as if it were wrapped in concrete. She could hardly breathe. Even though she ordered herself not to think about Paul, he hovered on the edge of her consciousness. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth trying to keep the salty tears from cascading down her cheeks. *Get a grip*, she ordered herself as she headed down the hall toward the bathroom to shower. *You're marrying your best friend, not being sold into white slavery.*

An hour later, subdued but in control, Cass stared at herself in the mirror. She noticed her mother and Helen Dooley exchanging worried looks behind her head as they dressed her for the wedding in Miriam Vocjek's renovated wedding dress and Helen Dooley's veil. Earlier they had laughed and chattered, now, picking up on her mood, they were quieter as they patted and fussed with the veil and headpiece.

"Beautiful. You are a beautiful bride," Helen Dooley sighed as she twitched the veil to one side and pulled one of Cass's curls to nestle against her cheek. "My son is a very lucky man."

"And Cass is a lucky girl to get someone as wonderful as Dooley," Cass's mom injected loyally.

Cass wished she could have some time alone to give herself a pep talk. This was her wedding day, and she

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couldn't remember when she'd felt more miserable. Her parents were thrilled, Dooley's parents were ecstatic, yet she felt like a fraud, participating in the 'big lie'. This wedding deceived all the people she loved most.

She also hated herself for feeling relieved Pastor Phillips had come down with a severe case of bronchitis immediately after their first visit with him. Because the minister had been confined to his bed, she and Dooley never went for the follow-up visits he'd asked for. He was still under the weather, so a visiting clergyman, Reverend Anderson, had been asked to conduct the ceremony. Somehow it didn't seem quite as bad to make false vows before someone they didn't know.

She didn't dare put on makeup until just before she left for the church. If the tears didn't quit dripping down her face, she'd probably be dehydrated by the time they got there.

With a significant look at Cass's mother, Helen Dooley said something about checking on her grandchildren and left the bedroom.

Miriam Vocjek gently turned Cass away from the mirror and led her to the bed. Her mother's searching scrutiny made Cass feel weak and vulnerable. She stifled an almost overwhelming desire to throw herself in her mother's arms and confess everything.

"Sit down, baby, and tell me what's wrong. If you're not sure about this wedding, we'll call it off. Is that it? Are you having second thoughts?"

Cass thought about the baby growing inside of her. Of Dooley's promise to be a good father even after they separated. The baby shouldn't have to suffer because she was

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being a moron. Getting married was the right thing for all of them. And acting like she needed Prozac certainly hadn't eased her mother's concern.

"No, Mom," she said softly, leaning into her mother's comforting arms. "I'm just a little jittery. I want to get married today. I don't know why I keep crying."

"I cried buckets on my wedding day," Miriam said with a misty-eyed smile. "It's in the gene-pool."

Cass laughed. It sounded a little rusty, but it helped dry up the tears. "You cry at coffee commercials, Mom."

Just then Mindy, Ken's five-year old daughter, stuck her head in the door and said, "Grandma, Dad says he needs help with his custer-bun—that thingy around his middle."

Cass sighed with relief as her mother left. Her relief didn't last long, however, because Dooley's sister Kathleen, pretty in her pink silk sheath, slipped into the room almost immediately. She gave Cass a big smile as she plunked herself on the corner of the bed.

"We're almost sisters-in-law now, Cass, so I can tell you I'm not jealous of you anymore."

"What was that all about anyway, Kath?" Kathleen had been openly unfriendly to Cass over the years they were next-door neighbors. Their relationship warmed somewhat after Kathleen married Doug.

"Now that I'm an old married lady, I can tell you I was jealous of the connection between you and Dooley. Dooley is my brother, but he always cared more for you than he did for me."

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Cass gaped in astonishment. "That's not true, Kathleen. Dooley adores you. He loves your kids. He's even crazy about Doug."

Kathleen laughed. "I know that now. But I had to get married and move away to get some perspective. I really felt left out when we were younger. I never thought you guys would get married, but it's a good thing you are. If Dooley had married anyone else, they'd never put up with your friendship."

"What's wrong with our friendship?" Cass asked defensively.

"It's so exclusive. In the past twenty years, you've never let anyone else in."

"Dooley and I have lots of other friends," Cass retorted, annoyed at the implication.

Kathleen threw her arms around Cass. "Don't get mad. I'm just saying what you have is special. I'm glad both of you finally recognized it for what it is."

That was the irony of her marriage to Dooley. She had been certain everyone would know theirs wasn't a love match, and here they were, all convinced she and Dooley had finally discovered some big romantic thing between them.

A sudden wave of nausea had Cass sinking slowly into the chair next to the vanity, not caring whether she crushed the dress or not. She pasted a smile on her face, waiting for the moment to pass, hoping Kathleen would leave.

With a worried frown, Kathleen asked, "You okay? You've gone white as a ghost."

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Oh, hell, it wasn't going to pass. Cass threw open the bedroom door and raced across the hall to the bathroom, Kathleen right behind her. As she leaned over the toilet, Kathleen had the presence of mind to throw a towel over the front of her dress, and then silently handed her a wet cloth when she finished throwing up.

"Nerves?" Kathleen asked.

Cass held the cool cloth to her temples and avoided looking at her. "My stomach's a little upset. I've not had anything to eat."

"I'll bring you some tea and dry toast. You need to get something in you before the wedding so you don't pass out at the church." Kathleen paused, looking embarrassed. "Cass, are you pregnant?"

Damn, more tears. Cass put the washcloth over her face, and a single sob escaped.

Kathleen removed the pins from the veil and lifted the gossamer lace from Cass's hair. Taking Cass by the hand she dragged her back to the bedroom and closed the door. Laying the veil across the bed, Kathleen turned to face her. "Is this why the wedding took place in such a hurry?"

Cass nodded, rubbing her face with the wet cloth. "Dooley wouldn't let me say anything, and I feel awful about deceiving everyone." Actually, for some bizarre reason, Cass felt a little better now that someone other than Dooley knew she was pregnant.

Kathleen hugged her and said, "He's right. They'll probably guess in a little while anyway. Don't feel bad. Both our families are so happy you two are getting married, they won't

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even care about the baby. In fact, they'll be thrilled to find out they're sharing a grandchild."

Cass's heart wrenched. Their families would probably accept an early baby without lifting an eyebrow as long as they believed the baby she carried belonged to Dooley. It really would destroy both sets of parents if they found out she was pregnant with someone else's child.

Misty-eyed, Kathleen turned Cass toward the mirror, "You'd better fix your face. You don't want to be a blotchy bride."

With a determined effort, Cass shook off the depression that had enveloped her since she woke up, and began applying her makeup. No more crying, she ordered herself as she practiced smiling in the mirror. Dooley was being such a good sport; the least she could do was look happy.

Her decision brought her a feeling of peace, and her naturally cheerful personality struggled to the fore. After all, she wasn't marrying some sleaze who would chain her to the stove and force her to cook calamari. Her biggest complaint about Dooley was his unnatural love for anchovies on his pizza.

Both mothers tiptoed into the room a few minutes later. Their hesitant looks melted into smiles as they watched Cass and Kathleen laughing and talking animatedly about refurnishing Cass's apartment.

Several hours later, Dooley leaned against the bar and watched his new bride talk to her brothers. Cass threw her head back and laughed, and Dooley once again felt the strange stirring of desire that had scissored through him

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when Cass walked down the aisle toward him in the church. She had looked so damn beautiful, he'd nearly hyperventilated. He had to force himself to breathe normally.

Over the years, he'd seen Cass in many different roles, many different outfits. He had thought seeing her in a wedding dress wouldn't make much of an impression on him. Boy, was he wrong. He had never seen anyone look as beautiful as Cass did in her mother's wedding dress and his mother's veil. With her dark hair brushed smoothly off her face and wrapped in some sort of loose knot at the nape of her neck, the near perfection of her bone structure nearly caused his heart to seize. Cass, who had once beaten him in arm wrestling and who could sometimes drink him under the table, looked fragile, ethereal, and utterly alluring.

He had winked at her as they moved together, and to his relief, she had given him a broad grin. They had kissed over the altar at the end of the ceremony pronouncing them man and wife. A sweet kiss, chaste and brief, yet Dooley had felt a sudden visceral longing for the kiss to be real, the wedding to be real.

He watched her punch Ken lightly on the forearm, and Dooley frowned, remembering the encounter he'd had with her brother outside the church just before the ceremony. Ken's hand had gripped his arm like a vise as he uttered a gritty warning. "Maybe everyone thinks this is a match made in heaven, but I know something else is going on, Dooley. You better make sure my sister doesn't get hurt."

Dooley had shrugged him off, tamping down his own anger. He had forced a friendly smile. "Come on, Ken. Just

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because your marriage didn't work out, you don't have to take it out on innocent bystanders." He felt real relief when Ken grinned sheepishly and backed off.

"I'm sorry, kid. You're right. I hope both of you will be very happy."

Dooley wondered, as he gazed at the laughing crowd of people gathered at the reception, if anyone else suspected this was not the happy occasion it appeared to be. Just then, his sister came up behind him and poked him the back.

"How's it feel to be a married man?"

"I'm not sure." He turned to face her. "It's only been about three hours. I'll let you know in a few months."

Kathleen smiled knowingly. "You better take good care of your wife. She's pretty delicate right now."

Dooley raised an eyebrow. "What're you talking about?"

"I'm talking about morning sickness, weight gain and hormonal overdrive. It's not a fun time for any woman, particularly a new bride."

Dooley crossed his arms and rested a hip against the corner of the bar. "Did she tell you, or did you ferret it out all by yourself?"

Kathleen frowned at his tone. "Hey boy, don't get cranky with me! It's no big deal Cass is pregnant. Well, I mean, of course it's a big deal to you, but no one else will care."

She placed her hand on his arm and motioned toward their parents. "Let's go talk to Mom and Dad. They're so thrilled you married Cass, they'll probably change the will and leave everything to you."

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Dooley grinned at the long-standing joke and threw his arm around his sister. "If they do, you can still have the piano."

Kathleen giggled. "Thanks a lot. You know I hate that piano."

Just about to make a comment about his sister's musical abilities, he happened to glance over at Cass, who stood frozen at the far side of the yard. Something was wrong. Her face had lost all color. She actually looked sort of greenish. She threw him a frantic look as she tried to edge away from the group of well-wishing co-workers surrounding her. Dooley, without a word to his sister, neatly sidestepped his two nephews who were heading toward him with a wiffle ball and a plastic bat, and loped over to her.

With a brief nod for her friends, he tucked his arm around her waist and said, "Sweetheart, come and meet Mr. Armory, my boss." He dragged her toward the back of the house.

When they rounded the corner of the porch, out of sight of the wedding guests, he bent toward her. "You okay? You look kinda pukey."

Cass grinned feebly. "I feel kinda pukey. This dress is heavy, and it's so hot, I feel like I'm going to faint." She leaned against him, closing her eyes. He held her loosely, pressing his nose into her hair, inhaling the clean scent of the lemon shampoo she had used since they were kids.

"Are you okay? Do you want to go inside and lie down?"

After a few minutes, Cass opened her eyes and gave him a weak smile as she pulled away. "I'm all right now. It comes

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and goes. But I think we better cut the cake and get ready to leave, before I embarrass both of us."

"Cake! Now I'm feeling pukey."

"Probably because you've been guzzling champagne all afternoon," Cass commented in a good-humored voice as they began to walk leisurely back to the reception area.

"At least I don't have performance anxiety about the honeymoon." Dooley regretted his feeble attempt at a joke as soon as the words were out of his mouth. Cass looked stricken. Her pallor increased.

Dooley stopped her and turned her toward him. "I'm sorry, honey. It was just a joke."

Cass drew a shuddery breath and focused on his face. Her hazel eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and he felt like a bastard.

"Are you okay?" he nearly laughed at the absurdity of his own question.

"I keep wishing everything was different," she said slowly, blinking quickly to keep the tears from falling.

"Everything is great," he said softly. "Each of us married our best friend. We're going to have a baby. I'm getting the promotion of a life-time ..."

"Mr. Armory ..." Cass cut in. "We were supposed to talk to Mr. Armory."

"Armory couldn't come. He's out of town. I just said that to rescue you from making a spectacle of yourself."

She laughed, and relief flooded through Dooley. "Come on, kid, let's go eat cake."

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Suddenly, Cass stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek.
"Thanks," she said softly.

"Thanks?"

"For marrying me. I know this isn't the wedding you envisioned for yourself."

Dooley shook her gently. "This is exactly the wedding I envisioned for myself."

Tears shimmered in her eyes as she shook her head.
"You'd better be careful, Dooley. You're such a romantic, you'll convince yourself that all along you wanted to marry someone who's pregnant."

Dooley felt a chill even though the temperature hovered around eighty. Cass was right. It might be easy to convince himself he really did love her and want her. Then in a year, after the divorce, he'd be on the outside looking in. By then, Cass would be over Paul and probably be ready for a real commitment with someone she could love. Fear rippled through him. He'd always been a vital part of her life—just as she had always been a vital part of his. He hoped marriage would not jeopardize that relationship. He'd already begun to realize he was in deeper emotionally than he should be for his own peace of mind. He'd better start building some defenses pretty damn quick.

Impulsively, he pulled Cass closer, put a hand under her chin, tilted it and kissed her firmly on the mouth before nipping gently at her bottom lip. When her lips parted for an intoxicating moment, he brushed her tongue with his, and she melted against him.

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It ended as soon as it began. She stiffened and pulled away, staring at him in wide-eyed shock. "What was that all about?"

"They're watching us, kiddo. We need to make it look good," he whispered against her mouth. Glancing over her head, he saw both sets of parents really were watching them. Smiles wreathed parental faces. Their mothers nodded at each other as if to say, "See, I knew they were meant for each other."

Dooley felt a strong need to taste her one more time, and again brushed his mouth lightly across hers.

Cass nudged him with her chin, "Are they still watching?"

"Uh-huh," he lied, his lips against her forehead. It took all of his willpower not to try for one more kiss. Her lips were cool, soft, tempting. Keep it light, he ordered himself, breaking away from her as reaction to their kiss caused a stirring in his groin. This was Cass, his childhood playmate, his friend—not his potential lover.

Grabbing her hand, he hauled her laughing and protesting to the four-layered cake, decorated in large red roses on white icing.

His mother yelled, "They're going to cut the cake. Everybody come and watch."

With people on all sides shouting advice, Dooley and Cass sedately cut the cake and fed small pieces to each other.

Cass's nephew howled in disappointment. "They're supposed to rub it in each other's faces! What a gyp!"

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After the cake cutting, Cass threw her bouquet over her shoulder. Sammy, one of the aerobics instructors from the spa, leaped over three other women to snag it.

A few minutes later, Cass and Dooley went back into the Vocjek house to change. They met a half hour later outside Cass's old bedroom. Dooley had changed into a lightweight summer jacket and casual slacks, and Cass into a beige, two-piece suit, which hit her just above the knees, showing off her long legs. Her hair fell into a tumble of curls over her shoulder, and Dooley wondered at the ironic twist of fate, which had turned his best friend into a beautiful, desirable woman just when he would have the most trouble dealing with the realization.

"You're looking very serious all of a sudden. Are you okay?" Cass asked.

No, he wasn't okay. And he wouldn't be for a long time. Living with Cass on a daily basis suddenly seemed like a Herculean task. Why in the hell, after all these years should he suddenly notice Cass had damn fine legs?

"I'm terrific," he lied, then attempted to change the subject. "What are we going to do with all the presents? I think I saw three toasters."

"My folks said we could leave them here for a week. We have to decide where to put all the stuff."

Looking over the banister at the people gathering at the bottom of the stairs, he said, "We better go down and tell everyone goodbye."

Cass shot him a questioning look. "What do you want to do after? It's only five o'clock."

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Dooley choked back an answer as a vision of Cass and him naked in bed, their legs and arms twined around each other flashed through his mind.

"We really could go to New Jersey," he joked, trying to shake off his mood. They had told their families they would honeymoon in Atlantic City at the Trump Plaza, but they were just going to hang out for a week and buy new furniture.

Cass laughed and slid her arm through his as they headed down the stairs.

It took them ten minutes to work their way through the mob of well-wishers throwing rice and birdseed. Dooley took Cass's hand and ushered her into the passenger side of his Volvo, which had been thoroughly decorated with balloons, pop cans and old shoes.

He jogged around to the driver's side, tapped the Just-Married sign decorating the back trunk with his forefinger, and slipped into the seat. "How about we head back to your apartment and decide what we want to do with the rest of the day?"

"All right. Except it's not just my apartment anymore." A quick glance informed Dooley the animation was gone and she'd turned quiet, subdued. He couldn't blame her. After all, this certainly hadn't been the future she'd probably envisioned for herself. Married. It generated a strong dose of reality in both of them to realize they were bound together by promises they didn't mean to keep.

The silence bothered him. "You looked beautiful today, Cass. Even when you turned green, it was a pretty shade."

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She laughed softly, and then laid her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. "I love you, Dooley."

An electric charge went through him. Through the years, in the true spirit of their friendship, they had often said those words to each other. Why, all of a sudden did they seem more meaningful? Suddenly infused with a spirit of well being, Dooley pulled the car into the parking lot of their apartment building and began loudly humming the wedding march. Dum Dum de Dum.

Cass glanced over at him, shook her head, and grinned. "How much champagne did you have?"

He waved a full bottle at her, "Not enough. I brought some home. You'll have to have lemonade."

He took her hand as he helped her out of the car, and then thinking better of the situation, thrust the champagne bottle into her arms and scooped her up.

She shrieked and shouted even as she laughed, "Put me down, you dope! You'll give yourself a hernia."

"I have to carry you over the threshold. It's the law."

Puffing and out of breath, he staggered up the stairs and ordered her to unlock the door to the apartment. The instant the door opened, he carried her inside and lowered her to the floor, both of them laughing like fools. Dooley congratulated himself on smoothly bypassing another awkward moment. Now, if they could only figure out something to do for the rest of the day and night that would make him stop thinking about kissing her and running his hands over various parts of her body.

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Chapter Seven

The heat in the apartment made it feel like a sauna. Cass had forgotten to turn on the air conditioning when she left. Kicking off her shoes and heading into the small kitchenette with the champagne, she said over her shoulder, "Turn on the air-conditioning, Dooley. I'll get some glasses."

She needed a break, a moment by herself. All day long, surrounded by people, she'd begun to feel suffocated. Leaving the champagne on the counter, she went into the bathroom and closed the door. She felt exhausted, yet keyed up. A glance in the mirror over the sink revealed her makeup and hair had wilted in the heat, and the dark circles under her eyes were a combination of sleepless nights and runny mascara. She looked like an overheated raccoon.

The air-conditioning began to hum, and she heard Dooley rummaging around in the kitchen.

"Cass, do you want me to make up this frozen lemonade, or would you rather have orange juice?" he yelled through the bathroom door.

Bless his heart. Anything cold would be a lifesaver. He really was a dear. A voice inside her whispered, *He's also your husband. And he deserves someone who's trying to be as cheerful as he is.*

"I'll take the lemonade with lots of ice," she called back, as she scrubbed her face and reapplied just a little eye makeup.

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Coming out of the bathroom, she dredged up a smile and reached for the tall glass he handed her. "Thanks. This is great."

He had slipped off his shoes and jacket, removed his tie and rolled up the sleeves on his white dress shirt. He looked cool and comfortable leaning against her counter drinking champagne out of her McDonald's Cinderella glass.

He raised the glass toward her, and she touched it with her lemonade glass. "A toast," he said. "To us. Friends forever."

"Friends forever," she echoed. They touched thumbs in ritualistic tribute to their friendship, then gazed at each other over the edge of their glasses. As much as Cass kept reminding herself it was only Dooley, the same Dooley she had known since kindergarten, this situation felt strange. The word *husband* rolled around in her head like a single marble in a jar.

Dooley set his glass down, lifted one hand to her chin, tilted it and pressed his lips against hers in a kiss. Tender, light, and questioning.

A frisson of desire tingled down her spine even as her mind told her this was a bad idea. She and Dooley shouldn't be kissing. They were just friends. It would complicate everything. But she was hot and tired, and the pressure from his lips felt good. With a soft sigh she leaned into him, and he began to cover her mouth with his in a much less tentative move.

Wait a minute! Wait a minute! This is dangerous!

She stiffened, backing away from him. "Dooley, this isn't a good idea. You've had so much champagne anyone would

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look good to you. This is me, Cass, not someone who just happens to be around when you feel the urge."

He leaned back so he could get a good look at her face. For a long moment, it looked as if he might argue, then he dropped his arms with a resigned sigh and muttered, "You're right. I'm sorry. You better make me some coffee."

As she reached past him to plug in the coffee maker, she smiled. "I'd better make you coffee? A marriage certificate doesn't make you helpless. You make better coffee than I do."

"That's right, Marge, and don't you forget it," he quipped, obviously relieved they could move past the awkward moment. What the hell had he been thinking of to kiss her like that?

"Why don't we go to the zoo?" he suggested, as they sat at the small table, companionably drinking coffee.

"On our honeymoon?" She rolled her eyes, but the idea did appeal. Over the years, the zoo had been their favorite place to meet when their lives became too busy to connect on a regular basis. They would call each other and leave cryptic voicemail messages: "The monkeys are thirsty. Tuesday, noon. Be there." Cass often thought anyone listening to the messages would assume they were drug dealers.

"Okay. Let's change and we can leave in a half hour," she said.

He nodded. "I'll be glad to get out of this suit." Then he grinned. "Although the monkeys have never seen me dressed up, maybe I should leave it on."

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Cass just shook her head laughing and followed him into the room they had designated as his for the next nine months. She sat on the oversized, single bed with the thick foam mattress she had insisted he buy for an exorbitant amount. A dark green bedspread matched the masculine print drapes over the small window. She glanced around, noting he had moved the desk and book shelf from his apartment under the window. Cass also noticed that he avoided looking at the bed as he passed it to rummage in the chest of drawers until he pulled out a navy t-shirt and a pair of khaki shorts. Finally he turned to her and said, "I'll go into the bathroom to change."

She popped off the bed like a jack-in-the box, a flush staining her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. You change in here, and I'll go change in my room."

What was she thinking—that he'd just strip in front of her?

After changing into a pair of cutoffs and a pink shirt, she headed back to the kitchen. The door to Dooley's bedroom was open, and she glanced in as she passed. He had his arms above his head, about to drag the shirt down. Cass stopped, her tongue unconsciously moistening her lips. In all the times she'd seen Dooley with his shirt off, why had she'd never noticed he had a great looking chest? Dark blond hair spread in whorls across his pecs, then arrowed down to his waist. She'd had certainly seen enough half naked men in her aerobics class not to be turned on by a hairy chest, but something internal kicked into high gear, drawing her eyes to his belt line and below.

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Suddenly, she noticed Dooley shifting uncomfortably, and realized she was staring.

"Let's go see the chimps," she said, quickly shifting her eyes to his face. He nodded, a slight smile on his face, but she could see the tiny muscle high on his cheek had tightened.

"Let's do it," he agreed, grabbing her hand and dragging her toward the door. "Let other fools go to Trump Plaza on their honeymoon. The truly enlightened go to the zoo."

Cass laughed. Everything would be all right.

The zoo turned out to be a mistake. The heat and humidity in the cage area escalated Cass's nausea to the point where she began to see black spots float in front of her eyes.

Dooley, engrossed in trying to entice the chimps to mimic him by mimicking them, hadn't noticed Cass's increasing pallor as they traveled from the lion house to the monkey house. Sweat beaded her forehead and her hands felt clammy. It was becoming imperative she find a rest room before she threw up all over the floor.

"Dooley ..." She whispered his name as a plea as she laid a tentative hand on his arm.

He turned from the monkey cages smiling toward her and then swore as he saw her ashen face and felt her fingers tremble against his arm.

"Easy, Cass," he murmured, frantically dabbing at the perspiration on her temples with his finger tips. "What can I do?"

"I need to find a bathroom. I'm going to be sick," she said hoarsely.

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Supporting her, practically carrying her, Dooley moved her toward the door marked *Women* near the entrance to the Monkey house.

"You can't go in there," Cass protested feebly.

"Ladies," Dooley called in a loud voice as he nudged the door open with his shoulder. "My wife is about to pass out. I need to come in with her to help her."

"Come right on in, honey," a deep, rich voice encouraged as he led Cass to a sagging vinyl couch in the corner of the lounge area. A large African American woman in a flowered dress hustled him out of the way and bent over Cass crooning, "What's the matter, child? You want me to call 911?"

"She's pregnant," Dooley said matter-of-factly.

The enormous good Samaritan chuckled. "Well, isn't that nice. I have five children myself, but I wasn't sick a day with any of them."

Cass moaned and let her head hang over the edge of the couch, trying not to hate the helpful woman.

Dooley soaked a wad of paper towels with cold water and laid it across her forehead. "You wait here. I'll bring the car around to the back gate."

Cass mumbled an agreement, once again grateful for Dooley's care-taking nature. She didn't know any other man who would have accompanied her into the ladies' room.

When they got back to the apartment, she headed straight for bed. She didn't care that Dooley would spend their wedding night watching television. She'd been nervous earlier, wondering how they were gracefully going to end the

evening without both of them feeling cheated. Now, she just didn't care.

Still dressed in the cutoffs and shirt she'd worn to the zoo, she sprawled diagonally across the queen size bed in her bedroom.

"Do you think we should call a doctor?" Dooley asked anxiously from his perch on the corner of her bed. Cass still looked washed out. Dark smudges had popped up under her eyes which appeared glazed and dull with fatigue.

"I just want to sleep," she said wearily. A few seconds later, her eyes closed, and she was gone.

For a half hour, Dooley watched her sleep, struck again by the beauty of her face. Then, he went into the kitchen and called Kathleen.

As soon as his sister heard his voice, she demanded, "What's wrong?"

Despite his concern for Cass, he smiled. "What makes you think something's wrong? Don't all guys call their sisters on their wedding nights?"

"Stop clowning around. Is Cass all right?"

"She nearly passed out from the heat, and now she's sleeping like she's dead. I'm wondering if I should call the doctor, or maybe take her to emergency."

"Is she cramping or spotting?"

"No. I think she's just exhausted."

"You've both had a pretty hectic day. She should be worn out. I can barely drag myself around during the early stages of my pregnancies." She started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Dooley demanded.

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"I think there's a good movie on T.V. if you get bored. I can hardly wait to tell Doug about your wedding night."

"Kathleen, you tell anyone about this, and Doug will be looking for a new wife. You understand me?"

She hung up still chuckling, and Dooley went back to the bedroom to check on Cass. Still dead to the world. She looked uncomfortable in her clothes, so he began to remove her cutoffs, trying not to wake her up.

His hands shook as he unzipped the denim shorts and slid them off. A sweat broke out when he caught sight of her white bikini panties.

Cass had long, shapely legs, toned through years of aerobic exercise. He wanted to lick the pale skin of her inner thigh to see if it was as soft as it looked. A sudden insane craving urged him to peel off the panties and touch her intimately. A rush of heat surged through him as he fought against the temptation of need and desire, coupled with the allure of the forbidden. This was going to be way more difficult than he'd imagined. He'd have to keep his guard up so this whole marriage thing wouldn't blow up in his face.

Swallowing a groan, he tugged her shirt down as far as it would go, but it barely covered her stomach. The panties were still visible. Guilt swept over him. Hell, he felt perverted. Cass lay asleep, sick, and exhausted. His best friend, pregnant with another man's child, and he got a hard on helping her undress. He'd blithely assured her staying celibate for a year wouldn't be a problem. Now, he wondered if he needed his head examined.

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In her sleep, she made a small, helpless sound, and Dooley hurried to pull a light blanket over her before he threw himself on top of her. He left the bedroom door open, wandering into the kitchen.

The bottle of champagne sat on the counter, an ironic reminder he was now a married man. He rinsed out the Cinderella glass and poured himself a hefty drink, then another. With the glass in his right hand, and the champagne bottle in the other, he headed into the living room and turned on the television.

At ten, more than two-thirds drunk, he turned off the television. He eyed the empty champagne bottle and felt lonely—not a feeling he was used to. If he had ever felt the need for company, there were plenty of people he could call. He'd had his share of relationships and managed to stay friends with most of the women in his life. And of course, Cass had always been there. Good old Cass. His best friend, Cass. His little wifey.

He needed to check on her before he went to bed. Standing up too quickly, he staggered and then caught himself. Hell, he must be drunker than he thought.

The light from the living room slanted into the bedroom and over the bed where Cass snuggled under the blanket. One shoulder poked out with just a slim white strap showing. Her shirt lay on the floor next to the bed. She must have awakened earlier and pulled it off. Long, dark tendrils of hair spread across her face and over the pillow.

Dooley laid a hand on her forehead. It felt cool. He brushed her hair back, smoothing it down the sides of her

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face. She smiled slightly and nuzzled his hand. He gently ran a finger over her lips.

He should leave, but his own room didn't look near as inviting, and there was plenty of space in the bed next to her. He was exhausted. He wouldn't wake her up. With a weary sigh, he sat on the bed and removed his shoes, shorts and shirt, dropping them in a heap. Clad only in his briefs and socks, and being careful not to touch her, he lay down on the far side of the bed on top of the blanket and fell asleep.

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Chapter Eight

At three a.m., Dooley shuddered awake, the insistent throbbing in his groin making him drowsily aware Cass had nestled her very delectable bottom into his lap. Although he had gone to sleep on top of the blankets, they now lay in a heap at the bottom of the bed.

His right arm was thrown over Cass, and he cradled her breast comfortably in his palm. She slept peacefully. A soft murmur issued from her as she pressed her breast more fully into his hand, her nipple peaking through the silky material of her bra. He rubbed his thumb gently over the stiff peak until she whimpered and raised her hand to cover his, holding it still against her.

Dooley groaned as his whole body jolted then surged violently to life. Blood pounded through his system, and he was so hard it hurt. He circled her waist and pulled her more securely against his arousal. He knew he was in serious trouble and should leave her bed immediately, but his body obstinately refused to acknowledge the half-hearted urging of his conscience.

Cass sighed, then turned and rolled into Dooley's arms, obviously not fully awake. Heedless at this point of anything beyond the pleasure he was feeling, he covered her lips with his and murmured against her mouth, "Let me love you."

"Nice," she murmured through the kisses. "Very nice."

Although he wanted to plunder her lips and bring the kisses deeper, Dooley kept his mouth gentle as it skimmed

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across her lips, then along her jaw and up to her temple before drifting back to nip softly at her bottom lip. She opened her mouth, and his tongue slipped easily inside, touching hers and turning the heat to a roaring fire. Shimmering wires seem to vibrate just under his skin as she dug her fingernails into his back.

In a few seconds they were both naked, straining in a wild, unexpected frenzy, caught up in a whirlpool of sensations. Her hands slid down his back then skimmed over the taut muscles to stroke his hip and thighs. He surged against her, and felt her arms tremble around him as he covered her face and neck with soft, lingering kisses. Dooley's brain shouted a warning to stop before things got totally out of control. He tuned it out, his body too desperate now to back away. The need to bury himself in Cass drove him. He murmured words of encouragement, and her body arched closer.

Slow down. Make it good for her. He made a half-hearted effort toward control, but he was too hot, too ready.

He scattered kisses all over her face before returning to her mouth, plunging his tongue in and out while she frantically tried to follow with hers, whimpering in her effort to get closer. He moved down her neck and chest with soft, nips, then gently sucked a protruding nipple into his mouth and worshiped it with his mouth.

She moaned, her eyes still closed.

"Come on, Cass. Let go," he urged into the curve of her neck. His hand moved down between her legs and cupped her wet readiness. With one finger, he gently stroked her until

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she parted her legs and pleaded softly, "Please ... Paul ... I need you."

Her words registered with the impact of an ice cold deluge. Dooley stiffened and pulled away from her. Damn! She thought he was Paul. The most incredible foreplay of his life, and she was giving credit to another man. No wonder she hadn't opened her eyes—she was fantasizing about someone other than her husband.

Anger, swift and unreasonable, prompted him to shake her fully awake. "Listen to me, my friend. When I make love to a woman she damn well better know who's in her bed!" He shook her again, and she finally awakened fully.

She opened her eyes and stared into Dooley's face. "Wha—what's the matter?" she gasped, her voice raspy from sleep. She sat up, and then, as the sheet fell to her lap, she glanced down at her naked breasts with a horrified expression.

Dooley still felt the burn as he lay beside her, his head propped up on his arm, gauging her reaction.

Cass grabbed a corner of the sheet and pulled it up to her neck. "Damn it, Dooley, what have you done?"

He answered coolly, "It's not what I've done, but what we almost did together that may bother you a little."

Her eyes widened incredulously. Pushing the hair off her forehead, she secured the sides behind her ear, and whispered, "What ... what are you talking about?"

Dooley flung himself back on the bed and bunched the pillow under his neck. "What do you think I'm talking about? Look at us. We're both naked. I bet you're feeling some sensations you haven't felt in a while. I know I am."

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She paled, then flushed before turning over on her stomach and burying her face in the pillow. "I was asleep. I thought it was a dream," came her muffled reply.

Dooley's anger disappeared. Hell, it wasn't Cass's fault they'd almost made love. She'd been half asleep, and he'd taken advantage. What kind of a cretin hits on his best friend when she's sleeping? His hand tentatively settled in the small of her back, and he stroked her in small, comforting circles.

"Don't cry, Cassie. Let's talk about it. I certainly didn't plan this, it just happened. I'm sorry."

A muffled sob escaped from the pillow. "We—we can't make love. We're getting divorced in a year. It will ruin our friendship."

Dooley lay back against the pillows, relieved she wasn't crying about Paul. He hadn't even thought of the divorce. A faint smile curved his lips as he thought of the intensity of his desire for her. Who would have thought he and Cass ...

She sat up and stared down at him, her cheeks flushed and her eyes dark with the remnants of aroused passion and the beginnings of anger. The sheet again fell to her waist. She glared at him. "What are you smiling about? There's nothing funny about this situation."

She was totally unaware her breasts were almost even with his mouth. "I'm not smiling."

"Right. It's more like a smirk."

"Maybe," he said, eyeing the rosy perfection of her nipples.

"Pervert." She shoved him roughly and tugged the sheet back over her breasts. "What happened to all your noble declarations about remaining chaste for a year? We haven't

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even been married for twenty-four hours yet. What were you doing in my bed anyway?"

"I was drunk ..." He knew it was a mistake the moment the words left his mouth. She went from pink to white, and stared at him in disbelief.

He quickly backpedaled. "I mean I was a little drunk when I went to bed, or I wouldn't even have gotten in your bed." He paused for a second, looked straight into her eyes and finished more strongly. "I was cold sober when we began making love."

"We were not together in that," she said. "I was asleep." She lay back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling, her expression mournful. "It feels as though I've just lost my best friend. This changes everything between us."

Dooley looked at her profile and felt a growing panic. He couldn't lose Cass. She was part of him. Strands of her were so closely interwoven throughout his life, losing her would be like losing a major organ—a heart or lung.

"Don't say that," he growled, raking his fingers through his hair. "Nothing really happened so nothing is changed."

Damn it, nothing had changed except he now had this incredible desire to re-write or even eliminate the No-Sex parameters of their agreement. They were married. He hadn't committed any great sin. He just had to convince Cass that making love wouldn't destroy their friendship.

Cass felt sad and confused, as if something had actually happened to Dooley. She refused to even contemplate the word *lovmaking* in connection with him. Then, as if to belie her thoughts, tiny ripples of heat whispered through her.

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Despite her disclaimer, she had really only been half asleep, believing herself caught in a particularly realistic sexual fantasy. Her nipples tightened as she remembered the sensation of his hands moving over her body, his lips at her breast. She had lost control with him. Paul had never done that for her. To have such skill, Dooley must have had a lot of practice. In fact, she knew he'd had a lot of practice.

She glanced at his profile. He lay on his back, his forearm over his eyes, the sheet draped to his waist, one leg uncovered from the thigh down. She noticed how his hip led in a smooth curve to a hard thigh and muscular calf. His left elbow curved behind his head. For a moment, it was like looking at a stranger, a nice looking, sexy stranger.

She frowned. Still not sure what happened or why it happened. He said he was drunk. Maybe he didn't realize he'd fallen in bed with her. She needed time to think and tried to steady her voice as she said, "Dooley, why don't you move to your own room? We'll discuss everything in the morning."

Dooley's arm dropped to his side as he levered himself up on both elbows and stared at her, his face unreadable. He seemed on the verge of saying something more, but he just nodded and got up. He walked naked out the door, and once again, Cass had the feeling of watching a stranger's naked back and buttocks move away from her.

But Dooley wasn't a stranger, and they had agreed to have a marriage in name only. Everything would change now, become uncomfortable unless they could pretend this night hadn't happened, that they hadn't nearly made love. Cass longed for the comfort of her old friend. If he wasn't smack

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dab in the middle of her problem, she would probably call him up and ask for advice.

Suddenly, she felt the rolling in her stomach that usually preceded a bout of nausea, reminding her that the stress probably wasn't all that good for the baby either. A minute later, he let Cass know his feelings. Scrambling out of bed, she barely made it to the toilet.

She hadn't eaten enough, and her stomach continued to retch with nothing coming up to relieve the nausea. Collapsed on the floor, her head leaning against the wall, she rested briefly, and then grabbed for the porcelain bowl as she began to retch and gag once more.

Behind her, she heard water running, and then Dooley thrust a half-filled glass of water in front of her. "Drink this so you'll have something to throw up," he said quietly, moving damp tendrils of her hair off her face with a warm wash cloth. He sat on the floor behind her and wrapped his arms loosely around her naked, heaving shoulders, offering support as the nausea rolled through her like a tsunami.

When it finally ended, Cass, feeling as limp as the washcloth Dooley still held, leaned back against his chest, and in less than a minute, fell asleep.

Dooley groaned as he tried to stand and lift Cass at the same time. His leg was numb from sitting, and he almost stumbled before he was able to stand upright and carry her back to the bedroom. He laid her down gently, carefully avoiding looking at the spot where they had nearly made love. He wanted to slip into the bed next to her and hold her until she woke up in the morning. There was nothing sexual

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about this desire, he just wanted to offer what comfort he could.

Instead, he rummaged through her drawer until he found a cotton U-MASS night shirt and slipped it over her head. Then, he pulled the blanket over her, and went back to his own room. It was close to five. Dawn was making a coy attempt to ease back the night as he flung himself on the bed, knowing he wouldn't be able to get any more sleep. Wouldn't be able to dispel the images of Cass, naked and warm in his arms. After tossing and turning for half an hour, he got up and took a cold shower.

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Chapter Nine

Cass woke gradually to the sound of her stomach growling. Pushing herself up on her elbows, she tipped her nose in the air—bacon and coffee—two of her favorite wake-up aromas. She waited a few minutes to see if the baby wanted to remind her of his presence, but all seemed peaceful on that front. Dropping back on the pillow, she wallowed for a moment in a sense of well-being. Dooley in the kitchen, cooking breakfast—what a great way to awaken. His cooking skills were far superior to hers. Swinging her feet over the side of the bed, she glanced down at the faded U-Mass logo on the t-shirt which barely skimmed her thighs. *Where did this come from?*

Then she remembered—Dooley poised over her, his strong, muscled body pressed intimately against her. She shivered, remembering the not quite completed act. Had she really confused him with Paul? Even though she loved Paul, their sex life hadn't been particularly stimulating. Now with Dooley, her best friend, who was so drunk he didn't even know who he was making love to, she finally understood all the hype. But sex with Dooley would wreck everything—they were blood brothers, practically relatives. They'd end up on Dr. Phil's show.

She shook her head, deliberately redirecting her thoughts from the way she felt about Dooley's hands on her breasts to his sympathetic support when she was sick and throwing up. That was her Dooley. For more than twenty years, they'd

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been closer than most brothers and sisters. What happened between them last night was an aberration. A one-time thing, and she had overreacted. She could even understand why it had happened. Mix too much champagne with a man and a woman in bed and propinquity does its thing. Feeling magnanimous about her own understanding, she made a conscious decision to put the whole event behind her. After all, nothing had happened, really. It was just some kissing, some fondling. They hadn't had sex. Although it was darn close, her conscience reminder her.

She scrambled into plaid shorts and a yellow t-shirt, quickly washed her face and brushed her teeth in the bathroom, then dragged a brush through her hair, all the while avoiding the mirror. She actually felt good this morning.

She looked down and patted her flat stomach. "Good baby. No morning sickness today." She realized this was the first time she had referred to the baby as an actual person. It had always been *The Pregnancy* as if it were a disease she had to cure. She grinned at her bare feet then chuckled out loud. Barefoot and pregnant—practically a living cliché.

Cass smiled into the mirror, feeling cheerful for the first time since the pregnancy test changed her world. Marriage, even a marriage of convenience, had alleviated much of the dark cloud hanging over her for a month. She felt a sudden surge of optimism and realized Dooley was responsible for this sense of well-being. As much as he denied it, he had given up a lot to marry her, and she'd make sure he didn't regret it.

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With a spring to her step, Cass walked into the kitchen. Dooley's back was to the door, and he didn't hear her. He'd dressed in a faded red t-shirt and old jeans. Cass covered her mouth to keep from giggling, as she watched him pile pancakes onto a plate in the center of an elegant silver tray which must have been a wedding present.

A bright pink, ruffled apron draped his front, and his hair stuck up in the back.

She said teasingly, "We'd better get you a more masculine apron if we don't want our friends wondering about you."

He whirled around, the spatula still in his hand and eyed her warily. "You okay?" His shoulders stiffened, bracing for her answer.

"I feel really good this morning." She smiled at him, and he visibly relaxed, returning her smile.

"Good," he said smugly, "because I'm preparing a breakfast that would make Julia Child green with jealousy." Offering her an exaggerated bow, he seated her at the table, removed the place setting from the tray, and set it in front of her. With a wide-armed flourish, he whipped a small vase of artificial flowers from the top of the microwave and placed it in the center of the small kitchen table.

Draping a dishtowel over his arm, he nodded slightly. "Does Madame wish orange juice or milk with her pancakes, eggs and bacon this morning?"

Grinning at the phony British accent, she asked for milk. "The baby will think he's died and gone to heaven. All I've been eating is dry toast and weak tea in the morning."

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His head shot up at her casual mention of the baby.

"So, um, you think we're going to have a boy?"

"Yup. And I even have a name picked out—Jefferson."

"Jefferson?" He scoffed, taking the chair opposite her.

"That's just setting him up to be a chauffeur or a butler. If we have a boy, he needs a masculine name like Rocky, or Charles, then we can call him Chuck."

"What do you mean, if we have a boy? I just told you it's a boy."

"How do you know? It's too early for an ultrasound."

"Women always know these things," Cass said loftily. "And we can't name him Chuck. Chuck Dooley sounds like a prize fighter." They both laughed. It was the first genuine laughter they'd shared since the day they decided to get married.

She forked a couple of pancakes and two strips of bacon on her plate and watched Dooley pile four strips of bacon and four pancakes on his. He stood and retrieved the milk from the refrigerator. He carefully poured her a glass, then sat and began spreading butter and syrup over the top of his own pancakes. Finally, he looked directly at her and said, "Ya know, Cass, for a minute just then I felt like it really was my kid. I got a charge just thinking about naming him or her."

Her stomach did a funny little flip that had nothing to do with the baby. She reached across the table and laid her hand over his. "Me too. Today is the first day I've felt good about being pregnant. Well, maybe good's not the right word. It's the first time I've actually thought about the baby as a real person."

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He curled his fingers around her hand, lifted it to his mouth, and kissed it, managing to get a smear of butter and syrup across her knuckles. As his tongue snaked out to lick her hand, heat zipped through her and pooled in her abdomen. She tugged her hand from his and stared down at the pancakes. What was happening here?

"Cass?" Dooley leaned over and tilted her chin up. His clear, hazel eyes peered into hers. "We have to talk about last night."

She stared back at him and whispered, "I can't. I'm not even sure what happened."

Dooley dropped his hand from her face and leaned back in his chair. "You don't remember?"

Attempting nonchalance she didn't feel, Cass shrugged. "I remember. I'm just not sure how it's going to affect us."

Dooley stood and walked over to the coffee maker. After pouring a cup for himself, he crossed his legs and leaned against the counter. "Do you remember when my mother started going through menopause?"

She chuckled. "You thought she had a brain tumor."

Dooley grinned over his coffee. "All those mood swings were pretty scary."

Cass tried to stifle her giggle. "You'd think an eighteen-year-old would have known something about hormones."

"I knew about mine, I just never suspected my mother had them."

Still smiling, Cass asked, "What's your mother's menopause got to do with anything?"

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Dooley put his coffee cup down, walked over to her and squatted down beside her chair. "I was terrified my mom had a brain tumor or something. It freaked me out, and you were the only one I could confide in. You got your mother to tell me all that weird menopause stuff was normal. I know you think I'm the one making the big sacrifice here, but you've always been there for me too."

Cass nodded, touched he would even remember the episode. His face was close enough for her to smell his coffee breath, and for a split second she fought an urge to lean forward and brush her lips across his. She sat back, feeling nervous and uncertain. Her voice wobbled as she said, "I still don't understand how this ties into our situation."

He sat back in his own chair and said calmly, "I'm trying to make the point we've always been able to talk about anything. We practically read each other's minds—like a Vulcan mind-blend."

She snorted. "Really? A Vulcan mind-blend?"

He held up his hand, indicating he wasn't finished. "Whatever it is we have, it's too special to mess up with a physical relationship. Last night, when you said we couldn't be friends the same way, it terrified me. I need your friendship. I count on it. We need to put last night into perspective, and then forget about it. "

Although she agreed with him, Cass felt a little chagrined that he appeared to be unaffected by their lovemaking. Obviously, it hadn't had the same impact on him it had on her. He wanted them to forget about it, act like it had never happened. That morning, she had felt great about putting the

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event behind them. She would be the reasonable one, defining the terms of their marriage, and Dooley had just beaten her to the punch.

She shrugged. "I've already put it into perspective. I know why it happened, and I've forgotten it."

Dooley frowned and raised an eyebrow. "Just like that?" He sounded annoyed.

Bolstered by the realization that Mr. Cool was not as unaffected as he pretended to be, Cass stood up and headed toward the door. "Just like that," she said serenely, glancing at him over her shoulder.

He stood up and followed her into the living room. "So what kind of perspective have you put it in? Why do you think it happened?"

She plopped down on the flowered couch and said airily, "Propinquity."

"Propinquity? What the hell does that mean?"

He sat on the couch next to her and simultaneously they both propped their bare feet on the low maple coffee table in front of them.

"You know. A drunken man gets into bed with a half naked woman. Neither of them realizes who the other is ... Nature takes its course ..."

"I wasn't drunk. At least I not when we...." He paused, and she could see the red creeping up his neck.

Cass patted his hand and then clutched his fingers, wanting to reassure him, "It doesn't matter, Dooley. I love you, but neither of us is *in love* with the other. I'm not over Paul. In fact, I may never get over him. But after the baby

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comes, you'll be able to find someone you can love with all the bells and whistles, like it's suppose to be. And our friendship will stay just the same."

Dooley nodded. "You're right. So we're still best friends?"

"Forever." She smiled, the ritual as old as their friendship.

For the first time that morning, Dooley relaxed. Cass was right. He refused to allow a half hour of indiscretion to jeopardize a relationship he had cherished for more than twenty years. If he really tried, he could make himself forget how her face looked, tense yet exhilarated and dreamy-eyed, as she raised her mouth to his. He felt his pulse escalate and shook his head to clear it. Damn! It was going to be harder than he thought to forget last night.

Dooley's gaze swept down the length of Cass's shapely legs and remembered how they had entwined with his. *You better be careful, boy. Real careful.*

Leaping off the couch, he grabbed Cass by the hand and hauled her up with him. "You shower. Then let's go into Boston and find something to do."

She gave him a big smile. "I love Boston. Maybe we could go to the Natural History Museum on campus."

Dooley laughed and shook his head. "We promised we'd never go back, and I never break my promises," he ended loftily.

On the way to her bedroom to gather clean clothes, Cass called over her shoulder. "That was ten years ago. I bet they don't even remember us."

"How much?"

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She stopped on the threshold and turned, eyeing him with speculatively. "How about twenty?"

"How about fifty?"

"Dooley, we're married now," Cass said plaintively. "You can't keep making money off me. You know, what's mine is yours, et cetera ..."

"Okay, twenty."

She nodded and grinned. Cass's competitive nature often spurred her to make impulsive bets, and her little strut as she entered her bedroom told him she was certain she'd win.

As he changed into navy slacks and an open-necked golf shirt, he tried to tally the wagers they had made over the years. Too many to count, but he usually won, despite Cass's confidence.

Just outside of Boston, they stopped for gas. Dooley went in to pay and brought back two raspberry slurpies. Cass grabbed for hers. "Thank you. Thank you," she exclaimed, making kissing noises at him. "I can't believe it's still this hot in September. Even with the window down, it's like a sauna in here."

"You should have come in with me."

"Couldn't. My feet are swollen," she said, showing him her right foot which bulged slightly in the open-toed sandal.

Frowning, Dooley raised her foot to his lap and gently poked at the swollen flesh. His finger made an imprint which didn't immediately disappear. "This isn't good."

Cass craned her neck to look at her foot, "What isn't good?"

"Swollen feet this early in your pregnancy."

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She glared at him and pulled her foot from his lap. "For Pete's sake, lots of non-pregnant women get swollen feet in the summer. If you're going to be like this for the next seven months, I'll have to go on Prozac."

"I'll be the one on Prozac if you don't take care of yourself," Dooley said as he started the car and headed toward the University of Massachusetts.

They rode in silence for five minutes until Cass said in a small voice, "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I'm just not used to you worrying about my health. I'm always healthy. You're the sick one."

"When am I ever sick?" Dooley asked incredulously. "I'm never sick except for a few weeks in the winter."

Cass nodded smugly. "You have weak lungs. Your mother told me years ago when I poured ice water on your head from the upstairs window."

Dooley started to laugh, remembering Cass's terrified expression when his mother reamed her out for trying to kill him. After a few seconds Cass joined him. He reached over and gently held her hand against his thigh. Dooley was extremely health conscious and took a variety of vitamins daily. He also worked out nearly every day, often joining Cass's aerobics class. As careful as he was with his health, it bugged him that every winter he spent two weeks gasping for breath in the grip of some weird asthmatic condition that showed up as regularly as tax time.

"Well, I'm not getting sick this year. I have to take care of my little preggo wife who won't be able to wear shoes at all if she doesn't see a doctor soon."

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He heard Cass sigh. From the corner of his eye, he could see her nod. They really hadn't discussed doctors and insurance and all the other kinds of medical stuff. He had talked to Mallory just before the wedding, indicating he and Cass had precipitated their marriage vows, and had been assured the pregnancy would be covered under his policy. Dooley smiled to himself, amazed at how comfortable he felt assuming the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood.

For years, he had bailed out of any relationship which seemed to be heading toward matrimony. He prided himself on the fact he had successfully sidestepped the pitfalls of that type of commitment, yet remained friends with the women he'd been with. Now he'd voluntarily plunged into the role he had so assiduously avoided. Of course it was only a temporary marriage, although it was becoming increasingly more difficult to remember that fact.

Once more, he relived the incredible sensation of Cass's breast blossoming in his hand, the hardened nipple rubbing erotically against his palm. Hell, he was doing it again. If he kept going there, he wouldn't be able to keep his promise to Cass that their near lovemaking episode was forgotten. He grabbed the watery slurpy from the drink holder. *I should pour this over my head.* A glance to his lap made him realize the cold douse would be more useful elsewhere.

"There's the museum exit," Cass pointed out, calling him back to the present. They parked the car and ambled toward the wide, wooden doors guarding the venerable, gray brick building. A large sign on a post in front of the building said

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the Natural History Museum was open from nine to five and photographs were permitted.

Dooley pushed the heavy door open, and they both sighed in relief as the blast of cold air from the air conditioning in the large tiled foyer hit them head on.

"Go buy us some sleeping bags," she whispered. "I'm staying here tonight."

He grinned. "They won't let you. I bet they have posters of us up in all the offices."

Cass snorted. "I'd almost forgotten about the bet. What an easy twenty bucks."

"Be prepared," he warned as they took their place in line in front of the visitor's counter. "I don't want to hear any whining when you lose."

"Even if you bring it up, they won't remember. So you better not be the one whining when they don't even raise an eyebrow," she whispered smugly.

When they reached the counter, a security guard in full uniform looked them over carefully, opened a notebook, frowned and then leaned over and whispered in the ear of the middle-aged clerk making out visitor passes. She stopped writing and sent a swift look their way.

Looking at some place beyond their ears, she cleared her throat, and then said very carefully, "I'm sorry, folks, but the security guard says you've been banned from this museum." She looked away from them immediately, and began talking to the people in line behind them.

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Dooley whispered into Cass's ear, "I told you they hadn't forgotten. You owe me twenty." He tried to guide her out of the building, but she dug in her heels.

"This is ridiculous," she hissed. "They can't ban us from a public building. You're alumni!"

Dooley nodded gravely, a smile barely cracking the corner of his mouth. "What do you want to do about it?"

Cass stalked over to the clerk behind the counter. "There must be some mistake," she said forcefully. "My husband and I want to tour the museum, and you have no reason to keep us from doing that. This is America. We have rights."

She then directed her attention toward the security guard, challenging him. "Are you going to let us in?"

"No." The guard in the dark green uniform answered curtly and turned his back on her.

Nearly sputtering in her anger, Cass started to insist the clerk call a higher campus authority when a more careful look at the back of the security guard showed his shoulders were shaking. Marching behind the counter, she moved in front of him where she could see his face contorted in an effort to keep from laughing. Suddenly catching on, she pointed a finger at Dooley and demanded, "Did that clown pay you to kick us out?"

"No, ma'am, he didn't. I've never seen that man before." The security guard snorted, his eyes brimming with laughter.

"Then how did you know we had been banned from the museum?"

The guard, unable to hold it any longer, glanced over her shoulder at Dooley and let it rip, laughing so hard he bent

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over and began pounding the counter. A second later, Dooley joined him. Their laughter echoed in the cavernous foyer. Dooley leaned against the wall, gasping for breath. Cass tapped her foot impatiently, frowning fiercely to keep from smiling.

Recovering finally, Dooley grinned and said, "Sucker. I called this morning, told him what we looked like and asked him to play along." Turning toward the still laughing guard, he said, "Thanks, man. It was even better than I thought."

"It was fun." The guard nodded. "Especially when your wife looked like she wanted to punch my lights out."

They laughed again, and this time Cass and the clerk joined in. The people waiting in line smiled even though they didn't know the reason for all the hilarity.

Now friends with the security guard, Cass and Dooley were handed visitor passes and directed toward the main entrance.

"Cassandra?" A man's voice called from behind. Cass stopped, her heart pounding. Paul's voice. He'd come back for her. Twirling around, she stared at the tall, dark-haired man holding the door for a slim, red-haired woman and two little girls, then froze. Not Paul. Leo, Paul's older brother. The resemblance was astonishing, and the disappointment so great, she almost staggered from the pain.

Dooley centered her by placing one hand on her shoulder.

Grinning, Leo walked toward her, his hand outstretched. "Cassandra, it's good to see you. Have you heard from Paul lately?"

Cass automatically shook his hand, unable to speak, and Dooley's fingers tightened on her shoulder. Finding her voice,

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she finally said, "How are you, Leo?" Nodding at the woman and two children who had wandered off to look at the museum posters, she asked, "Is that your family?"

Leo smiled benignly, "Yes. My wife Margo, and Stacy and Tracy. They're twins. But I really want to talk about Paul. I swear that kid gets so lost in his music, we haven't heard from him in weeks. But I bet you have." He looked at her expectantly.

"Well, actually, I haven't heard anything from him since he left."

"You're kidding." Shrugging his shoulders, he added, "Well, I know he's crazy about you. You'll probably hear soon."

Dooley fingers almost hurt as his grip tightened like a vise, so Cass tugged on his arm to bring him forward. "Leo, I'd like you to meet ... Ah ... This is Thomas Dooley."

"Tom." Leo stuck out his hand for a friendly shake. Grinning in a teasing manner, he said to Cass, "Maybe I'd better write Paul and tell him he has some competition."

Cass cleared her throat. "Actually, Dooley is my husband. We were married yesterday."

Leo's eyebrows nearly hit his hairline. "You're married? But I thought you and Paul..." He glanced at Dooley, who was frowning fiercely. "Well, um, that's good. Congratulations, Tom. Cassandra is a wonderful woman."

Turning to Cass, he asked, "Can I talk to you privately for a minute?"

Cass knew she shouldn't talk to him, but all of a sudden she desperately needed to hear about Paul. Glancing

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apologetically at Dooley, Cass moved with Leo toward the far side of the foyer where Leo's family loitered gazing at posters.

Dooley watched her go. The surge of hostility he felt toward Paul's brother shocked the hell out of him. He had never been single-minded about Cass. He had often double dated with her and her current boyfriend. Why, out of the blue, was he feeling this macho *my woman* possessiveness? She'd laugh herself sick if she knew. It was ridiculous, but he didn't want her walking arm and arm with her ex-lover's brother.

Although he'd never felt particularly possessive toward other women he'd had in his life, marriage had all of a sudden shaken the dynamics of his friendship with Cass, making him feel unsettled and irritable. Certainly, last night's little episode hadn't helped. Because he was trying not to think of it, erotic images began pouring into his head. He thought of Cass's satin smooth skin beneath his hands. He remembered her breath, soft against his ear. Another flash of heat settled in his groin. He needed to get this memory out of his head or invest in larger pants. He had promised her a platonic relationship. Sex had definitely not been a part of the bargain.

His jaw clenched as he remembered her calling for Paul. Paul, the lover who had gotten her pregnant, abandoned her, yet still held a central place in her heart. Cass did not love lightly. She would love the baby fiercely, and probably love Paul long after most other woman would have written him off as a selfish scumbag.

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Feeling noble, Dooley told himself he hoped Cass would meet someone else she could really fall in love with and forget about Paul. *After the baby, after the divorce.* He could see these two phrases becoming his mantra for the next year. He looked across the room to see Cass and Leo's heads inclined toward each other, their faces serious. What the hell did Paul's brother have to talk to her about in private?

By unspoken agreement, they left the museum right after Cass and Leo finished their conversation. The drive home was quiet. Dooley glanced occasionally at Cass who kept her eyes steadfastly on the landscape outside the window. Ten miles from West Sheffield, he pulled into a rest stop, turned off the car and just sat there looking at her.

After a few seconds she turned toward him, "Why'd we stop?"

"Why do you think?"

She shook her head and turned back toward the window. "Dooley, I don't want to talk about it."

"Now or never?"

"I don't know. Right now, it's confusing. My whole life is confusing, and I don't know if I can straighten anything out."

"Cass, you need to talk. Get a handle on what you're feeling. No matter what it is, I'll support you. Pretend I'm your best friend."

Cass gave him an uncertain smile and reached for his hand. "You are my best friend. If I have to be miserable, I want to be miserable with you."

He folded his fingers around hers. "That's a good girl. Concentrate on being miserable, and I'll support you." He

contorted his face into such a melancholy frown, a small laugh escaped her.

"Can't you ever be serious?" she chided.

Her smile disappeared as he hauled her over to lean against him. With his chin resting on top of her head, he asked softly, "What did Leo say that's put you in such a funk?"

She took a deep breath and said in a carefully controlled voice, "He said he was sure Paul still loved me and would be devastated to find out I was married. He also said Paul might be coming back soon."

"The guy wants his cake without having to pay anything for it," Dooley muttered angrily.

Cass sighed, moving out from the curve of his arm. "It's only been a few months. Maybe that's how much time he needed to get his feelings straight."

A strong feeling, one Dooley recognized as possessive jealousy, rolled over him as he studied Cass's profile. He clamped his jaw shut to keep from yelling at her. Couldn't she see what he was beginning to see so clearly? He and Cass belonged together. They were married, and come hell or high water, he intended that they stay that way.

In a deceptively calm voice, he asked, "So what do you want to do now? Get a divorce?"

She gave him a startled glance, "Divorce? We just got married yesterday. Besides we wouldn't have to get a divorce, we could get an annulment."

"By the skin of our teeth," he said, just to set the record straight, and watched the dull red creep up her cheeks.

"I can't take this on-again-off-again stuff. You know I'm not much for ultimatums," he said grimly, "but here's how it's going to be, Cass. According to the marriage certificate and all our family, you're my wife, carrying my baby. We either end it right now, or we stay married until the baby comes, and I will always have a part in his life. Even if Paul comes back. Remember, I still have my career to worry about."

Her spine stiffened, and she pulled away to glare at him. She'd seldom heard that tone from him, and it had rarely been directed at her. He could tell by glint in her eyes, she was struggling to control her anger. For Dooley, it was like watching a movie he had seen a hundred times. He saw the minute she calmed down and accepted his terms. The anger, regret and sadness melted away. This was his girl. His Cass. They would get through this.

She reached out and laid her hand across his. He turned his palm over and smoothed his fingers across the back of her hand.

She blinked back tears. "I'm sorry, Dooley. I tried to block things out and just live moment to moment, but you've been a saint while I've been moaning, groaning and whining about everything since Paul left me. Whatever my feelings are for Paul, they're not going to interfere with what we've got going now. I don't know why you're putting up with me, but you deserve more, and I promise you until the baby comes, we'll be a happy little family. Even if I hate to be given ultimatums."

Dooley felt his heart settle down, especially when she offered him a teasing smile.

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"So macho man, a deal is a deal. You concentrate on your career, and I'll concentrate on being the best little pregnant wife my feminist heart can tolerate."

She surprised him by giving up so easily. He glanced down at their clasped hands so she wouldn't see the emotion in his eyes. When his gaze again met hers, he could see she was waiting for his response.

"It's a deal." He leaned forward and brushed a kiss lightly across her lips.

Her startled look made him laugh. "No kissing on the lips," she ordered.

When he glanced pointedly at her breasts and raised his eyebrows, she laughed and pushed against his shoulder.

"Don't even go there."

Grinning hugely, he started the car and switched on the radio. The station was celebrating twenty-four hours of Beatle mania, and they drove home singing "We all live in a yellow submarine ..." each trying to drown the other out.

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Chapter Ten

"I still think I should go," Dooley said as he drew another wet plate from the drainer and swiped the towel over it.

Cass shook her head. "It's only the first visit. She'll tell me I'm four months pregnant, give me some vitamins, tell me to take it easy, and send me home."

"And how did you get to be this informed about maternity visits? As if I didn't know." Dooley lightly flipped her arm with the damp end of the dish towel.

"Kathleen," they both said in unison.

"Honestly, Dooley, she calls me every day. Even at work. I bet if I tell her you can't go, she'll insist I let her come."

Dooley grinned as he lifted a plate from the drainer. "It's only been a couple of months. The novelty will wear off in a little while. I bet Kathleen feels like she's playing with a pregnant Barbie."

Cass laughed and splashed soapy dishwater in his face.

Dooley waved the towel threateningly at her and chuckled, moved by the open cheerfulness in her face. This was the old Cass—carefree, happy. Sometimes, when she believed his concentration was elsewhere, he'd notice a wistful sadness drift across her face, and he would redouble his efforts to make her laugh. Doing the dinner dishes together had become a nightly ritual and allowed them to catch up on each other's day.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to keep his eyes off Cass's body. The pregnancy had added a delicious

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fullness to her breasts and hips. She didn't look pregnant. She looked ripe, womanly. They both seemed to find comfort in the simple intimacy of doing dishes together. The teasing, the talking, the easiness of their understanding of each other's way of thinking, had always been an integral part of their friendship.

Inwardly, Dooley groaned. Doing the dishes with Cass was fun. Going to bed without her wasn't fun at all. The way she'd settled into their arrangement with a nonchalant acceptance was way beyond him. She acted as if they really were brother and sister. Talking to him through the open bathroom door as she brushed her teeth, bending over the sink with the hem of her cotton nightshirt riding at the top of her thighs, strolling into the kitchen in the morning, her hands lifted in a stretch which clearly outlined her breasts under the soft material. She'd never been a tease. She was simply oblivious to the fact he got hard just watching her. It usually took him hours to get to sleep. He knew he should avoid those situations with Cass which tied him in knots, but he didn't have the will power.

While Cass seemed perfectly content with the arrangement, Dooley knew he'd need extensive dental work if he didn't stop grinding his teeth at night. And the dreams when he did fall asleep, were torturous. Erotic fantasies of Cass's breasts in his hands, in his mouth. Fantasies of her hands doing deliciously naughty things to him had him panting and moaning in the middle of the night.

He'd begun to doubt his ability to last five more months. What had he been thinking to insist it would be easy for him

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to be celibate until the baby came? Desire, or lust to be perfectly honest, was about to do him in. He walked around the apartment with a perpetual hard on. It was frustrating, embarrassing, and confusing. He could probably sneak off and find someone to take care of his frustration, but he didn't want anyone else. He consciously shied away from examining his feelings for Cass. She trusted him, and he would live up to the terms of their agreement even if it killed him.

The quiet of the doctor's office, and the walls covered with photographs of babies and toddlers, helped Cass relax as she filled out the required paperwork then waited to be summoned for her first maternity exam. Two young, very pregnant women, obviously friends, conversed softly on the sofa. Cass wondered how they were going to be able to haul themselves up when their names were called.

She glanced down at her stomach. The pleats in her tailored slacks still lay almost flat. Nearing the four and a half month mark, she had developed only a slight roundness in the tummy area, evident only when she dressed in a leotard. Everyone at work knew she was pregnant, and there'd only been a few sly comments about the timing. All in all, it had been a lot easier than she had expected.

Everything had been easier than she'd thought it would be. Living with Dooley was fun. A lot more fun than living with female roommates who were not always funny, considerate, or strong enough to open jars. He didn't even leave the toilet seat up. Cass sighed with content.

She'd not heard from Paul, and as long as she kept all thoughts of him locked in a tight mental box, she'd be fine.

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Nights were still difficult, although she tried to hide it from Dooley. Most nights, as soon as she went to sleep, images of Paul charming her then rejecting her woke her at three A.M. She would stare at the ceiling, convinced she would never get over him. Never be able to love anyone else.

In the mornings, the sound of Dooley's off-key singing in the bathroom cheered her almost instantly. She decided he was much better than prescription drugs for depression. As she had promised, she never mentioned Paul. Except for a certain tenseness Dooley had begun to exhibit every so often, she thought they rubbed along quite well together. Dooley made her laugh.

A ripple of heat shimmered up her spine as she remembered how he'd looked that morning, shaving at the bathroom sink, a towel wrapped over his hips. He always left the bathroom door open after he had showered so they could talk. They had been idly chatting, when she noticed his back. His naked back. He had a very nice back—smooth and muscular.

The overhead track lighting caused the freckles across his shoulders to radiate a golden sheen, delineating the taut muscles tapering to a narrow waist. Below the towel, long powerful thighs blended into the sculpted muscles of his legs. She had seen Dooley's naked back hundreds of times while they were growing up. It just seemed different in the intimacy of the bathroom.

Even though Kathleen had warned her about raging hormones during pregnancy, this was the first time she'd experienced them. And with Dooley, of all people. For a few

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seconds in the bathroom, he no longer looked like Dooley, her best friend; but a stranger with a very sexy back. Confused and uncertain, she had backed hurriedly out of the bathroom and made a beeline for the privacy of her own room.

Now seated in the doctor's office, the heat spread all the way to her toes as she remembered her overwhelming urge to smooth her hands down his back and pull away the towel.

Trying to block this unwanted memory of her sexual awareness regarding Dooley's back, Cass concentrated on the expectant mother brochure she had plucked from the stack on the small oblong table next to the chair. In the past few months, she'd become very familiar with the birth process. Dooley had purchased several books on pregnancy and a large medical book with explicit instructions about home delivery in case of emergencies. He read the pertinent parts to her nearly every evening before she went to bed. At this rate, they could probably open their own pregnancy clinic when the nine months were over.

She was still smiling at the idea when the door to the waiting room opened, and her mother walked in.

"Mom! What are you doing here?"

"Dooley called and said you were going to be by yourself. So I thought I'd come over and keep you company. Helen's parking the car."

Cass groaned. Dooley had sent their mothers to make sure she wrote everything down.

An hour later, both mothers looked up with identical anxious expressions on their faces when Cass exited the

examining room, accompanied by a serious-faced woman doctor who handed her a prescription.

Miriam stood immediately and rushed to Cass's side. "I'm Miriam Vocjec, Cass's mother, Doctor Stein. Is everything all right?"

Glancing at Cass, who nodded her okay, the doctor smiled at Miriam and said, "Her blood pressure is a little elevated, and we want to monitor that pretty carefully. Other than that, she's in excellent shape."

"Did you do an ultrasound?" Helen Dooley chimed in.

"As long as there aren't any problems, we like to do one at five months. So next month ..." the doctor called over her shoulder as she headed into another examining room.

Both mothers turned toward Cass with an expectant look. She waved the prescriptions at them. "Vitamins and something for the blood pressure. Everything is fine, and I can still work as long as I don't get too tired."

Frowning, Miriam said, "You certainly can't keep jumping around now that you're pregnant."

Helen nodded in agreement.

Cass stifled a grin. "I can teach low-impact aerobics. No jumping around. I'm probably going to be made the assistant manager of the Spa in a few months, and I'll be too busy then to teach classes."

Helen beamed. "You are a perfect wife for Thomas. Beautiful, smart as a whip, and now you are going to make me a grandmother. If only your mother had taught you how to cook." All three women left the doctor's office laughing.

A perfect wife for Thomas.

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The words echoed in Cass's head two weeks later in the middle of their first, real marital fight.

"I can't, Dooley. I already told you I have to go to Vermont with Robert on Thursday to look at sites for the new spa."

"Damn it, Cass. This is the first time Armory has ever invited me to his house. He wants to get to know you."

"He wants to look me over. See if I'm suitable."

His chin jutted out. "So what? I told you I wouldn't get the promotion unless he thought I was stable."

"You are stable. You are the most stable person I know. It shouldn't make any difference to Armory if you married a trapeze artist with three heads," Cass said through clenched teeth.

The argument had sprung from nowhere. They were sitting side by side on the couch, their legs propped on the coffee table. After giving Dooley a word-for-word run down on what the doctor had said after her second visit, she'd casually mentioned she would be out of town with her boss on Thursday and Friday.

Dooley reacted as if she had hit him with a baseball bat.

"What do you mean you're going out of town?" He sprang to his feet and stared down at her. "Thursday is the night Armory is having us over for dinner."

She made the mistake of shrugging, "Tell him we can't make it."

"Like hell I will! You tell Casanova you can't make it, especially for two days, especially over night."

The words were clipped, the sound of his voice colder than Cass had ever heard it. Dictatorial. How dare he order her not

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to do something! Her back stiffened. And she answered in a voice as hot as his was cool, "Who died and made you boss? I'm sorry about Armory, but I am going to Vermont on Thursday."

As soon as she made her stand, guilt stabbed her. The only compensation Dooley got out of this fake marriage was the chance to move ahead in his company. And now, she'd refused to cooperate with the first thing he'd asked of her.

She looked up at him, ready to apologize when he voiced the same thought, his jaw set, his eyes stormy.

"I'm not asking a lot out of this marriage, Cass, but I did expect you to cooperate about my job." He stood and walked into the kitchen, his back rigid.

The hot surge of anger she had begun to tamp down, resurfaced. It was all right for her to be magnanimous, but she would not give in to emotional blackmail. Beneath her anger, she recognized another emotion—bewilderment. What was up with him, anyway? When she was in a snit, he always teased her out of it. He didn't throw tantrums. The Armory dinner must be a much bigger deal than she thought.

Dooley cursed himself as he stalked silently into the kitchen. What the hell was he doing ripping her head off like that? His responses to the idea of Cass and other men were getting out of hand. He didn't care if they missed the dinner with Armory, they could easily reschedule it. He just didn't want her jaunting off for two days with her boss. He knew his reactions were unreasonable. He trusted her. He even trusted Robert. So where were these Neanderthal impulses coming from?

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He had always prided himself on his ability to stay cool, smugly aware of his self-control even when others seemed to be losing theirs. He realized his increasing level of desire for Cass caused most of his tension. He just wasn't sure what to do about it.

He couldn't talk to his buddies because no one knew the real nature of their marriage. He didn't want another woman. He only wanted Cass, in fact he worried this wanting was becoming an obsession. He thought about her constantly—and they certainly weren't platonic thoughts. In some states, he could probably be arrested for what he wanted to do with her. And she remained oblivious, although she had licked her lips once while she watched him shave. He stared out the window into the parking lot below.

It had to be proximity.

He couldn't be falling in love with her; he'd known her all his life. Although, he couldn't remember a time when he'd been so consumed by erotic fantasies. Even the raging hormones of his teen years hadn't tied him in as many knots. And if love felt like this, it was hell. He had married Cass to give her protection and support until the baby came, not to complicate both their lives.

Suddenly, two hands began to massage the muscles just below his shoulder blades. Cass's breath whispered across his neck, "I'm sorry. I know this is important to you. I'll ask Robert to change the dates."

He didn't dare turn around. He could smell the familiar scent of her lemon shampoo. Her fingers prodded all the right places. In order to massage the top of his shoulders, she had

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moved close enough for him to feel the tips of her breasts against his back. His brain short-circuited under the sensory overload. *Don't turn around! Don't turn around!* The blood surging behind his eardrums drowned out the voice of reason.

With a groan, he turned to face her, his left arm slipping around her waist, pulling her against him. His right hand swept behind her head and pulled her face forward until his lips met hers. As kisses went, it wasn't particularly gentle. He told himself to back off, to stay in control, but his overwrought system didn't buy it. Hungry, needy, his lips moved over hers, nibbling at her bottom lip, tugging until her lips parted, and he deftly used his tongue, teasing her, willing her to respond.

At first she stood very still. He could feel the tension in her hands as they lay passively against his chest. Her fingers flexed, and his body stiffened, ready for her to push him away.

Instead, she sighed, and her arms slid up around his neck. "This isn't good," she whispered against his lips.

"This is good," he contradicted softly. "And it's going to get even better. Just go with it, Cass."

Once more, his lips slanted possessively against hers. His tongue slid deep, seeking hers. Urging. Coaxing. Suddenly, she began responding with similar urgency. Her tongue made its own sly forays causing him to moan her name. The tips of his fingers moved slowly along her jaw line and down her neck until they settled gently just above the rapidly beating pulse point. She buried her fingers into his hair and pulled him closer.

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His body responded with another surge of heat straight from his gut. His hands grasped her bottom, fitting her snugly against his jutting hardness. It would kill him if she tried to stop him.

But she didn't. Instead, she arched into him, rotating her hips.

Their kisses became frantic, tongues tangled and mated. She bit his bottom lip with just enough pressure to cause a pleasurable pain and then rubbed her tongue over the spot. He moved his lips to her neck, nipping and kissing from her ear lobe to her shoulder. His hand gently cupped her breast, and she swelled into his palm, her nipples pebbling against the t-shirt.

He dragged her out of the kitchen into the hallway toward the bedroom. They didn't make it. With a soft growl, he backed her against the wall and thrust against her, seeking a place where he could rub the aching part of him against her softness. It felt good, but not good enough. He could feel the heat between her thighs and placed his hand there, rubbing slowly, his fingers and thumb brushing across her most sensitive spot.

She gasped, and moved against his hand, her eyes glazed. Her heart beat so rapidly he could see it fluttering under her shirt. He had to make love to her, now. Right here, on the floor, clothes on or off. He had to be in her, be part of her.

He tugged at the zipper on her jeans, and she batted his hand away, pulling the jeans down over her hips. His hand moved inside to cup her through her panties. Already wet and ready, she lifted to the pressure of his hand. His body surged,

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so out of control, he doubted he'd get his pants all the way off. He had to be inside her. Now.

Cass wanted him. Warning sirens clanged in her head, but she refused to listen. They were married, and she wanted him. She wouldn't stop this time. Couldn't. She felt a desperate need to feel Dooley's mouth at her breasts, his hands in the place where she ached the most. Her lips never left his as she put just enough space between them to yank off her shirt.

Dooley reached around her to unfasten her bra, cradling her breasts and lifting them to his lips when they tumbled free. "Perfect," he whispered. "Your breasts are perfect."

She sighed against his mouth, and in a swift move which almost unbalanced her, he scooped her against him and held her tightly as they slid down the wall to finally lie side by side on the thickly carpeted floor. Moving over her, resting on one elbow, he gently lifted her left breast, circling her nipple with his tongue before drawing it fully into his mouth.

Hot, steamy, wired. Too much, not enough. Another low moan issued up from deep inside her as he alternately sucked and licked both breasts. She moved her hand between them to try to unbutton his shirt, frantic now to feel him naked, to touch and inflame him as he touched her.

The raucous sound of the doorbell jerked them apart.

Heart pounding, Cass stared up at him, her eyes glazed. She whispered, "Don't answer it. Maybe they'll go away."

Dooley nodded, his tongue returning to trace the curve of her breast. The persistent ringing of the bell gave way to

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insistent pounding on the door, and Ken's voice hollering, "I know you guys are in there. Let me in."

Dooley looked down at her, his hazel eyes still blazing with need. "What should we do?" he whispered.

The pounding escalated. "Come on, Cass. Let me in."

Cass sighed, the heat already receding. "He won't go away. I'd better answer it."

Dooley groaned but moved away from her and rolled onto his back to stare at the ceiling, his breathing harsh, his arousal straining the zipper of his pants. Cass sat up, reaching frantically for her clothes. She slipped her shirt over her head, not bothering with the bra, and zipped her pants on the way to the door. Before she opened it, she glanced back at Dooley, now standing, slumped against the wall, glaring at the floor.

"Open—" Ken's yell petered off as the door opened. Giving Cass a sunny smile, he bent down to lift the two large boxes of pizza stacked on the porch.

"Hi, Sis. Thought you guys might like some pizza and company tonight."

Ignoring her glare, he nudged past her to head toward the kitchen. He grinned at Dooley sitting on the couch with the newspaper spread over his lap.

"Hey, my man, come and eat pizza. I decided to rescue you tonight. I know Cass can't cook worth beans."

Feeling steamrollered, Cass followed helplessly, the heat spreading up her neck and behind her ears when she noticed her discarded bra in the middle of the hallway. Oblivious, Ken stepped over it. Frantically, she glanced at Dooley who

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shrugged, and stood up to follow them into the kitchen, casually scooping up the bra and sticking it in his pocket on the way.

Cass dropped out of the heated discussion about the Patriots and mentally replayed the whole hallway episode. She glanced at Dooley, whose eyes seemed focused on her breasts even while he carried his side of the conversation with Ken. His eyes were still dark, the pupils almost black.

She thought of his mouth closing over her, and felt a pounding, swirling sensation spreading from the pit of her stomach and lower. Lust? Desire? Whatever it was, she feared it would be nearly impossible to get the lid back on. Damn. She'd never felt anything this powerful. Pregnancy had activated her libido to nymphomaniac status.

She wanted Ken to leave. She wanted Dooley naked and on top of her. Inside of her. She wanted ... Dooley! She didn't care if he *was* her best friend. She actually didn't care about anything except reliving those few minutes before the doorbell rang. Only this time, she wanted it to end the way it should have ended.

Girl, are you crazy? The inner voice, which had hounded her all her adult life, sounded surprisingly like Whoopie Goldberg. *You start messin' with Dooley, and you'll be in a whole pack of trouble.*

Cass sighed. Whoopie was right. She and Dooley had set the no-sex guidelines for their marriage for a very good reason. She had believed she would never be a candidate for uncommitted sex. Of course, she was committed to Dooley, but she didn't love him. She loved Paul. Although she had

never actually craved making love to Paul, never felt an overwhelming compulsion to run her tongue over the planes and angles of his body. It must be the hormones. There were several chapters in the pregnancy books about the effects of pregnancy hormones on the libido.

How could she have known Dooley forever, and never noticed how sexy his hands were. She couldn't take her eyes off them. Her breath caught when she looked up and found Dooley watching her as she stared at his hands. When their eyes met, he gave her a small pleading look that begged her to wait a little while longer.

Ken stopped talking, and neither of them noticed. They simply stared at each other, the silence so filled with sexual vibes, the space between them hummed.

"Cass ..." Ken sounded uncomfortable.

"What?" Cass answered, barely glancing at him.

"I wish you guys had said something when I came in ..."

Ken's words finally registered, and Cass looked at her brother. His cheeks were red with embarrassment, and Cass felt her face also flame. "What are you talking about?" She tried to brazen it out.

"I keep forgetting you guys are newlyweds. I'm so used to hanging around with both of you I didn't think it might be ... ah ...inconvenient."

Dooley laughed. "It's not that inconvenient, Ken."

Ridiculously, Cass felt hurt. Maybe Dooley didn't feel the way she did about the hallway interlude.

Ken stood up and headed for the door, looking back over his shoulder with a strained smile. "You guys finish up the

pizza. I gotta go." As he opened the door, he said, "I'll call next time." And he was gone.

Still seated at the table, Cass closed her eyes.

Dooley said, "Damn, he's still hurting over Sharon. I didn't realize he was still having such a hard time."

She nodded, "He'll probably feel bad until he finds someone else. He's not even looking, so it may take a while."

Dooley reached across the table to pick up her hand. He traced the lines in her palm with his forefinger. "Are you?"

"Am I what?" she asked warily.

"Looking?"

"I don't want to play twenty questions, Thomas, what are you asking?"

He put her hand down on the table and looked into her face with a puzzled frown. "You only call me Thomas when you're mad about something."

Cass stood up and began to clean the plates off the table, trying to avoid looking at him. "Give it a rest, Dooley. I'm not mad."

"Are you upset, irritated, or just frustrated because we didn't make love in the hallway?"

She turned to look at him. His mouth quirked in a wry smile, his eyes warm. She felt an answering warmth rise in her and returned his smile. They stared at each other for a few seconds, before she answered, "I'm not sure what I feel, probably all three."

Dooley lifted his arms and she moved into them as naturally as a homing pigeon returning to its roost.

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"I wanted to kill your brother. Stomp on him; kick him out of the apartment. I was so frustrated, I felt like howling like some kind of rabid wolf." Dooley murmured into her hair, his arms tight around her.

She chuckled against his shirt. "You didn't sound frustrated when you told him he hadn't interrupted anything important."

"Is that why your nose is out of joint? Did you really think I didn't care that he came at the worst possible moment?"

Cass tilted her head to get a better look at him, "You sounded pretty casual."

"Casual? He's damn lucky I didn't have a blunt instrument in my hand when he came in with those pizzas."

She smiled weakly, and then buried her face against his shirt. "This is going to change everything," she said tremulously.

He nodded, nuzzling her hair. "Things have already changed, and we haven't even made love yet." His arms tightened around her. "I don't want our friendship to change, babe, but ever since we got married, I crave making love to you like I'm some kind of sex addict. I've tried to control it, Cass. Hell, I've had so many cold showers, my internal organs are frozen. But nothing seems to work, so let's not analyze anything right now. Come into the bedroom with me before I become a candidate for the state hospital."

Cass leaned back against his arm and stared into his face. He looked flushed, feverish, his eyes bright with desire. *Go with him. Don't think, just go!* With a shudder, her internal defenses crumbled and once again turned into a pool of hot desire.

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She lifted her hand to his chin and tugged his face toward her, at the same time lifting her mouth in invitation. "Kiss me, Dooley," she whispered. "Touch me. Make love to me."

As he angled his mouth securely over hers, fire eddied into wildness. She couldn't get close enough, touch enough places.

Frantically, they ran their hands over each other, swaying together. She felt weightless, anchored only by Dooley's lips on hers. Hot. Melting at the core, struggling to get even closer to the iron-hard bulge at the front of his jeans. She rocked against him and he moaned. He cupped her buttocks, lifting her higher against him until he nestled securely in the damp heat burning through her clothes. The feeling built, and then intensified as flashes of heat exploded inside her.

"Bed," he gasped. "We need to get to a bed."

Too far gone to respond, Cass simply nodded and held on when he swung her into his arms and moved swiftly into her bedroom to lay her in the center of the queen size bed. He followed her down, never losing contact with her mouth. He stopped kissing her briefly to unzip her slacks and strip them off her. He then moved his hand slowly up her inner thigh until he slipped two fingers inside her high cut bikini panties to touch her intimately with firm, sure caresses. She arched into his stroking fingers. Nothing had ever felt this good. She murmured encouragement.

He unbuttoned her shirt with his other hand, never stopping the light circular motion of his fingers. Her body felt like a heat-seeking missile as she moved closer to the edge. His tongue claimed her breast in a slow sucking movement.

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She wanted him over her, in her. She placed her hand between them and stroked down the length of the iron hard bulge in his jeans. The shirt, hanging half off her shoulders, hindered her movement and she sat up to shrug it off.

Dooley shifted to allow her to kick off her panties, then he pulled back briefly to remove his own clothes. She whimpered softly at the removal of his hand. Within a few seconds, he returned to her, naked and fully aroused. Sliding down next to her, he buried his face between her breasts, his hands once more working magic on the most sensitive parts of her body.

She ran her hands up and down his back in sweeping motions, nipping his shoulders as she moved toward climaxing. Dooley did have magic fingers, several times bringing her almost to the edge then slowing in a riptide of sensual pleasure. She couldn't take it any longer and pleaded with him to end the torment.

Gasping for control, he positioned himself over her and slid inside. Deep. Full. Hard.

She responded with near frantic movements of her hips. Struggling for control, he grabbed her hips and tried to slow her movements.

Staring into her face, his features tense. "Say my name?" he demanded in a hoarse whisper.

"Dooley," she pleaded, lifting toward him. "Please." It was almost a sob.

With ragged breath, he began plunging and withdrawing until she cried out as she climaxed and sharp waves of ecstasy stabbed through her. A minute later, Dooley's

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primitive shout of pleasure pushed her over the edge again. They clung to each other, limp and sated, as the world slowly settled around them. Dooley kissed her gently then rolled off her to collapse on his back.

They lay next to each other, shoulders touching and holding hands in a comfortable silence until Dooley's breathing became slow and heavy, and Cass knew he had fallen asleep. Neither of them had felt the need for conversation.

She smiled as a sweet lethargy swept through her. She'd sleep well tonight. She was aware they had probably messed up their long standing friendship by making love, but right this minute, she didn't regret a thing. Making love with Dooley had been spectacular. Too spectacular to worry about how things might change between them. With a yawn, she settled more fully into the curve of his arm and also fell into a deep sleep.

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Chapter Eleven

The alarm went off at six A.M. Without opening his eyes, Dooley reached out to push the snooze button, his arm flailing until he realized someone had moved the clock. The annoying buzz came from the other side of the bed.

"What the ..." Reluctantly he opened his eyes in time to see Cass's arm reach out to tap the button. They were snuggled together in Cass's bed, her dark hair spread across the pillow they both shared. A light sheet covered them, and his hand rested on the curve of her stomach.

The *naked* curve of her stomach.

Although his body reacted instantly, he controlled his urge to pull her on top of him. The night before, they had made exquisite, earth-moving love, and she was still in his arms the next morning. It felt right—as if he had been waiting his whole life to wake up with Cass in his arms.

He felt terrific, on top of the world, but he realized beneath the emotional euphoria ran an edgy, nervous apprehension. How would Cass react to their lovemaking this morning? Remembering her response when they had nearly made love on their wedding night, he wondered how he would handle it if she had major regrets?

Even though she had turned off the alarm, she still slept. He leaned up on his elbow to examine her face, pleased to see a slight smile tilting her lips. His body urged him to wake her up by covering her face with kisses, but his mind said he'd better test the waters before trying for a repeat of the

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previous night's mind-blowing experience. Who would have thought he and Cass...?

Images of their lovemaking returned full force, making it difficult for him to breathe normally. He had never made love before without a condom, and couldn't decide if the pleasure was greater because of that or because it was Cass who nearly screamed as she found fulfillment.

Cautiously, he removed his hand from her body and rolled on his back. He tried to force himself to review what he was supposed to accomplish at work, but it wasn't happening. His mind kept returning to their agreement to separate after the baby came. To go back to the carefree, no-strings friendship they'd enjoyed for over twenty years. Dooley knew that couldn't happen. Convinced now the roller coaster ride he'd been on since their wedding had been caused by thwarted love, he wanted a real marriage, a permanent marriage with Cass.

In fact, examining his feelings carefully, he'd now understood he'd been in love with her for a very long time. She'd been the reason he'd generally felt restless and bored in other relationships. No one could hold a candle to Cass. No one made him laugh as much or feel more comfortable. And although he hadn't realized it until recently, no one had ever turned him on as much.

He took a deep breath, relieved by his new insight. Putting a label on his feelings was freeing. For right now, he could accept she didn't love him—that she was still hung up on Paul, or at least thought she was. But given time—lots of time

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probably—he knew he could make her fall in love with him. He had four months until the baby came.

Beside him, Cass began to stir, and Dooley braced himself for her reaction.

Cass opened her eyes and stared at the clock. 6:15. Time to get up. She felt incredibly relaxed and well-rested. Lazily, she slid her leg back and connected with another leg, a masculine, hair-covered leg.

Still not totally awake, she leaned up on one elbow and hooked her hair behind her ear. With the sheet at his waist, Dooley had his arms crossed behind his head. He was staring at her, wearing his bland, poker face.

For a moment, her mind felt blank. What was he doing in her bed? And then she remembered. She and Dooley had made love, and it had been incredible. Heat rode from her abdomen to her face, just thinking about it. Though he appeared relaxed, she knew him well enough to see the tension in his face and the muscles of his arm. She stared back at him for a second and then grinned. "Are we having a sleep over?"

His smile was tender, relieved. "I guess we are. It's a lot more fun now than when we were eight."

The look he gave her sent an electric current blazing from her toes to her chest. She laid her head on his chest, feeling him broaden and lengthen against her side. He looked incredibly sexy this morning. "It's time to get up," she murmured, her lips barely moving against his throat.

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He turned and gathered her against him. "I'm up already," he said hoarsely, sifting his hands through her hair to lift her face toward his.

"Yeah. I can tell," Cass whispered as their lips met. The power of Dooley's kisses amazed her. Her body simultaneously melted and tensed as he nibbled on her lower lip before thrusting his tongue into her mouth. Last night, they had been on fire for each other. This morning, their loving was gentle and sweet. They came together, conscious of each other and the harmony of their aligned bodies. It was good. Better than good. They swept over the edge at the same time and clutched each other in the aftermath.

Lying beside him, feeling totally satisfied, Cass didn't want to think. If she started thinking, she would have to look at their marriage in a different light. And she knew Dooley. He would feel tied to her now—committed to stay in the marriage because they had made love. But Cass knew great sex wasn't enough to sustain a permanent relationship. She'd learned that particular lesson with Paul, although the sex had not been near as satisfying with him. Without love, the kind of love her parents and Dooley's parents had, marriages didn't stand a chance. She and Dooley didn't love each other that way. She could never love that way again, and it would be selfish to keep Dooley from finding that kind of happiness with someone else.

Suddenly, Dooley was leaning over her, a frown marring his features. "What's going on in your head? You stiffened up like a wax dummy."

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"Well, that's a nice image." She slid under his arm to sit on the edge of the bed, avoiding his face.

He reached, cupped her cheek, and stared into her eyes. "Cass, we need to ..." He stopped and shook his head, kissed her suddenly on the nose, and said, "We'd better get up, or were both going to be late for work." Then, he swung his legs off the bed and strolled into the bathroom, whistling.

Stunned by his sudden departure from the bed, and wishing he had completed his first statement, Cass watched his naked backside disappear behind the closed door. She smiled. Dooley did have a great looking tush. They were going to have to talk, but maybe now was not the time to say, "Thanks, but no thanks."

Feeling relieved they didn't have to talk right away, she lay on her back, listening to his singing volume escalate in the shower. It's a wonder the neighbors didn't complain about the way his voice bounced off the walls every morning.

She lay flat, still smiling, her hands curved over her small but definitely rounded abdomen. Suddenly, beneath her fingers, she felt a faint ripple of movement. She stilled, barely breathing.

There it was again. Slight, very slight, but definitely movement.

The baby—she could feel it. The miracle of it caused tears to spurt from her eyes and roll down her cheeks. She heard the shower turned off, and with a voice barely above a whisper, she called, "Dooley, come out here." When the door remained closed, she called in a stronger voice, "Dooley ..."

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He opened the door and peered around the corner, grinning, his wet hair hanging in his eyes. "Sweetheart, as much as I would love to come back to bed, I have to ..." The teasing stopped when his gaze locked with hers.

Instantly, he was at her side, a towel clutched in his fingers. He knelt beside the bed. "What is it, honey? Did I hurt you?"

Without speaking, as tears continued spilling over, she smiled, took his hand and laid it on her stomach. "I felt the baby move," she whispered.

"No kidding." He laughed in relief. "I thought something was wrong."

Quietly they both waited, his hand on her stomach. Once more, a very faint rippling movement had him lifting his hand and staring at her in amazement. "Was that it? You're sure it's the baby?"

Cass smiled at the hushed reverence of his tone. "It's either the baby, or my body's been taken over by alien fish."

He whooped and threw himself next to her on the bed, catching her in his arms and rocking her back and forth. "That's my little stud muffin," he chortled jubilantly. Then he jumped up and started doing a wild dance around the room, totally naked.

Cass laughed helplessly, "Stud muffin?"

"I think I'll call him that until you have the ultrasound, of course then *he* might be our little princess instead."

"Little girls in the twentieth first century are not called *princess*," Cass said. "Call her your little CEO."

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She sat up, and moved her feet over the edge of the bed. The arrested look in Dooley's eyes reminded her of her nudity. Feeling suddenly embarrassed, she pulled the sheet from the bed and wrapped it around her as she rose and headed for the bathroom. On the way, she scooped up Dooley's towel from the floor and threw it at him.

"You might need to take another shower," she said with a significant glance at a portion of his anatomy which had reacted with definite interest. As she pulled the bathroom door behind her, she poked her face out and smirked. "Stud muffin."

"You win the lottery?"

Robert's question caught Cass off guard. She looked up from the ad she was writing for the Spa. "No. Where'd that question come from?"

"You're humming. You haven't been humming for a few months now," he paused then grinned. "Oh, I get it. Morning sickness is over, right."

"Right." Cass hoped the real reason she felt so upbeat didn't show on her face. She felt good. Happy, content. Like things were finally going to be okay. Making love with Dooley had been exciting and comfortable, even fun. Maybe they could make a go of their marriage. Physically they were compatible, and they had always been close as friends.

She had consciously blocked Paul's image from her mind until the grinding pain of his betrayal had dulled to a persistent ache.

Robert shifted the papers on her desk so he could sit on the corner. "I wish I felt like humming. I canceled our plans

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for New Hampshire. I really don't want to go without you. If Dooley's so ripped about the trip, why don't you find a weekend all three of us can go?"

"Dooley's not ripped," Cass lied. "He just doesn't want to cancel our plans with his boss when a promotion is so close." It still bothered her they had a major fight over such a minor thing. She smiled again, remembering where the fight had ended.

Dooley's position at the plant was very important to him. Part of the reason he married her was to ensure his promotion. For a moment, a cold stillness settled over her. Maybe she was in la-la land, planning a future with Dooley. For all she knew, once he got the promotion and the baby arrived, he might want to head off to greener pastures, his caretaking responsibilities fulfilled. Maybe Dooley wouldn't want to make their marriage permanent?

Disturbed by the unsettling thought, Cass didn't notice Robert leaving her desk to wander back to his own office. She had already blue-lined several spelling errors in the ad copy, when the phone rang.

"Hi, babe."

Her face heated. Even Dooley's casual greeting reminded her of the erotic activities they had shared in the middle of the night. "What's up?"

"I'm not going to be home for dinner tonight. Melissa called, and she needs somebody's shoulder to cry on. I'm going to meet her at Curly Jones, but I shouldn't be too late."

Melissa! His ex-girlfriend! He was having have dinner with his ex-girlfriend? Both jealousy and hurt made sharp,

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unwelcome appearances, ice cold and deadly, in the region around her heart. While she'd been contemplating a permanent commitment to their marriage, he was planning to take his former girlfriend out to dinner.

"Okay. I'll see you later, then." Although she fumbled with the papers on her desk, her voice remained cool, collected.

A silent moment followed, before he asked cautiously, "Cass? Everything all right there? You sound a little ..."

"I'm fine," she answered in the same unemotional tone.

"You don't sound fine. Are you all right? Is it the baby? Maybe I shou—"

"I said I was fine. The baby's fine. Everything's fine. Have dinner with Melissa, and I'll see you when you get home."

She hung up, so incensed she didn't even remind him they were scheduled to visit the hospital that evening to tour the labor and delivery rooms. Jerk! How could he make incredible love to her all night and then blithely go off to help his ex-girlfriend?

By five, she had calmed down. Dooley had always been available to his friends when they needed him. Cass had certainly taken advantage of him over the years, calling and expecting him to drop everything to rescue or console her. The fact they were married didn't change his nature, especially when the marriage wasn't ... wasn't ... what?

Cass was confused about what to call their new relationship. Although the physical boundaries of their marriage had changed, maybe the basic structure remained the same. They could still divorce after the baby came, and

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Dooley would be free to find someone he could love wholeheartedly.

In the dim interior of the restaurant, Dooley observed his former girlfriend with dispassionate awareness. Melissa's clothes were too provocative, her tears seemed artificial, and the clutch of her hand on his arm a little too desperate as they sat in a quiet corner at Curley Jones, a restaurant noted for its ribs. The waiter, after bringing their food, had left them discretely alone.

"I never should have left you, Dooley." Melissa's voice quavered, and he began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. "I know you married Cass on the rebound."

She lifted her watery blue eyes to his, and he almost grinned. *So it didn't work out with the lawyer.* He didn't mind offering a little help if Melissa really needed it, but this blatant attempt to squeeze back into his life was almost comical. A feeling of relief curled through him as he realized Cass never resorted to these tactics.

Cass had sounded strange on the phone that afternoon. He had meant to call her back, but got trapped in a last minute meeting and had to run to keep the appointment with Melissa. He hoped Cass wasn't regretting their intimacy. He certainly wasn't. Just the thought of how she looked, sprawled naked on the bed, caused his groin to tighten. Boy. He really had it bad. He forced himself to concentrate on what Melissa was saying.

"If you explain it to Cass, I'm sure she'll understand." Melissa smiled invitingly.

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"Explain what?" How much of the conversation had he missed?

She slid her finger across the back of his palm in a gesture too sensual to be mistaken. "Explain that we still love each other, and she'll have to give you up."

"I'm sorry if that's what you think, Melissa, but it's not true." He tried to be gentle. "Cass and I have a great marriage, and we're going to have a baby."

"A baby!" Her voice escalated an octave, as her expression went from seductive to sulky. "Why didn't you say something when I called? I wouldn't have made such a fool of myself."

"You said you were desperate, and I was the only one who could help you," Dooley reminded her. "You never mentioned the exact nature of your problem. Cass and I are pretty solid, and with the baby coming ..."

Oh God! The baby. It suddenly dawned on him they were supposed to tour the hospital that night at seven. Quickly, he glanced at his watch. Seven-thirty. Mumbling a hasty excuse to Melissa, he raced for the pay phone in the entryway, cursing the dead battery in his cell phone. After seven rings, he realized Cass wasn't home. She must have gone to the hospital tour without him. Hot-footing it back to Melissa, he threw a couple of twenties on the table.

"I gotta go, Melissa. Cass and I are supposed to do something tonight, and I forgot. Can you take care of the bill?"

Without another glance in her direction, Dooley left the restaurant and sprinted to his car. The hospital was only

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twenty minutes away. He could catch the last of the tour anyway. Why hadn't Cass reminded him?

When he finally caught up with the tour, Cass wasn't there.

"Your wife called earlier to say both of you would come another time." The middle-aged volunteer guiding the tour looked confused.

Embarrassed, Dooley muttered something about a mix-up and left the hospital. Where in the hell was Cass?

When he let himself into the apartment, she still wasn't home. There was no note and no message on the answering machine.

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Chapter Twelve

At nine-thirty, after Dooley's second call to Cass's parents, they arrived at the apartment, accompanied by *his* parents. At nine forty-five, her brother Ken showed up. At ten-fifteen, they began discussing whether or not to call the police.

"Cass will be furious if I call the police," Dooley said, vowing silently to do that very thing if she wasn't home by eleven. Although he tried to appear calm, his fears had escalated to the point where he mentally prepared himself to deal with the call asking him to come to the morgue to identify her body.

"Did you guys have a fight?" Ken asked.

Dooley shook his head. "Not exactly."

"Well, what exactly?" His mother chimed in. "Cass has been missing for hours. If something serious happened between you two, you need to tell us."

His pounding heart and frayed nerves made him snap. "Cass is not missing. And it really isn't anyone's business what happens between us."

The uproar this comment caused should have leveled the building.

In the midst of Dooley's apology to his mother, Cass came home.

She stood in the doorway watching the commotion, a look of utter astonishment on her face. "What are all of you doing here?"

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Relief surged through him so strongly he had to blink back tears. Cass was home. She was safe. Wearing a pair of stretch pants and his old leather bomber jacket, her hair in a pony tail, she looked so normal, so unhurt, he was able to release the gut-wrenching images he had of her bruised and broken body lying somewhere in an alley or on the freeway.

The relief quickly gave way to fury. "Where the hell have you been?" he roared, stalking toward her.

Her look of confusion gave way to indignation. "I went to the movies when you forgot about the hospital tour."

"I did not forget. When I got there, I found out you had canceled and then disappeared. You didn't even leave a note."

Her chin raised an inch. "I'm a big girl. I don't need your permission to go out."

"Now, Cass, Dooley was only concerned about you," Miriam began.

"You had to involve our entire family in this?" Cass glared at him, waving her arm at their parents and her brother still sitting in the living room.

Dooley could feel the slow rise of color in his face. His heart rate had slowed, and he realized the panic he'd felt when she turned up missing was caused by his guilt at forgetting the appointment and his concern about their relationship now that they'd slept together. Finally admitting the truth to himself, he realized he had overreacted because he'd been afraid she might have left him.

Turning away from her, he spoke to the assembled witnesses in a carefully controlled voice. "Folks, Cass and I

need to talk, so I guess you'd all better go home. I'm sorry for ..."

His apology trailed off as Ken snorted. "Don't worry about us, Dooley. If I know my sister, you'll have your hands full just dealing with her."

Everyone chuckled, and in a matter of minutes, the room emptied, leaving Dooley and Cass facing each other. Cass, her feet spread apart and her hands plunged deep into the pockets of the bomber jacket, looked ready for a fight.

The look irritated the hell out of him. He was the wronged party here. He had been scared out of his mind. She should have left a note or something on the answering machine. They were married. He had a right to be concerned about her.

"Why didn't you remind me about the appointment when I called?" he asked, proud he was able to control his voice.

Her eyebrows went up. "You didn't give me a chance. You just told me your plans to have dinner with Melissa and hung up."

"What about a note? Couldn't you have left a note?" Memory of the sick feeling in his stomach when he didn't know where she was had him hitting the table with the flat of his hand. "Damn it, Cass, we're not roommates. We're married. Didn't it even cross your mind I'd be worried about you?"

"Yes. It crossed my mind."

His fingers tightened around her shoulders as he dragged her toward him, his voice rising, "Then why the hell didn't you call?"

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She broke free and slumped down on the couch, her face turned away. "I was jealous. I wanted you to worry," she mumbled.

"What? I didn't hear what you said."

She looked directly at him, her hazel eyes wary. "I said I was jealous, and I wanted you to worry."

Her answer caught him so off guard, he laughed. "Jealous? You don't have a jealous bone in your body."

The in-your-face defiant look on Cass's face disappeared, and she turned her head. The next instant, her shoulders heaved as great gulping noises issued from her mouth, and a torrent of tears poured from her eyes.

Alarmed, Dooley knelt beside her and gathered her in his arms. "What is it? Cass, honey, talk to me."

She began to sob harder, and tension knotted his stomach. Something was very wrong. These tears were not the result of a hormonal overload. Cass sobbed as if her heart were shattered.

Scooping her up in his arms, he sat on the couch and settled her on his lap with slow rocking motions. He held her until her crying turned to noisy sniffles, and then deep sighs.

He rested his chin on the top of her head. "So tell me," he said softly.

"I miss my friend," she whispered sadly, and Dooley's heart cracked.

"I'm here, Cassie. Your old friend Dooley. You can talk to me."

She straightened and moved from his lap to sit on the couch next to him. Slipping off the heavy leather jacket, she

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let it fall to the floor before she raised her head to meet his gaze. "That's just it, Dooley, we can't talk like we used to. Nothing is the same. I don't want to be jealous of you. I don't want to feel picked on if you decide to go and help an old friend instead of coming home. I want what we used to have."

Inwardly, he heaved a great sigh. She was talking about sex. Or rather no sex. It required all the intestinal fortitude he had to agree. "I want that too, Cass. No matter what else we are, we'll always be friends. I'll do whatever it takes to make you happy, including sleeping in my own bed."

Her eyes locked with his. "I think it would be better for us," she said slowly. "Making love brought a whole new element into our relationship that's turning me into a nutcase and can only cause problems for the both of us."

"Problems?"

"This is a temporary marriage, Dooley. Making love was a mistake. Now you'll probably agree to stay in the marriage forever because you think I need you."

He started to interrupt, but she put her hand over his mouth and continued, "I'm a big girl. I made one mistake, but I'm not going to make an even bigger one. We don't love each other the way people need to in a real marriage. Someday you'll find a woman you can love like that, and if we continue sleeping together, it will just make it worse."

He could feel the muscle tighten in his jaw as he bit back his response. He *had* found the right woman. Cass. He loved her and wanted their marriage to last forever. She was the one with blinders on. He wanted to yell at her to open her

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eyes and see what they had, but she obviously wasn't ready to hear it. With her confusion about their relationship, it probably would be better if they backed away from a sexual relationship until she got a better handle on things.

"Does this have anything to do with how you feel about Paul?" he asked, his body tensing for the answer.

Her eyes filled with tears once more as she leaned her forehead against his. "I think this has more to do with how I feel about you. I'm a wreck. I can't live without you, but I can't sleep with you either. I thought I would love Paul until I died, but some days I have a hard time remembering what he looks like."

Finally, in this entire relationship fiasco, there was hope. Dooley looked away so Cass wouldn't see the exultation in his face. This was the first time she had admitted maybe Paul wasn't her soul mate, the only man she could ever love. He'd probably be taking a lot of cold showers until the baby came, but things were definitely looking up.

He kissed her cheek and drew carefully away from her. "It's not good for you or the baby to be upset, Cass. If you want a platonic relationship, that's fine with me."

She tried to smile up at him through her tears, "You're being pretty accommodating. What exactly did Melissa want to talk about?"

He grimaced, and then laughed with reluctant humor, "You don't want to know." He stood up and headed toward his room. "This has been some day."

"Dooley?" her voice sounded tentative.

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He glanced back. She sat huddled on the couch, her face streaked with tears, her hair going every which way. She looked so lost, his stomach clenched. He wanted to take her to bed, replace that forlorn look with the look of scorching desire she'd worn that morning.

"Yeah?"

She started to speak, then shook her head, "Nothing. Good night."

She bent over to pick up her jacket, and he tried to avoid looking at her breasts, high and full against the denim shirt.

He forced a smile. "Night, honey. Sleep well. Things will look better in the morning."

An hour later, he was still tossing in bed, trying not to think about the night before. A picture of his life with Cass ran like a slow motion video through his mind. Their early years, their teens and later. He grinned at memories of some of their wilder escapades. He had always loved Cass, the girl. When had he fallen in love with Cass, the woman? And her baby?

He recalled the thrill of feeling the baby move beneath his fingers. He had definite plans for the baby. He knew it was a boy. Swinging in the park. Little League. A house in the country with a basketball hoop. If he had anything to do with it, he and Cass would certainly have more than one child. He hoped he could be the kind of dad his own father had been. It was certainly more relaxing to make plans for the future than to think about Cass alone in bed in the next room.

As if he had conjured her up with his thoughts, he heard her call softly, "You still awake?"

He debated about not answering, then reluctantly said, "I'm awake."

She appeared at his doorway wearing a voluminous nightgown, which in the faint light from the hallway made her look like a heroine in a Victorian novel.

She leaned against the doorjamb, "I can't sleep."

He sat up in the bed and propped a pillow behind his back. "I can't either."

"Can I come in?" She moved toward his bed.

"Cass," he said warningly, "that's not a good idea."

She stopped and sighed. "I know. I just thought if we could hold each other without sex, both of us might get some sleep."

A major dumb idea. Hold each other without sex? He would tell her how impossible it was. "Okay, sweetheart. We can do that." And he jumped up and out of his own bed so fast his brain was reeling. *Wait a minute. You fool!* His mind warned, but his body ushered both of them back to Cass's bed and sank into the mattress with a sigh of relief. He gathered her close to him, and within a matter of seconds they were both asleep.

At three A.M., he awoke and stared wide-awake at the ceiling, shaking with the effort to keep from sliding Cass's nightgown up around her waist and plunging into her. He was so hard he couldn't breathe. Quietly, he edged his way out of Cass's bed and went back to the cold sheets and discomfort of the other room. When the alarm went off, he was still staring at the ceiling.

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Chapter Thirteen

"Those are called onesies," Kathleen said, as Cass held up a tiny flowered undershirt that snapped at the bottom. "You'll need a lot of them."

Cass chuckled and shook the box, "There are ten of them in here. That's enough to last her a life time."

She noticed all the mothers in the room laughed. Glancing at the small mountain of clothing and baby paraphernalia piled around her, Cass wondered how a tiny baby could possibly need so much stuff.

"Open mine next, Cass," Dooley's mother called from across the room. Cass's niece, Shelly, hauled a large, gaily wrapped box in front of her. Inside the box, she found a large state-of-the art infant car seat with every available safety feature.

"Thanks, Aunt Helen. We looked at this kind, but didn't think we could afford it. Dooley will be thrilled."

Mrs. Dooley waved her hands expansively and said with a large smile, "Nothing is too expensive for my granddaughter."

As if in accordance with this statement, Cass felt the baby give an exuberant kick against her bladder. At seven and a half months, Andrea Dooley, was practicing to be a place kicker for the Patriots. Cass jumped up, climbed over the mess of paper, ribbons and presents and barely made it to the bathroom. This was getting ridiculous. She couldn't go anywhere where she didn't have ready access to a bathroom.

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The baby shower had been a surprise, carefully planned by her sisters-in-law and both mothers. In addition to them, all of Cass's co-workers at the gym had come, along with several other friends, cousins on both sides, and assorted female relatives. About twenty women were crammed into Cass's small living room. Dooley must have been in on the surprise. He had practically forced her to stay home all morning and rest. When the apartment doorbell rang at eleven, he had welcomed the horde of women carrying food and presents, kissed Cass on the cheek, and disappeared.

He would love going through all the presents, she thought, glancing idly around the bathroom. She smiled inwardly, remembering the expression on his face when the ultrasound revealed they were having a girl. He had stared at the moving images, pretending to see her clearly.

"She's waving at us," he said, waving energetically back at the video screen. "Boy, is she a great swimmer, or what!"

After pouring over name books for two weeks, they had finally decided on Andrea Dooley for the baby's name. Dooley had opted for a middle name, but Cass held firm that without a middle name Andrea would be able to retain her last name when she married, keeping her maiden name as a middle name.

Dooley had teased her about planning so far ahead. "She's not even here yet, and you're already marrying her off."

"Who brought home the college brochures?"

He grinned sheepishly, "That's different. It's important nowadays that girls go to a good school. It's a jungle out there."

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In the past two months, their relationship had settled back into the comfortable friendship Cass had thought she wanted. They teased each other, played practical jokes, planned for the baby, slept in separate beds, and never talked about the night they made love. But she thought about it, a lot. And although Dooley never said anything, she often caught him gazing at her with a dark, heated look that caused her temperature to rise.

However, lately he had stopped looking at her in that particular way. She wasn't surprised. She looked like a whale. Her feet swelled until she couldn't fit into any of her shoes, and her fingers resembled sausages.

Whoever said that women looked beautiful during the final stages of pregnancy hadn't been following her around. Being uncomfortable made her snippy. Dooley worked longer and longer hours at the plant, blaming his new position as plant manager, but she knew the real reason was because she'd been so difficult to live with. She usually couldn't fall asleep until she heard his key in the door, but when he opened her door to check on her, she pretended to be asleep.

Her mother pounded on the bathroom door. "Cass, are you all right in there? We're getting ready to serve the food."

"I'll be right out, Mom," she said as she hauled herself up from the seat. She couldn't believe how big she'd gotten in just the past week. Her face had puffed up so much she looked like the Pillsbury Dough Boy. A few minutes later, she discovered it was impossible to balance a plate of cake and a paper cup of punch on her lap. She didn't have a lap. As she looked around for a place to safely stow the food, her sister-

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in-law maneuvered her way through scattered piles of presents and discarded wrapping paper and hauled Cass up off the couch.

"Come with me," Kathleen ordered. Bypassing the kitchen filled with chattering and laughing women, she led Cass to her bedroom and closed the door.

Cass sunk down on her bed, suddenly realizing her level of exhaustion. Kathleen stood over her, a frown marring her usually good-natured face.

"When's your next doctor's appointment?"

"In two weeks, why?"

"I just noticed how swollen you are."

Cass laughed. "I'm seven months pregnant. I'm supposed to be swollen."

Kathleen poked her finger into the back of Cass's hand. "Not this swollen. I saw you last week and you looked normal. Now you look like a puff pastry."

"If you brought me in here to tell me how much weight I've gained, I'm already aware of it. I'm the one carrying it around." Cass fought the antagonism she felt at Kathleen's officiousness, but she knew she still sounded curt.

Her expression immediately remorseful, Kathleen slipped her arm around Cass's shoulder. "I'm not criticizing you, honey. I think you should see your doctor about all this fluid retention."

Cass chortled, "Fluid retention! I don't think so. I'm going to the bathroom every ten seconds."

"That's not exactly normal either." Kathleen frowned. "I think I'll call your doctor myself." She reached for the phone next to the bed.

Cass felt the first finger of fear creep up her spine. "Wait a minute. We're in the middle of a party. You'll cause a major panic. Maybe I've just eaten too much salt this week or something."

Kathleen replaced the receiver. "All right, but as soon as the party's over, we're going to call."

To Cass's chagrin, the situation wouldn't wait until the party ended. A half hour later, as she stood over the kitchen sink, emptying ice cubes into a pitcher, a wave of dizziness accompanied by a sharp pain in her abdomen caused her to clutch at the counter to keep from falling over.

As she had predicted, panic ensued, and within a very few minutes they were speeding toward the emergency room in her mother's car, with Dooley's mother and sister alternately trying to soothe her and urge her mother to greater speed from the back seat. When they arrived, at Cass's request, Kathleen ushered the two soon-to-be grandmothers back to the waiting room—their anxious hovering only compounding her fear.

Lying flat on an examining table in the emergency ward, stark terror ripped through her. It was too early for the baby, yet the pains kept coming. They didn't feel like contractions, more like someone kept poking her with a razor blade.

"Mama's here, Andrea," she murmured, placing her hands protectively over her stomach. Nothing was going to happen to her baby. "You're going to be fine," she declared fiercely.

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She wanted Dooley. Everything would be okay when Dooley came.

And then he was there.

Racing into the room like a mad man, he threw his arms around her and cradled her against his chest. She finally let the tears fall as she rested her head against the frantic beating of his heart.

"Sweetheart, the doctor will be here in a second. I passed her on the way in."

On the heels of that pronouncement, Dr. Rosalie Stein walked in, looking calm and efficient in green scrubs, a stethoscope around her neck. "Are you having contractions, Cass?" she asked, sliding a rubber glove on her right hand as she spoke.

"I don't think they're contractions. There's no cramping or anything. It feels more like a pulled muscle."

Now that Dooley and the doctor were both in the room, Cass felt calmer. Dooley's freckles looked like copper pennies against the pallor of his face, and he squeezed her hand so tightly it went numb. As her pain eased, she wondered if it was all in her head.

"Everything will be okay, sweetheart. Isn't that right, Doctor?" Dooley grasped her hand even harder as he gazed anxiously at the doctor, who nodded absently as she pinched a fold of skin around Cass's ankle.

"How long have your feet and ankles been swollen like this?" the doctor asked as she adjusted Cass's feet in the stirrups and urged her to scoot forward on the table.

"About two weeks, but today they're really bad," Cass said.

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Dooley and Cass eyed the doctor anxiously, both seeking immediate reassurance this was a normal pregnancy thing. But the total absence of expression on the doctor's face helped little.

The doctor's smooth features frowned slightly as she took Cass's blood pressure.

"What is it, doctor? Does she have toxemia? Is Cass going to be okay?"

"Never mind me," Cass broke in, "is Andrea going to be okay?"

A small smile crossed the doctor's face as she glanced at Dooley. "You really have done your home work, haven't you, Mr. Dooley?"

Although Cass experienced a twinge of embarrassment that Dooley knew more about pregnancy problems than she did, she felt the pressure ease. Whatever was wrong, it couldn't be life threatening, or the doctor wouldn't be smiling. However, the doctor's next words sent an icy chill through her.

"Cass's blood pressure is quite a bit higher than it was at her last check up. I believe she is going into a condition called pre-eclampsia. In five minutes, I'll take another reading with her sitting up. But the swelling combined with an elevated BP is pretty conclusive."

"Pre-eclampsia? I've never heard of it." Cass's voice wobbled.

The doctor pressed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "The common term is toxemia. It happens in about four

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percent of pregnant women who experience extreme hypertension in the later months of pregnancy."

The relief was so great, Cass laughed. "Well, high blood pressure is not going to kill me. My dad's had it for years. "

"Toxemia's nothing to fool around with, Cass," Dooley interrupted grimly. "It can kill you and the baby."

Her mouth fell open as she stared at him. He'd never looked so fierce. He also looked determined and scared.

"What do you know about anything, Dooley? You're not a doctor."

"It's in the baby books. You should have read them."

"I couldn't get them away from you," she snapped, pulling her hand from his.

Doctor Stein interrupted, her tone calm. "Pre-eclampsia can be dangerous if it is not dealt with, especially if it goes into eclampsia. Since we caught it early, there's a very good chance Cass will be able to deliver a normal, healthy baby."

"Chance?" Cass's choked whisper blended with Dooley's.

"You mean there's only a chance now? It's not a sure thing?" Cass's voice broke on the question. "It's really that serious?"

The doctor nodded but also smiled comfortingly. "It's serious, but certainly treatable, and something we just have to monitor. You and your baby will be fine."

"Whatever it is, we'll do it, Doc," Dooley said, once again grabbing Cass's hand and holding it against his chest. She could feel his heart pounding as wildly as hers.

Cass nodded slowly, still trying to assimilate the idea her baby might be in danger. She cleared the lump in her throat.

"Was it something I did or didn't do? Maybe the way I ate? I have been eating a lot lately."

Doctor Stein spoke soothingly. "It's not what you've done, but what you have to do to get this condition under control. We're going to keep you overnight and try to get your blood pressure down, which should reduce the swelling."

Cass struggled to sit up on the examining table. "I have to stay in the hospital?"

"Just overnight. We're also going to put you a restricted diet for a few weeks to see if we can control the fluid build up."

She leaned against Dooley who stood next to the table. He enfolded her in his arms and kissed the top of her head.

"Can Dooley stay with me?" It suddenly became very important that Dooley remain close to her.

The doctor smiled and nodded. "We'll put you in a room with a reclining chair. They're comfortable if you're not going to spend several nights in them."

While the orderlies wheeled Cass to a small room on the maternity ward, Dooley reported to their anxious families in the waiting room.

"I will stay with my daughter," Miriam Vocjek announced. "She needs her mother at this time."

"Cass has a husband to stay with her," James Vocjcek reminded his wife as he urged her out of the waiting room.

Dooley finally convinced his own family to leave by promising to call them every couple of hours. By the time he made it back to Cass' room, she was in bed, hooked up to a monitor while a nurse busily adjusted an IV drip.

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Twenty minutes later, the small room quieted, except for the soft beeps from the monitor. Cass lay in the bed staring at the ceiling, her hands resting lightly on her abdomen.

He stood next to her, feeling helpless. "It's only seven o'clock. You want to play cards or watch television, or something?"

She shook her head. "I feel like if I just lie here and not move, everything will fix itself." She turned her head toward him, her hazel eyes huge in her pale face. "You know, at first, when Paul left me, I didn't want this pregnancy or the baby. Now I can't imagine a life without her. She is so real to me. What will we do if we lose her, Dooley?"

Dooley's heart lurched in his chest. He turned away from her pleading eyes, struggling with the exact same fears.

"See if you can get some rest, babe," he said softly. "I'm going to sit in that recliner. If you need anything, you call me."

He nestled into the cushy chair and closed his eyes, letting his head rest against the back. Even though it was early, he felt exhausted. Quickly, his breathing settled into a slow even rhythm.

Dooley paced back and forth in the waiting room. From a distant hallway, he could hear Cass screaming. He wanted to go to her, but he was trapped in this sterile room, sweat pouring off his face as if he'd been running a marathon. Suddenly, Pastor Phillips appeared in the doorway, dressed in black vestments, his usually benevolent features set in a mask of sorrow.

"I am so sorry, my son. But you cannot fool God. There is a price for all the choices we make."

Cass screamed again, and Dooley shuddered, terror coursing through him. "Please forgive us, Pastor. We only wanted what was best for the baby."

The cleric shook his head. "You cannot lie to God, and therefore must not lie to yourself. You and Cass wanted what was best for yourselves. You made a mockery of the sacred marriage covenant. A penance will be required." At the minister's tone, which seemed gravely prophetic, Dooley felt the tears spurt from his eyes.

"Please don't punish them." He fell on his knees in front of the pastor. "It was me. I was the one who insisted on marriage. Please don't punish Cass and the baby." He sobbed as he pleaded for his family.

"Dooley, wake up." Cass's voice filtered through the darkness of Dooley's dream, became part of it until he awoke with a jolt, realizing she really had called his name.

He lay in the reclining chair for a few seconds, feeling disoriented, still caught up in the horrible nightmare. Then he remembered they were in the hospital and Cass needed him. He turned his head to look at her. She stared at him while she struggled to sit up. His head cleared, and he bolted out of the reclining chair to stand next to the hospital bed. "Is something wrong? Do you need the nurse?"

She shook her head. "You were crying in your sleep," she whispered. "It scared me."

Embarrassed, Dooley rubbed a hand over his face trying to remove the traces of the tears still damp on his cheeks. "Just

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a bad dream, Cass." He said lightly, as he leaned over to kiss her forehead. "Nothing to worry about."

A frown puckered her brow. "Must have been some dream. I've never seen you cry before."

"What about the day you got your license? You begged me to let you drive my new car, and then you crashed it into the corner of our garage. I'm sure I cried then." *Keep it light. Keep the nightmare at bay. Don't infect Cass with your fears.*

A smile lit her face as she remembered. "There wasn't any crying, just lots of yelling. I can't remember another time when you were so angry at me, but when your dad came home, you told him you were the one who wrecked the garage so he wouldn't tear into me."

Dooley grinned. "We would have gotten away with it too if Kathleen, the snitch, hadn't told him what really happened. He grounded me for a month for lying."

Cass's smile slowly faded. "My parents grounded me for letting you take the blame." She lay back on the bed, her eyes closed. "You've been covering for me my whole life. Trying to keep me out of trouble. You are the nicest, sweetest guy I've ever known." She spoke so softly he barely heard it. "I wish we weren't in this mess. I know I'm beginning to sound like a broken record, but I'm afraid we'll never get back to what we had before."

She sounded so forlorn, he wanted to comfort her, but her words pissed him off, and he was shocked by his desire to yell at her.

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I don't want what we had before! I am more than your best friend! I'm your husband now. I love you, I want you. I want our baby. You are mine, Cass. Why can't you see that?

Dooley's resolve hardened as he stared at her beloved face. As soon as she came home from the hospital, they'd have a serious talk about turning their make-believe marriage into a real one. During the past months, he and Cass had only played at marriage, so anxious to preserve their friendship, they shied away from trying to build something permanent. He loved her, and if she didn't love him that way, well that was too damn bad! He'd get her to love him. He'd fill her life with so much happiness, she'd never think of Paul again.

"Dooley?" Cass tried to gain enough leverage sit up again, so he placed his arm around her shoulder and helped her to sit more comfortably.

"It's midnight. You're supposed to be sleeping," he said firmly, fighting the urge to crawl up in the single bed and lie beside her. Cuddle her to sleep.

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. Just lie down and close your eyes."

She stuck her tongue out at him, and he laughed. "That's mature."

"I want you to call the nurse," she said, staring down at the folds of the blanket in her lap.

What an idiot he was! While he stood around wishing he could crawl into the bed with her, she needed medical help. "I'm sorry, honey. You should have told me right away you needed the nurse. Are you dizzy again?"

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She shook her head and flushed, the delicate pink stain reaching her hairline. "I have to go to the bathroom."

Dooley's laugh echoed in the small room. "I can help you. I'm your husband."

She shook her head more vehemently this time and began to wail. "I don't want you to help me. I want a nurse."

Dooley stiffened, the hurt slamming him in the gut. "Well, then I'll get the nurse," he said grimly.

"Please don't get that look on your face," Cass said, flustered and embarrassed.

"What look?" He avoided her eyes.

She glared at him, then sighed. "The reason I don't want you to help me is I'm fat and ugly and clumsy. I have to take the IV stand with me, and I won't be able to pull down my panties. I can't ask you to do that."

The hurt evaporated in a rush of tenderness. "Sweetheart, you are not ugly or clumsy. You're pregnant. It would be an honor to pull down your panties."

As quickly as that, the mood shifted. She chuckled. "You probably say that to all the girls. I notice you didn't say I wasn't fat."

Dooley slid a helpful arm around her again and held her as she slid her legs from the bed to the floor.

"Come on," he said, adjusting the IV tube and lifting her to her feet. "Into the bathroom before we have an accident, and then we *will* have to call the nurse."

As she shuffled slowly to the bathroom door, he followed, wheeling the IV stand next to her. He glanced down at the

rounded contours of her naked backside clearly visible in the opening of the hospital gown.

"You have the sweetest butt I ever saw," he murmured in her ear.

She reached behind to grab the edges of the gown, but he caught her arm and passed his hand lightly over her bottom in a brief caress. Because his arms were around her, supporting her, he knew she felt his instant arousal.

She giggled. "Only a pervert would be turned on by someone who looks like Moby Dick."

Dooley smiled back at her, pleased he'd gotten her to laugh. "I like my women plump." He said, raising his eyebrows in a Groucho Marx leer.

"I guess you've got a keeper, then," Cass said ruefully gazing down at her protruding abdomen.

Her comment pleased him so much, he kissed the back of her neck as he eased her through the bathroom door. He then helped her with such brisk efficiency, she was back in bed in a matter of minutes.

Cass yawned sleepily as she snuggled down in the bed. Dooley tucked the covers around her as if she were a child. "Good night, Cass," he whispered, kissing her fully on the mouth, smiling as she kissed him back and then sighed and closed her eyes. He leaned over and placed a kiss on her stomach, through the blanket. "Good night, Andrea."

He turned off the lights, settled back in the recliner, and closed his eyes, more at peace than he had been all evening.

"What did you dream about, Dooley?" Cass asked quietly from the bed.

"It was nothing, Cass. Go to sleep."

"It had to be about the baby. You wouldn't have cried if you weren't worried."

Dooley wasn't surprised she knew. She'd always been able to read him better than anyone else.

"I am worried about you and the baby," Dooley admitted. "I'm especially worried neither of you is getting any sleep. Close your eyes, and no more talking."

"Yes, daddy."

Dooley could hear the smile in her voice.

"But you don't have to worry about us," she reassured him. "We're going to be fine."

Dooley hoped she was right. He felt the nightmare had been a warning to him. His and Cass's marriage had begun as a marriage of convenience. They hadn't considered the deceptions needed to pull it off. They had even deceived themselves into thinking they didn't feel the kind of love necessary to make a true marriage—romantic love. He was ready to admit he loved Cass, romantically and every other way. He loved her baby. Right now, Cass still couldn't see beyond their friendship to what their real relationship had become, but he was determined to turn the marriage into a real one. A lasting one. He just had to convince her.

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Chapter Fourteen

The balloons came through the apartment door first, a riotous burst of color floating up to the ceiling. Then Cass heard two male voices singing "Happy Birthday" at the top of their lungs. Struggling to get up from the couch, she began giggling as the off-key notes warbled and wavered on, "Happy birthday, dear Ca-ass, happy birthday to you-oo."

Dooley stuck his head in and ordered her back to the couch. "Close your eyes. We're bringing your present in, so keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them."

Obediently, Cass waddled back to where she'd been sitting all morning. Entering the final month of her pregnancy, she felt as if she were carrying quintuplets. Baby Andrea Dooley never stayed in one place or napped. She kicked and pounded Cass's insides twenty-four/seven until Cass's bladder suffered, her ribs suffered, and several vertebra in her lower back protested daily.

However, today was her birthday, and she'd vowed not to whine for the entire day. Now, sitting with her eyes closed, she listened to her brother Ken and Dooley grunt and swear as they lugged something obviously very large through the door and into the living room to a place directly in front of her.

"You can open your eyes on three," Dooley said. "One, two..."

She opened her eyes to stare at the huge ladder-back rocking chair in front of her.

"Damn it, Cass, I said wait to three." But Dooley grinned at the stupefied look on her face.

"Grandma Vocjek's rocking chair," she whispered, her chin quivering. "Where did you find it? We thought it burned up in the fire."

When Cass was a teenager, most of her grandmother's belongings had been destroyed in a fire at the assisted living center where she lived, shortly before she passed away. Both Cass and her mother repeatedly mourned the loss of the huge old rocker, which had been passed down through several generations of Vocjek children and grandchildren.

"I found it in an antique store," Ken grinned triumphantly. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I spotted it. I knew it was hers because Roger's initials are still carved in the bottom of the seat."

Reverently, Cass ran her hand over the upholstered arms. "It looks brand new. Who did the upholstery?"

Dooley grinned, obviously pleased by her reaction. "Mr. Armory's sister is an upholsterer. She tried to match the original material as closely as she could."

Cass blinked back tears as she traced the ornate carvings in the wood below the upholstery. "This is the best present anyone has ever given me." She threw her arms around Dooley. "Thank you. I love it, and Andrea will too."

"Hey, wait a minute," her brother protested. "I found the chair. All he did was make it look pretty. Where's my thank you?"

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She turned from Dooley, and Ken enveloped her in his arms as he tried to lift her in a whirling embrace. They both staggered off balance. "Whoa, girl, you weigh a ton."

Immediately, her eyes filled with tears. Then, she laughed at Ken's appalled expression.

"Sorry, Cass. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," he apologized.

"Don't worry about it, Ken. She has to cry at least ten times a day, and this was just one of those times," Dooley joked, as he moved behind Cass and gently rubbed her lower back. "You going to try out your present?"

The large chair could accommodate her and several small children if necessary. Cass felt positively dainty as she rocked back and forth in the newly refurbished antique.

"Does Mom know you found it?" she asked her brother.

He nodded. "At first, I wanted to give it to her, but she suggested Dooley and I fix it up for you."

Cass's eyes misted over once again. Her grandmother's chair. What a perfect gift! Now, if only the baby would make an appearance, they could put it to good use.

Ken eyed her warily before speaking to Dooley. "She's tearing up again. Can't say I blame her. Twenty-seven and looking pretty ripe. She'd better pop that kid before she explodes."

"Anybody ever tell you have a masterful way with words?" Dooley asked. When Ken shook his head, Dooley added, "I didn't think so. Why don't you leave now, and let me mop up the mess you made. We'll see you later at your folks' house for the party."

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When they were alone, Cass and Dooley went into his bedroom which they planned to turn into a nursery. The room was already crowded with furniture. In addition to the single bed and dresser, it contained a crib and a bassinet, a changing table and a pile of assorted baby paraphernalia.

Cass looked around and shook her head. "There's no room for anything in here."

"Well, we could take out my bed and dresser, then there'd be plenty of room," Dooley said thoughtfully.

"Then where will you sleep?"

"With you. Your bed's certainly big enough for both of us." His voice sounded casual, but his look said his request was anything but. He reached out and clasped her hand in his, brushing his fingers over her knuckles. "What do you say, Cass?"

Although his eyes had lightened with amusement, Cass realized he wasn't kidding. Dooley had been more than patient through her whole pregnancy. Already more than half in love with him, she realized he truly made the perfect partner for her, and he'd be a terrific father. It had been months since they had discussed getting a divorce. They never talked about Andrea's real father, and when Cass thought about Paul these days it came with a kind of sad nostalgia.

Dooley deserved a real marriage with marital privileges. She couldn't ask for a better friend or a more supportive husband. And, after several months of abstinence, she'd appreciate a few marital privileges herself. With a sense of inevitability, she realized it was time to move their marriage

to the next level and start planning a stable family for Andrea.

Standing close together in the crowded room, Cass could feel the air around them thicken with emotion as they stared at each other. She could feel heat radiating from him or maybe from her. Whoever generated it, it moved through her in a sensual flame from her chest downward to her center. She recognized it as the prime motivator for most her of sleepless nights and erotic dreams for the past months.

She stared at Dooley's lips—thin and masculine. Would they be hard and demanding as they'd been the first and only time they'd made love? She wanted him to kiss her again. Wanted to do more than just kiss.

Dooley's eyes darkened as if he had read her mind. He leaned toward her just as Andrea aimed a straight shot to her kidneys. "Oof," she groaned, clutching her side.

He touched her shoulder. "You okay?"

The amusement and whatever else had been in his eyes disappeared as he put his arms around her and helped her to the edge of the bed.

"I'll be lucky not to need a kidney transplant by the time this baby gets here," Cass joked. She lay back on the bed and stretched out her legs. She and Dooley both watched the rolling ripples beneath her maternity shirt.

"It looks as if she's swimming laps in there," Dooley said.

"Feels more like the butterfly stroke. At least she's active."

Dooley propped himself on one arm and looked down into her face. "So what do you think?"

Her lips quirked. "About what?"

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"About me making the splendid gesture of giving the baby my room and moving into your bed?"

Feeling the sexual pull of their mutual need, she let the smile spread across her face.

"Splendid gesture?"

He dropped his head until his lips were just above hers.

"It's a great sacrifice, and I should be compensated," he murmured, never taking his eyes from hers.

Staring into her eyes, Dooley waited until she finally nodded, and he closed the distance between them. He took her in his arms and whispered her name. As his lips began a leisurely journey over her face, touching her cheeks, the corner of her eye, her left temple, her breath caught, and she closed her eyes. Then she slid her hands into his hair, urging his mouth back to her hers.

That fast, the kiss changed. Suddenly, they were straining against each other, his knee insinuated between her legs and his hand gently cupped her breast, rhythmically teasing the nipple in time to the movement of his tongue in and out of her mouth. Buttons flew as she pulled his shirt open and ran her hand up and down his chest, thrilling as he held his breath and then let it out in a long sigh.

"Honey, I want you so bad, I'm about to explode with it." Dooley groaned, moving his mouth down to suckle one of her breasts through her shirt. "Will it be too uncomfortable for you?"

Well, hell, Cass thought. She'd been so excited she'd actually forgotten she was pregnant. She sighed and pulled away from him, the fever in her blood cooling slightly. "I don't

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think this will work, Dooley. I'm so big it would be like making love to a rhino."

He chuckled as he pulled her back into a warm embrace. "Hey, how do you think rhinos make babies? I read in the *National Geographic* that rhinos are exceptionally horny and very creative lovers."

"I bet they don't do it when the mother rhino is ten months pregnant. They probably find a little, unpregnant cutie to hang out with."

Dooley cupped her face in his hands. "Cass, I don't want an unpregnant cutie. I want you. I want to make love to you, pregnant and not. I want us to sleep together for the next fifty years—to have a marriage like our parents have."

This time, she made the first move, leaning over to kiss him, her hand reaching for his belt buckle. His hand moved inside her stretch pants and panties, gently stroking the damp center between her legs. She gasped at the fiery explosions spiraling through her bloodstream.

"Kathleen told me a way we could make love," she whispered as he unbuttoned her shirt with one hand and continued the circular motion of his fingers against the wet heat of her.

"Tell me," he demanded, spreading her shirt open, slipping down her bra strap, and nuzzling his face against her breasts.

She opened her mouth to tell him, when Andrea made another dive bomb attack against her kidneys. The pain nearly doubled her over, and she cried out.

Dooley immediately backed away. "Did I hurt you? God, Cass I'm sorry."

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Though there were tears in her eyes, she had to chuckle. "It's not you, Dooley. It's the baby. She's going to be twelve pounds if I have to go another month. She wants out. She hates it in there. I can tell."

Dooley wrapped his arms around her and they lay quietly together, her head resting on the crook of his arm. When the impression of what seemed to be a tiny foot pushed against Cass's distended abdomen, Dooley splayed a warm hand over it, then forced his voice to sound stern.

"Andrea, this is Daddy speaking. Your mommy and I want to make love, and we want you to take a nap for a while. Do not move or make a sound for the next two hours."

Cass laughed. "Two hours? You may be superman, but my stamina is limited these days."

"Okay, one hour." He was leaning over her, kissing her tummy, preparing to move lower, when the doorbell rang.

Dooley flung himself backwards on the bed, staring at the ceiling. "My horoscope must have predicted horrible things for today," he muttered. "Let's not answer it."

Cass giggled then struggled to sit up and pull her bra into place. "I have to. It's my birthday. That could be the mailman delivering presents or flowers. Suppose the Dream Team is knocking on the door with the sweepstakes check."

Dooley gave a mock sigh. "I never knew you were so greedy." He slipped from the bed and grabbed his shirt from the floor. "I'll go. I'm more dressed than you are."

"Okay. I'll just wait here until you bring me my presents."

Cass lay on the bed in Dooley's crowded room, trying to cool her heated nervous system by mentally rearranging the

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furniture to make room for the rocker. She raised her left hand and stared at her wedding band. They had been married for seven months, and finally today, after they made love, their marriage would become real to both of them.

Several minutes later, Dooley still hadn't returned to the bedroom. Through the closed bedroom door, she heard the faint murmur of voices. Sighing heavily, she climbed off the bed and pulled one of Dooley's t-shirts over her head rather than trying to recover her maternity blouse from the floor.

The shirt clung to her, emphasizing the enormity of her protruding abdomen. She stared into the mirror over Dooley's dresser. "This is not beautiful. I don't care what the magazines say," she muttered.

Grabbing Dooley's brush, she pulled her hair into a lopsided ponytail and secured it with a banana clip. They were going to her parent's house later for a birthday dinner, so it made no sense to do her hair and makeup before then.

Poor Dooley. He was really dealing with the fuzzy end of the lollipop—not only had he missed out on a normal sexual relationship, but now they were planning to end their months of celibacy, his wife looked like Mt. Rushmore. She could feel the warmth once more slip down her spine and pool low in her abdomen as she remembered his roving hands and mouth.

So they didn't do the deed yet, hadn't gotten to it actually. There was still plenty of time left in the afternoon, and after the dinner tonight, she'd let him know he was more than welcome in her bed.

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Just so there'd be no question about where Dooley would sleep that night, she stripped the sheets and blanket from his bed and dumped them in his hamper.

Her bed was larger and more comfortable. If they decided to try Kathleen's recommendation this afternoon, she'd rather do it in her bed.

Where the heck was Dooley?

She grabbed his two pillows from the stripped bed and opened the door, planning to deposit them in her room.

She could hear voices in the living room as she went across the hall to her bedroom. In her bedroom, she glanced once more at herself in the mirror. If it were possible, she seemed to have deteriorated since her last glimpse of herself. Her hair already tumbled out of the ponytail clip, and the t-shirt looked almost obscene as it clung to her huge stomach. She slipped a baggy sweater over the shirt and headed into the living room to see who had dropped by.

She walked into the living room, just in time to hear Dooley threaten the handsome man holding a huge bouquet of spring flowers in front of him like a weapon. "You do anything to upset her, and I'll break both your legs."

Her breath caught in her throat as the man caught sight of her over Dooley's shoulder and walked toward her.

"Happy birthday, Cass," he said, handing her the flowers. "I've missed you."

"Hello, Paul," she said faintly.

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Chapter Fifteen

Dooley's heart sank as he watched Cass nervously touch her hair and try to close the oversized sweater over the ugly t-shirt she wore. Aside from saying his name, she hadn't spoken to Paul, only stared at him as if he were a ghost—and a not unwelcome ghost at that. Neither of them said anything. To Dooley, it seemed as if he were watching a movie of some schmaltzy love story. If he waited long enough, mysterious violin music would crescendo in the background, and he would disappear as the two star-crossed lovers fell into each other's arms.

No way! Not in this lifetime. He tried to tamp down the slow rage which had been building since he opened the door to Paul Wiley. Cass was his. This interloper couldn't come around with his freakin' flowers and try to mess up everything Dooley had been building toward for the last eight months. A surge of possessive fury catapulted him from the sidelines to the center of the room between them.

"What are you doing here, Wiley?"

Paul raised an eyebrow. "I've come to see Cass, obviously."

"Why?"

"We have unfinished business between us—she is carrying my child." He gave Dooley a pitying look, which annoyed the hell out of him.

"You do know we're married, don't you?" Dooley attempted his own arrogant tone, but it was difficult with his palms sweating and his heart vibrating in terror.

Another raised eyebrow. "I know. My brother wrote me. I also know Cass only married you because of the pregnancy. She doesn't love you."

Both men looked at Cass who appeared to be nearly catatonic, her face as pale as the white t-shirt she had on.

"Cass?" Dooley willed her to say something, not just stand there looking like she'd been hit by a two-by-four.

She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it and swallowed as if she couldn't get the words out. She cleared her throat twice and finally said, "How long are you here for, Paul?"

Her ex-boyfriend reached out to touch her shoulder. Gazing deeply into her eyes, he said, "That depends on you. My contract in Michigan ended last week. I came back as soon as I could."

Dooley snorted. "In case it's escaped your notice, she's eight months along. Where were you seven months ago?" What he wanted to say was, *get your hands off my wife*. He wanted Cass to tell him to get the hell out of their home. But Cass just kept staring at his pretty boy features as if she couldn't believe he really stood in front of her.

The fear began as an ache low in his belly. He was going to lose her. She still loved Paul. He could see it in her face. Fed up with his own inertia, he decided to force the issue. "What do you want to do, Cass?"

"Do?" she asked vaguely.

"Earth to Cass," he said sarcastically. "One of us has to go. You decide."

She looked at him pleadingly. "I have to talk to him, Dooley. You do understand, don't you?"

"Sure, I understand. Whatever you want is fine with me. I'm out of here. You can call me at my folks'."

Cass swallowed. "Are you going to tell them?"

He shrugged. He didn't know what the hell he intended to do, but he had to get out of there before he found himself on his knees begging her to stay. A part of him kept insisting he should grab Wiley by the neck and haul him out of the apartment, but Cass had to decide for herself who she wanted. If only she weren't so damn vulnerable right now. Wiley was Andrea's father. Maybe Cass would believe that counted.

Suddenly, Dooley realized if he lost Cass, he'd also lose the baby. The baby he'd thought of as his for the past seven months. The crushing weight of disappointment nearly brought him to his knees. He had to get out. Without saying another word, he wheeled out the door and down the stairs to the parking lot.

Cass couldn't think, couldn't focus. Just a few minutes ago, she had dropped Dooley's pillows on her bed as a symbolic gesture, significant to both of them. Now, her brain short-circuited, and her body felt like it was caught in some kind of cosmic time warp. She couldn't think clearly. Paul had come back. He'd brought her flowers for her birthday. He acted as if he wanted to pick up where they'd left off.

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She was still trying to assess how she felt, when Paul moved close and tried to draw her into his arms. When she moved away, he looked surprised.

"Cass, baby, I came back to you. I'm willing to marry you."

The words registered like cold water bouncing across a hot griddle. Cass shuddered as if coming out of a trance. When her vision cleared she saw Paul for what he really was. Someone she couldn't trust for the long haul.

"I'm already married," she said quietly.

He moved toward her again. "But you don't love him. You love me. Remember how it was, Cass. It's never been as good with anyone else as it was between us. I can't stop thinking about it. Hell, that's really the reason I came back. I don't mind about the baby. You won't always be as big as you are now."

"You don't mind about the baby?" she repeated incredulously. "This is, or rather might have been your baby. She's not some minor inconvenience that will disappear as soon as she's born."

A frown darkened his handsome face. "I know that. What do you mean it might have been my baby? Is the child you're carrying mine or not?"

It was so simple. The lie came easily to her lips, although in her heart she knew she told the truth. "I thought it was. But it isn't. It's Dooley's baby. I'm sorry if I misled you."

He narrowed his eyes. "It's not my kid?"

"Nope." She almost chuckled at the obvious relief he had difficulty containing.

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He eyed her with something close to horror. "This isn't exactly the reunion I pictured," he said. "Do all pregnant women let themselves go like this?" He waved a hand to indicate her unkempt hair and protruding belly."

The pompous ass! Let him try being pregnant for eight months and see how polished he looked.

"So you're not going to hit me up for child support or anything like that?"

A low angry hum moved through Cass. "I wouldn't ask you for directions, you creep. This baby's lucky you're not her father."

His chiseled features darkened with anger. "Where do you get off calling me names? You're the one who lied about me getting you pregnant." He advanced toward her. "You were sleeping with your *friend* at the same time you were sleeping with me. I've been worried sick about having to support your kid."

He grabbed the bouquet of fresh cut flowers from the coffee table and pushed them at Cass. "Put these in water. They cost me fifty bucks."

As Cass reached for the flowers, she could barely keep from laughing in his face. He glared at her, apparently angrier about her neglect of the flowers than her pregnancy. How could she ever have thought him sensitive and intelligent? It was as if someone had swept a veil from her eyes, and she could see now how self-centered and selfish he was. He would be a terrible father. A wave of relief rolled over her as she realized her narrow escape.

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Feeling immensely lighter and happy, she turned, heading toward the kitchen for a vase, and ran smack into Grandma Vocjek's rocking chair. The flowers flew from her hand, sailing into the air as she tripped, losing her balance. Instantly, she realized she would land hard on the floor. She shifted to protect the baby, and a sharp pain dazed her as she struck the back of her head on the heavy oak coffee table.

"Cass. Are you all right?" Paul knelt at her side trying to lift her to a sitting position. "My God, you're bleeding all over the carpet."

Despite the massive throbbing at the back of her head and the jagged flashes of yellow light zigzagging across her vision, his comment made her laugh. She attempted to rise to her knees when a pain knifed through her abdomen, making her gasp and fall back to the carpeted floor.

Andrea! The fall had injured the baby. Tears spurted from her eyes, but she forced her voice to remain calm. "Call 9-1-1, Paul," she ordered. "Something's wrong with the baby." She felt nauseated although the pain in her stomach had begun to subside. "After you call the paramedics, try to find Dooley. His parents' number is next to the phone."

He stared down at her with a horrified expression. "I can't call your husband. He threatened to break my legs."

Had he always been this ridiculous? The zigzag flashes in her vision were replaced by an encroaching mist of soft gray, accompanied by a very nice floating sensation. Just before she blacked out completely, she reached out her hand and patted Paul's shoe. "Don't worry about Dooley. He's always kidding."

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When Dooley slammed out of their apartment, he felt as if all of his internal organs had frozen into a solid mass. Frantically, he laid a hand across his chest to see if he could feel his heart beating. It was, but just barely. Even though he'd told Cass he'd go to his parents' house, he couldn't. He would probably end up blubbering like a baby.

After walking aimlessly for ten minutes, he headed for Ken's place. Ken's wife had left him for another man. Surely, he'd have some words of advice, but as Dooley's fingers pressed the doorbell, his numbed faculties suddenly thawed. Ken was not handling his divorce at all well. What kind of wisdom could he expect from him?

When Ken opened the door to see Dooley standing on the porch, a look of surprise lit his face. "I didn't think Cass would give up her boy toy on her birthday," he joked.

Then noticing Dooley's unusually serious expression, he opened his door wider to let him in. "What's up, Dooley?"

Dooley just shook his head, unable to say anything. Once in the small living room, Dooley looked around for a place to sit. As usual, Ken's apartment was a mess. He only cleaned it on the weekends his kids visited. Otherwise, newspapers, empty beer cans and the remains of half eaten microwave dinners cluttered every flat surface.

"You want a beer?" Ken asked, heading toward his minuscule kitchen.

"Sounds good." Dooley moved a week's accumulation of debris from a chair to the floor, being careful to check for stray food before settling in the leather recliner.

"Here you are, my man."

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Ken tossed him a can of Miller Light, and he tapped the top before popping the lid.

"I thought you and Cass might be celebrating her birthday," Ken said casually.

"We were about to when we had company drop in," Dooley said glumly.

"Yeah? Who?" Ken took a deep pull from the can.

"Paul Wiley."

Ken choked on his beer. "What did he want?"

Dooley twisted the nearly full can in his hands. "He says he still loves Cass and wants her back."

Ken guffawed. "The guy's a fairy. I hope Cass told him where to get off." When Dooley didn't answer, Ken looked more closely at him. "She did tell him he was out of line, right?"

Dooley rubbed a hand over his face, and Ken dragged a kitchen chair closer.

"What's going on Dooley? Where's Cass?"

"She's at home—talking to Paul."

Ken uttered short, vulgar word. "I thought you guys were tight," he said. "Why didn't you just kick his butt out of your house?"

"Because he's the baby's father," Dooley said.

Ken jumped to his feet, an angry flush darkening his face. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Dooley shifted his gaze to a point beyond Ken's left shoulder. "Cass was pregnant with Wiley's baby when we got married."

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A litany of curses fell from Ken's mouth as he paced around the living room. "I can't believe my sister would deceive you like that, Dooley. When did you find out?" He cast him a horrified glance. "Oh man, you didn't just hear it today, did you?"

Dooley leaned back in the recliner and closed his eyes. "I knew before we got married. It was supposed to be a marriage of convenience for both of us. Wiley wouldn't marry her. So we decided to get married. She would have the baby, and after a while, we'd get a divorce. It seemed the right thing to do at the time."

Ken stopped pacing to stare at him. "But you're in love with Cass. I can see that. Hell, everyone can see it."

"I do love her. And it has been more than a marriage of convenience for us." He sighed. "But if she wants Wiley, I won't stand in her way."

"Bull!"

Dooley's eyes snapped open, and he glared at Ken.

"I suppose you think I should wave a club around and drag her away from him by her hair."

"Damn straight. Cass doesn't love Wiley. She's too smart to dump you for him."

"You should have seen the way she looked at him. It made me sick, Ken. I had to leave."

Ken snorted in disgust. "Well, if you're not willing to fight for her, just let her go then."

"Fight for her?" Outrage lanced through Dooley. "For almost nine months we've lived together, planned on having a

baby together, and suddenly that doesn't mean anything to her."

"Did she say that? Did she say she wanted to leave you?"

"I didn't give her a chance. She said she wanted to talk to him, so I left."

"Been there done that, old buddy. But my wife told me right to my face she wanted me out. Cass could be telling Wiley it's over even as we speak. You won't know unless you go back home." He shook his head. "I still can't believe it's not your baby. You're more into the Daddy thing than any guy I know, myself included. I love my kids, but I certainly didn't read twenty maternity books when they were on the way."

"A fat lot of good it did me," Dooley said, his misery combining with a bleak depression. "I watched Andrea grow inside Cass and felt so damn proud about being a father. Now I ..." Feeling the lump rise in his throat, he stood abruptly and carried his beer into the kitchen where he chucked it into the trashcan. He took a deep breath, trying to fill the emptiness inside.

"Go home, Dooley. Don't let that jerkoff steal your family," Ken ordered. "Cass loves you, even if she's not aware of it." He paused as if considering his words. "You—um—you haven't been celibate all this time, have you?"

Dooley walked back and sat down, remembering the non-celibate times of his marriage. "No. We made love, once. And were about to do it again when he showed up."

"God, Dooley, you're probably a candidate for sainthood. So, you've done the wild thing—that should count for

something." Ken eyed him carefully. "Unless it was a crappy experience."

Dooley kicked at an empty beer can. "It was one hell of a great experience, for both of us."

Ken smiled. "Well then, my man, time's on your side, even if Cass thinks she still has feelings for what's his name."

Dooley ran a hand down his face. Ken was right. He needed to go home and claim his wife. So much for being a self-sacrificing wimp. Cass was still his best friend as well as his wife, and he'd be damned if he'd let her get tangled up with Wiley again. Maybe the wedding vows hadn't meant much when they said them, but they meant something now.

With a determined stride, he headed for the door. "You're right, Ken. I'm going home. Cass is my wife. Andrea is my baby. Wiley is just the sperm donor. What was I thinking, leaving him there with her?"

As he ran down the steps to the street, Ken shouted after him, "You'd better call me in exactly one hour, Dooley, or I'll bring the big guns over."

"I'll call. And don't even think about contacting our parents," Dooley ordered, as he sprinted down the street toward his apartment, running the eight blocks in record time.

His spirits lifted a little as he mentally played the best-case scenario through his head. He hadn't even been gone an hour. Cass would still be at the apartment. Wiley would be gone. They would talk. He would tell her how much he loved her. She would tell him the same thing. In his mind, he could even hear the music playing as they walked arm and arm to

the bedroom. Then he shook his head, realizing the sound he heard wasn't music but the noisy blaring of an ambulance siren as the vehicle came up from behind then passed him.

He was still smiling as he rounded the corner on his street—just in time to see the ambulance pull into the parking lot of his apartment house. His stomach clutched as he realized the paramedics pouring from the emergency vehicle were heading toward the steps leading to his apartment.

"Cass!" he shouted and raced forward, trying to push past the men blocking the stairway.

One of the paramedics, a huge man with *Bill* stitched across the pocket of his shirt, tried to hold him back. "Hey, wait a minute, buddy. We got an emergency call up there."

Dooley shook himself loose. "It's my wife. She's pregnant."

"Let him through," Bill called, and the two other emergency service people stepped back as Dooley barreled up the stairs and threw open the apartment door.

He stopped dead in the doorway, terror exploding through him at the sight of Cass's motionless body on the floor next to the rocking chair.

A plea ripped from his soul. His legs began to shake as he moved toward her whispering her name. "Cass, honey." He knelt beside her and touched her shoulder.

She whimpered and rolled onto her back but didn't open her eyes.

"You need to get out of the way, man, so we can see to her," the burly paramedic said, not unkindly.

As Dooley moved, two men and a woman surrounded Cass and began hooking her up to portable monitors. Dooley's eyes

never left her face. It was so smooth and still, it made him sick to his stomach.

"Come on, baby," he whispered. "Open your eyes." As the minutes passed and she didn't respond, panic twisted his insides until he felt like screaming.

"When's she due?"

With a start, Dooley realized Bill had asked him the same question twice.

"The end of the month. What's wrong with her? Is it the baby?"

"I don't think so. We have a fetal monitor on her and the heart beat is strong."

"Why is she unconscious?" Visions of fatal pregnancy complications covered in the books he'd read raced through him—toxemia, stroke, brain aneurysm.

The other paramedic whistled. He gently lifted Cass's head and cradled it in his lap. "She has a huge lump on the back of her head. She's probably concussed."

Suddenly, Cass moaned and her eyelids fluttered.

"What's her name?" the woman paramedic demanded.

"Cassandra. C-Cass," Dooley stumbled over her name.

"Cass, can you hear me? Cass, open your eyes," the paramedic demanded, tapping her on her cheek, but Cass remained motionless.

"Okay, guys. Let's get her to the hospital," Bill said. "Her vitals are good. It looks like she tripped over the rocker and banged her head." Turning to Dooley, his brown eyes sympathetic, he said, "Don't worry, man. She'll be okay. You want to go in the ambulance or follow in your car?"

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"I think she's in labor," the female paramedic called, looking up from the fetal monitor. "She's having some mild contractions, but they're pretty steady."

New reason for dread rolled over Dooley in waves. Cass was unconscious, and the baby was coming. As they loaded Cass onto the stretcher, he ran to her bedroom to grab the bag she had packed for the hospital.

Rushing back into the living room, he heard a noise from the kitchen and suddenly Paul Wiley appeared in the doorway, a vase of flowers in his hand.

Dooley lunged toward him. "You've been here the whole time and didn't say anything!" Knocking the vase to the floor, he grabbed a fistful of Wiley's shirt. "What happened to Cass?" he demanded with a ferocious growl.

"She fell and banged her head, just like the paramedic said." Paul tried to shrug out of Dooley's grip, but he tightened his hold.

"Why didn't you say something when they first got here?"

Paul tried for an insouciant look, but his face was fearful and red from Dooley's grip on his shirt. "It wasn't my problem. I called 9-1-1. They came. She'll be fine. End of story."

"You son of a bitch! Don't you even care about the baby?"

Purple anger replaced the red in Paul's face. "Don't try to pass off your brat on to me. Cass confessed the whole thing."

Surprised rocketed through Dooley, and he loosened his grip. "What did she confess?"

Paul glared at him. "That you're the real father. I don't know what scam you're trying to pull, but I would have had a

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DNA test run anyway. You're not suckering me into years of child support."

Dooley released his grip. "We don't want your damn money. But if anything happens to Cass or the baby, I'm coming after you."

Paul backed away from him. "What for? She's so huge, she tripped over her own feet. You can't blame me for that."

Dooley's fist connected with Wiley's nose with a satisfying crunch, and blood gushed down Paul's face. He moaned and staggered backward, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"You broke my nose, you bastard!" He swiped a hand under his nose and paled when it came away covered with blood. "I'm calling the cops, Dooley. Your ass will be in jail so fast..."

Dooley made an obscene gesture, grabbed Cass's small suitcase and headed toward the door. In the doorway, he turned back. "Get out of my house, Wiley. And take the damn flowers with you."

As a closing remark, Dooley realized it lacked certain flair, but all of his thoughts were now centered on Cass and Andrea. He broke several speed limits getting to the hospital.

Pulling into the parking lot, he jerked to a stop and grabbed his cell phone to dial Ken's number. "Cass had an accident, and she's in labor. We're at the hospital!" he shouted as soon as Ken answered.

He hung up and raced into the emergency room. An orderly directed him to a screened cubicle where Cass lay strapped to a gurney, still unconscious. An ER doctor bent

over her, holding a small penlight with one hand while two fingers on his other hand propped her eyelid open.

"You the husband?" the doctor asked casually.

Dooley wanted to pound him for his nonchalance. Maybe violence was becoming a way of life for him.

"Yes. How is she? How's the baby?"

"She's still unconscious. I don't think it's a serious concussion because she's responding to direct orders. I've order a CAT scan to be on the safe side, but we have more pressing business now."

Dooley's heart stuttered in his chest. "Pressing business?"

"Yes. She's in labor, and the baby's in a breech position. If she were awake, we'd just wait to see if he or she turns. But since she's unconscious, her doctor is planning to do a Cesarean. They're getting the operating room ready now."

"A Cesarean?" Dooley asked helplessly. "But we've had Lamaze classes."

The doctor looked at him as if he were an imbecile. "Maybe you can use them for the next child," he said soothingly, moving toward a white hospital phone.

Finishing his conversation, the doctor directed two orderlies to move Cass to the maternity floor. Just as Dooley was about to follow her into the elevator, Cass's mother shouted his name. He turned to find her and Cass's Dad, Ken, his own parents, and Kathleen racing down the hallway. The elevator doors closed as he paused, waiting for them to catch up.

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Miriam Vocjek grabbed his arm. "What's going on, Thomas? Ken called us and said Cass had an accident." Her eyes were wide and frightened.

Dooley patted her arm. In a strange transference of emotion, her terror calmed him.

"Cass tripped over the rocker and hit her head. She's unconscious. The doctor's pretty sure it's only a mild concussion. But she is in labor, and the baby's breech, so Dr. Stein is going to do a Cesarean."

"A Cesarean," Marian moaned. "There must be something wrong with the baby." She fell sobbing into her husband's arms.

"I've got to get upstairs with Cass," Dooley finally said, breaking loose from the family and punching the button to summon the elevator again.

When the doors opened, they all crowded in with him, and he felt claustrophobic. He considered asking them to wait in the hospital foyer while he talked to the doctor, but gave up the idea when his mother and Kathleen both burst into tears, joining his still-sobbing mother-in-law.

At the nurse's station, he met Dr. Stein, who told him he could witness the surgery to deliver his baby if he were suitably gowned and sterilized.

Without another thought toward the waiting family members, Dooley followed the doctor to the scrub room, speed-stripped and dressed in the faded blue scrubs a nurse handed him. He stared at Cass through the large glass window of the sterilization area. She was still unconscious and moved restlessly on the operating table, her uncovered belly

rippling every time a contraction struck. He nearly catapulted into the operating room still trying to adjust the face mask strings around his ears.

As he approached the table, Cass suddenly moaned and clutched at her stomach. Even though he hated to see her in pain, the sound was heavenly music. She was coming to.

"Can I talk to her?" he whispered through the mask to Dr. Stein after she finished conferring with the anesthesiologist.

"Just for a minute. We're going to give her a mild sedative and then do a local for the abdominal incision."

Dooley held his breath, then asked, "Is the baby all right?"

Beneath her mask, the doctor grinned. "She's fine. Once we get this show on the road, she'll be here in twenty minutes."

Dooley stood at Cass's head and whispered her name. Her eyes fluttered open, and she blinked as she stared up at him. "Dooley?"

Relief swept through him, and he lifted up the mask and bent to press kisses across her forehead and cheeks.

"Dooley?" she said anxiously, this time clutching her stomach. "Where am I?"

"In the hospital, babe. Andrea is about to make her appearance."

Her forehead wrinkled. "What about all the breathing stuff?"

"Don't worry about anything, Cass. Close your eyes and rest. When you wake up, we'll be parents."

She sighed, and like an obedient child, closed her eyes.

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Exactly twenty-five minutes later, Andrea Dooley made an entrance with a hearty squall, loud enough for the anxious family members in the waiting room to hear.

Dr. Stein allowed Dooley to cut the cord and then placed the slippery newborn into his arms. "Congratulations, Dad. She looks to be about seven pounds and change."

Dooley blinked back tears as he stared down at the red-faced, howling baby, feeling an awed reverence for the miracle in his arms. Andrea was a beauty. It was hard to tell about her eyes, but the dark shock of curly hair and shape of her face indicated she would be a miniature replica of Cass.

The nurse took the baby to be bathed, weighed and measured, and Dooley watched Dr. Stein meticulously suture the incision in Cass's abdomen. She was still out from the sedative, and he knew how much she would regret missing the baby's birth.

When they were ready to wheel her into a room on the maternity ward, he finally went to the waiting room and ushered his antsy family to the large glassed nursery.

"There she is," he said, proudly pointing to the baby, now lying quietly on her side in an isolette close to the window. Tightly wrapped in a pink, receiving blanket with a tiny pink, knitted cap on her head, Andrea's eyes were closed, and her long dark lashes curled against her cheeks. A pink card attached to the isolette said: *Andrea Dooley, seven pounds four ounces, twenty inches long.*

"What a beauty," James Dooley said, slapping his son on the back. "She looks just like Cass."

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"I think she has Dooley's nose," Kathleen broke in, and everyone stared at the tiny nose. "You're right," Ken chuckled. "She does have Dooley's nose. Poor kid."

His mother swatted him. "Hush now. She's a beautiful baby, and look how big she is."

Dooley drank it all in, beaming with pride at the praise and compliments heaped upon his tiny daughter.

Dr. Stein came out, dressed in street clothes, and told the assembled family members Cass would probably sleep for several more hours but seemed to be suffering no ill after effects from the concussion.

An hour later, everyone but Ken and Dooley had left. Dooley was determined to stick around until Cass woke up so they could share in the glow of parenthood. He felt almost guilty she had missed these first few hours of Andrea's life and vowed he would remember every little thing about the birth, no matter how insignificant, so he could relate them to her.

Both he and Ken were once again standing at the nursery window, peering at the baby, and Dooley had just told him about his encounter with Paul, when he felt a sudden tap on his shoulder. Turning around, he found himself looking directly into the face of a uniformed police officer.

"Thomas Dooley?" the policeman asked.

When Dooley nodded, the officer said, "I'm going to have to ask you to come with me to the police station."

Dooley and Ken exchanged glances.

"What for?" Ken asked.

"There's a warrant for his arrest."

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Dooley grinned. "There must be a mistake, officer. I'm a law-abiding citizen. My wife just had a baby."

With just the hint of apology, the policeman said, "I'm sorry about this, but you will have to come with me. A guy named Paul Wiley filed assault charges against you. Said you broke his nose."

Stunned, Dooley just shook his head while Ken exclaimed angrily, "You've got to be kidding! The jerk filed charges?"

The officer, now a little impatient, nodded. "Yes, sir, he did." He placed his hand on Dooley's arm. "If you'll just come with me to the station, Mr. Dooley, I'm sure the whole thing can be straightened out."

Dooley's heart hammered against his ribs and sweat broke out on his forehead. He had to leave Cass and his baby. As he turned away from the nursery window to follow the cop, Andrea, as if sensing something was wrong, let out an angry wail.

Turning back toward the crying baby, he placed his hand flat against the glass and whispered. "Shush sweetheart. Daddy will be back before you know it."

He hoped it was true.

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Chapter Sixteen

Cass woke to the soft thump of the breakfast tray being lowered to the table next to her. She opened one eye and stared at the unfamiliar ceiling. Where was she? When she attempted to move her head, a loud siren in her brain warned her it wasn't a wise decision. A massive, mind-boggling headache gripped the top half of her skull like a carpenter's vise. It hurt to blink her eyes. Lying as still as she could, she once more stared at the ceiling, trying to sort the random impressions racing on fast-forward through her brain.

Suddenly a woman's face came into view as she leaned over Cass. She had tightly permed gray hair, and her bright blue eyes peered over half glasses. She wore multi-colored medical scrubs.

"You awake?" she asked in the annoyingly chipper tone adopted by hospital personnel.

Cass closed her eyes, deciding not to answer the rhetorical question. She was in the hospital. The woman asking the asinine questions, a nurse. How did she get here? Vainly her mind scrambled for something, anything that might give her a clue.

The nurse adjusted the blanket then pointed toward the breakfast tray. "Are we hungry?"

Cass wasn't sure about the nurse, but her head throbbed too much to even think about food. "No. I'm not hungry," she croaked. "My head hurts."

"I can boost your pain medication now that you're awake." The nurse adjusted a valve on the IV line attached to Cass's arm.

"Wh-what happened to me?"

The nurse gently touched the side of her head. "A concussion, poor thing. You got a nasty bump on the head—but the tests show it's nothing serious."

Nothing serious! Her head was about to explode. Even as she had the thought, she could feel the pain easing as the medication kicked in. Within a few minutes, she began floating in a hazy, dream-like state. Her eyes lazily followed the nurse's bustling movements as she carried the tray out. At the door, she turned with a cheery smile. "As soon as you're feeling better, we'll bring the baby in so you can try nursing."

Cass's eyes snapped open, and she felt the jolt through her whole system. Baby? She had the baby. Frantically, she moved her hands to her stomach which was bulging and flabby, but definitely unpregnant. She tried to clear her brain, damning the narcotic clouding her thoughts and luring her to sleep. She slid her eyes around the room. Alone. Where was Dooley? Why couldn't she remember giving birth? With a fretful sigh, she gave in to the demand of the medication and fell asleep.

It seemed only a few minutes later when she heard the wailing cry of a baby and fought through the fuzzy layers of sleep to wakefulness. When she finally opened her eyes, her mother sat beside the bed, cradling a blanket-wrapped infant who had a pink bow taped to the top of her head.

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A glance at the overhead clock indicated she had slept for three hours. Her thoughts were clearer, and her heart began pounding as she quietly observed the way her mother crooned to the still wailing child.

"Is that my baby?" she asked doubtfully, reeling from the idea she had no recollection of how Andrea had made her appearance into the world.

The sheen of tears in her mother's eyes as she proudly tipped the baby toward Cass so she could get a better look, answered the question. "Yes, sweetheart. You have a beautiful, healthy little girl. Do you want to hold her?"

The baby's red face screwed into a mask of howling fury, and for a moment Cass was afraid to reach for her. "What's wrong with her?" she asked fearfully.

Her mother chuckled. "Nothing. She could be hungry. The nurse thought if she were really hungry, she'd be more anxious to nurse, so they haven't fed her. The first couple of days is always a learning process."

"They're starving my baby so she can learn something?" Cass asked indignantly, automatically reaching for the small squirming bundle.

"No. They've fed her a little formula and some water in a bottle, but it really is better for the both of you if she gets used to latching on to your nipple to get her food."

Cass stared down at the Andrea, who had calmed as soon as she felt her mother's arms around her. "Look, Mom, she's quieted down. I think she recognizes me."

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Miriam spread her arms around both Cass and the baby. "I'm sure she recognizes your voice, honey. She's heard it for the last nine months."

Andrea had a tuft of curly dark hair on the top of her head, long eyelashes, and the sweetest little cupid bow mouth. She was a beauty. The infant gazed unblinkingly up at Cass as if assessing her, and a river of love flooded through Cass, accompanied by a sense of the awesome responsibility of raising this little girl.

Cass suddenly burst into tears, startling the baby, who began to howl in accompaniment to her sobbing mother. The sound of stereophonic crying brought the officious floor nurse back to the room.

"Here now. What's going on?" she demanded, neatly scooping the baby out of Cass's arms and placing her with her grandmother. "You are not suppose to get upset, Mrs. Dooley," she said as she adjusted the blood pressure cuff around Cass's upper arm. "We can take the baby back to the nursery for a while. You can have her back when you're feeling better."

Cass lay flat on the bed and continued to sob. "I want her here with me, but I don't even know when she was born. I can't remember what happened to me. And I want my husband. Where is he?" She looked at her mother pleadingly.

The nurse left the room, and Miriam suddenly made a fussing gesture over the baby, then stood and placed Andrea gently back into the isolette at the foot of the bed. The baby stopped crying immediately. Still Miriam hovered over her, and Cass recognized her actions as delaying tactics. A frisson

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of fear slid up her back. Where was Dooley? Had they been in an auto accident? Was that how she'd been injured? On God, what if he was dead?

Her tears forgotten, she sat up in bed. "Mom, look at me. Where's Dooley? Is he all right?"

Her mother moved to her bedside and wrapped her arms around Cass. "Yes, he's all right. He was here when the baby was born. He's ..." she paused, then continued, "He's home getting some sleep. He'll be back later."

Cass couldn't believe her ears. Home getting some sleep? He should be here at her side, worshipping the baby. After all, that's all he talked about for the past eight months.

She rubbed her hand over her stomach again, this time recognizing the bandages and the stiff soreness.

"Did I have a caesarean?" she asked incredulously.

Her mother nodded. "You were unconscious, and the baby was coming, so your doctor thought it would be safer for the both of you. They let Dooley into the operating room, and he held Andrea as soon as she was born." Her mother sniffed, trying to hold back the tears. "I've never seen a prouder father."

"Then why isn't the proud father here?" Cass asked with a disgruntled snort. "And how did I end up unconscious?"

Her mother patted the back of her hand. "They said you tripped over a rocking chair. Daddy and I were so worried, we didn't get a lot of details. But now you're awake, and the baby is here, I'm sure everything will come back to you."

And in a flash it did. As if a video replayed the scenario in her head, Cass remembered Paul's visit, Dooley's angry

departure, her recognition of the shallowness of Paul's character, and her longing for Dooley to return. However, she didn't remember how she came to be in the hospital, and she bitterly regretted missing the birth of her child.

Andrea began to whimper again, and for the first time Cass felt a tingling in her breasts. She had decided to nurse her baby following the recommendations of every childcare manual she'd read. She knew her milk wouldn't be in for a couple of days, but nursing was supposed to commence immediately after birth so the mother and child could begin bonding.

She automatically swung her legs over the side of the bed, trying to get to the crying baby. She winced as a sharp pain zipped through her stomach.

"What are you doing?" Her mother came up off the chair.

"I'm going to try to feed her."

"I'll get the nurse. She's going to help you."

"It looks like a pretty natural thing, Mom. How hard can it be?"

Miriam shook her head. "It's not as easy as it looks. But it's certainly worth it."

A half hour later, Andrea was still howling and tears of frustration pooled in Cass's eyes. She was a failure as a mother. At first, the baby refused to latch on. When she finally did, it hurt, making Cass flinch and yelp, which startled the baby into a fit of near hysterical crying.

Miriam and the nurse stood by, giving advice Cass couldn't bear to listen to. She peered at the sobbing infant's tiny red face, her own tears burning hot tracks down her cheeks,

terrified they would never be able to bond and would end up like one of those families on the Dr. Phil show.

"Shh, sweetie," she murmured, trying to cuddle Andrea, but the baby stiffened and wailed even louder.

"Maybe I'd better take her for a while," the nurse spoke soothingly as she approached the bed. "Don't be upset, Mrs. Dooley. These things always take a little time. I promise you, before long, nursing will be as easy as breathing. I'll have the nursery bring a bottle so you can feed her. We'll try again a little later with the nursing."

Reluctantly, Cass handed Andrea over, then buried her face in the pillow. "I'm going to be a terrible mother. She'll end up hating me," she sobbed.

"What's all this noise about?" Kathleen's cheerful voice called from the doorway.

Cass rolled over to glare at her sister-in-law. She knew she looked horrible, and she hurt all over. She didn't need Kathleen's irritating cheerfulness. "I can't nurse, the baby hates me, and where the hell is Dooley?"

Kathleen raised one eyebrow at Cass's surly tone, then she smiled. "You sound exactly like me when I had my first baby. All you ever hear about are the wonders of the nursing experience—no one ever tells you it hurts like hell at first and the kid also has to learn how to do it."

"Then it's not just me?"

"Nope. It's pretty nearly all first time nursing mothers. I'm surprised the nurse didn't tell you that. Did you sign up for a visit from the La Leche League? They were really helpful when I first started."

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Cass nodded. "They're coming tomorrow." She pointed to the baby, now sleeping peacefully with a pacifier in her little rosebud mouth. "So what do you think about your niece?"

Kathleen grinned. "Adorable. Just what I expected from the genetic combination of Dooley and Vocjek." She glanced at Miriam, who was nearly dozing in the comfortable recliner next to the bed. "You look worn out, Miriam. Why don't you go home for a while? I'll stay with Cass."

Miriam flashed her a grateful look, kissed Cass, and left, promising to return later.

As soon as her mother left the room, Cass grabbed her sister-in-law's arm. "Kath, where's Dooley? I can't believe he's not here, and Mom was so evasive when I asked. Is he all right?"

Kathleen sighed. "I don't know how to tell you this. But right after the baby's birth, the police came to the hospital and arrested Dooley on assault charges."

"They arrested him?" Cass squeaked.

Kathleen nodded. "None of us knew. He spent nearly the whole night in jail until your brother Ken hired a lawyer who arranged for bail. My parents are beside themselves, but Dooley's not talking. He went to your apartment to get some sleep and said to tell you he'll be here this afternoon."

Cass felt dizzy and disoriented. Dooley was the most peaceable man she knew. The last time she could remember him being in a fight was in the sixth grade when some kid had stolen her lunch. She drew a deep breath. "Who did he assault?"

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Kathleen shrugged. "I don't know. The report says he broke some guy's nose. Knowing Dooley, I'm sure he had good reason. He refuses to say anything about it, and the last we heard, the guy is still pressing charges."

A sick roiling stirred in Cass's stomach. "When did it happen," she whispered.

"Ken says it was just before you were admitted to the hospital. But he's not talking either, and my father really gave him the third degree."

It had to be Paul Wiley. He'd been in the apartment when she fell. Maybe Dooley thought Paul had pushed her, or threatened her, or something. Her brain quickened as she ran through various scenarios. She knew Dooley wouldn't defend himself to their families, because then the secret about Andrea's parentage might come out. It was just like him to protect someone else at his own expense.

She looked directly at her sister-in-law. "I think I know what it's about, Kathleen. I can probably straighten things out, but I need some privacy to make a few calls."

Kathleen's eyes narrowed. "He's my brother, Cass. If there's trouble, I want to help him. You just had a baby and should be taking it easy. Just tell me who to call."

She shook her head. "No. I have to do it. Please."

Kathleen stared at her for a long minute before slowly nodding. "All right. I'll go down to the cafeteria and get some lunch."

As soon as she left, Cass grabbed for the phone book. Paul must be staying at his brother's. Although there were two Leo

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Wileys in the book, Cass dialed the first one, which turned out to be the right number.

"Leo, this is Cass Dooley, er ...Vocjek. Is Paul there?"

Leo's voice sounded coldly polite. "Yes, he is, Cassandra, but I doubt he will come to the phone. He's not feeling well."

"Come on, Leo," Cass urged. "I need to talk to him. Just put him on."

"Hold on a minute." Leo left her hanging for five full minutes, before returning to the phone. "He says he doesn't want to talk to you."

Cass rolled her eyes. "Well, tell him he'd better talk to me, or he'll be talking to my lawyer."

She could hear whispering, and then Paul came on the line.

"What's this all about, Cass? Your husband broke my nose, why should I be talking to your lawyer?"

She grinned at the nasal sound of his petulant voice. She found something secretly thrilling about Dooley defending their little family with his fists. She felt like a heroine in an old fashioned melodrama. She had to get Paul to drop the charges against Dooley.

"Why don't you ask about the baby?" she said casually.

There was a long pause. "Why should I? It's not mine. You told me it belongs to that brawling bully you married."

"Now that she's here, I'm a little concerned. I may have been too hasty in my assessment."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he bellowed.

"I think we may have to have DNA testing after all, Paul. The baby doesn't look anything like Dooley," Cass said cheerfully, knowing full well the idea would horrify him.

"Listen here, Cass ..." Paul threatened.

Suddenly Leo was on the phone. "Cassandra, Paul will call you back in a little while." Cass could hear Paul protesting wildly in the background as their phone disconnected.

Cass lay back against the pillow, a satisfied smile on her face. She was pretty sure Paul would be willing to drop the charges against Dooley if he were totally absolved from any responsibility for Andrea. She could hardly wait for Dooley to show up so she could tell him.

Dooley woke after only a few hours sleep. He lay in bed reliving the whole nightmarish scene at the police station. Wiley had signed a deposition stating Dooley had first threatened him, and then punched him without provocation. The arresting officer had listened to his protestations of innocence with a bland face and then had fingerprinted him and locked him in a small holding cell until Ken finally showed up with the lawyer.

He rubbed a hand over his jaw. He needed to get up, shave and shower, and get to the hospital. Cass would think he'd jumped ship if he didn't see her soon. And he was anxious to see Andrea again, to make sure she was as beautiful as his memories of her. It felt like he'd been away for weeks instead of only overnight.

The lawyer had told him not to worry. The charges against him would most likely be dropped when Wiley realized he was walking on thin ice simply by still being on the premises

where Dooley's pregnant wife was found unconscious from a mysterious accident.

An angry chill shivered its way down Dooley's back as he considered that Paul Wiley may have been responsible for Cass's concussion. He needed to talk to Cass and have her confirm or deny he'd had the right to break Wiley's nose. And if Wiley had touched Cass in any way, had caused her to fall, the man would need serious insurance to cover all the other damages Dooley would inflict on him.

He grinned into the mirror as he lathered his face. Nothing hiked a man's testosterone levels more than contemplating judicial mayhem.

The phone rang as he stepped into the shower. He let the answering machine pick it up. A few minutes later, while he towel-dried his hair, he pressed the playback button.

Kathleen's voice echoed in the quiet apartment. "Dooley, I had to tell Cass you spent the night in jail. She's worried about you. And her first time nursing didn't go well. You'd better get over here to the hospital as soon as you can."

He swore as he pressed the erase button. Damn Kathleen and her big mouth! He had planned to keep the news about the assault charge from Cass until much later. He knew she'd feel depressed about missing Andrea's birth. She didn't need anything else to worry about.

Dooley no longer believed Paul threatened their marriage. His smile broadened as he remembered Wiley accusing Cass of trying to pawn off Dooley's child as his. He said Cass had admitted it. Bless his beautiful, clever Cass for making sure

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Wiley would be out of their lives for good—after the assault charges were settled, anyway.

He finished dressing, and left for the hospital, making one stop at the Toys "R" Us store close to the hospital.

Whistling as he exited the elevator on the maternity floor, he made his way toward Cass's room. The door stood open. As he prepared to enter, he realized she was on the phone. Deciding to wait until she finished her conversation, he unwrapped the packages, wanting to make an entrance.

As he arranged the tiny pink ball cap on top of the miniscule pink baseball bat, he suddenly honed in on Cass's phone conversation, his heart clutching in stunned disbelief as he heard her say, "I think we may have to do DNA testing after all, Paul. The baby doesn't look anything like Dooley."

Cass pointed her toes and stretched her arms above her head while she lay flat on the bed. The tugging pain in her mid-section reminded her it could be a while before she'd be ready to do any vigorous exercises. She glanced once again at the clock. Where the heck was Dooley?

A faint sense of misgiving rippled up her back. He must be livid that Paul had filed charges, but surely he wouldn't hold her responsible. Dooley wasn't like that. Besides, she knew Paul would drop the charges rather than submit to any tests which might link him to the baby.

She chuckled, remembering his panicky tone when she had said the baby looked like him. She had stared at the baby for nearly an hour before realizing Andrea looked more like her maternal grandmother than anyone else. However, she was only a day old. She had a lot of changes to go through before

she got her final looks. Cass hoped Andrea would have the good fortune to find a best friend like Dooley, who would stay by her forever. She glanced at the clock again. Where was he?

She grabbed her robe from the bottom of the bed, slowly swung her legs to the side and pushed herself up. With shuffling, sideways movements she made her way out of the room toward the nurse's station.

Three nurses stopped talking to watch her painful progress.

"That's great, Mrs. Dooley," one called encouragingly. "The more you walk around, the easier it will get."

Cass grinned. "I can't believe I bought all those lies about pioneer women having babies in the field and getting up to keep on plowing."

All three nurses laughed, then a young, pretty nurse Cass hadn't met yet, walked toward her. "Is there something I can get for you? Or are you just exercising?"

Suddenly feeling lightheaded, Cass grabbed onto the counter and closed her eyes. The young nurse leaped around the desk to support her. "I've got you. Let's get you into a wheel chair and take you back to your room."

One of the other nurses gently pushed the chair against the back of her legs, and Cass sank gratefully into the seat. "Wow," she said shakily. "I'm not going to do any plowing this afternoon, am I?"

The older nurse, who had brought the baby in earlier, leaned over the counter. "Do you want me to get your husband for you?" she asked solicitously.

Startled, Cass looked up at her. "Is he here? I've been wondering where he was."

The nurse chuckled, and shook her head. "First time fathers. They always spend more time in the nursery than any other place. Your husband has been with the baby nearly an hour."

Her indulgent tone only intensified Cass's suspicions something was drastically wrong. No matter how much he loved Andrea, Dooley would have come to see her, if only to check on how she felt after the surgery. She tried to stifle her hurt feelings. She would not be jealous of her own daughter. If Dooley found Andrea so enchanting she now had to settle for second place, so be it. Dooley's heart was so big that second place there was better than first place anywhere else.

"Please take me to the nursery," she asked the nurse, who had started pushing the wheelchair down the hall toward her room. "I want to see my family."

"Sure, honey," the nurse said, reversing directions in the middle of the hallway. "Your little girl is the cutest baby in the nursery. Everyone who sees her remarks on it."

Maternal pride flowed through Cass, followed by an incredible sense of rightness as her apprehension disappeared. If she'd been able to get around more easily, she would have spent all her time in the nursery also. Suddenly eager to see both her husband and their child, she leaned forward in the chair as they approached the glassed area referred to as the parents' room. She could see Dooley in a padded rocking chair, Andrea lying across his knees

wearing a tiny pink ball cap. He seemed to be having an earnest conversation with her.

"Isn't that the cutest thing?" the nurse asked in a hushed whisper. "He obviously adores her already."

Cass blinked back tears. "Could you leave me here? I just want to watch them for a few minutes."

The nurse sniffed as if she too were moved by the father-daughter tableau beyond the glass. "I'll go back to the desk. Have your husband come for me when you want to move the baby back to your room."

Cass nodded, her eyes still glued to Dooley's face. Her initial sense of well-being gradually disappeared as she recognized the look of profound sadness and resignation on his face. What was going on? Why did he look so unhappy? On a table next to Cass sat a high tech baby monitor, obviously used by the nursing staff to contact parents in the room. With a trembling hand, Cass switched the power on.

"So my beautiful girl, in my heart I will always be your daddy. I will try to be as much a part of your life as your mom will let me. Just because we won't be living together, doesn't mean we won't spend time together. Your mom has always been my best friend—and she's the best. She deserves the best. I love her, but if she wants someone else ..."

Cass snapped the monitor off, her mind reeling. What was that all about? Where'd he get the crazy idea she wanted someone else? She didn't want anyone but him—she loved him, and he loved her. The residual thrill those words caused in her, warred with her escalating anger. So he planned to

just bow out of the picture like some damn Good Samaritan, did he? Well, that wasn't going to happen. Not if she had anything to say about it.

She switched the monitor back on. "Thomas Dooley, you bring that baby out to me right now!"

His head jerked up, and he stared at her through the window, an angry scowl on his face. "How long have you been eavesdropping?" he demanded.

"Long enough!" She scowled back. "Bring that baby to me and never touch her again."

The shocked look on his face almost made her laugh. She forced herself to look as if she meant it.

"What the hell are you talking about? Andrea is my daughter. Just because you want to get back with that wimp, doesn't take away my rights as her father. My name is on her birth certificate. I took care of that yesterday."

"Come out here and say that," she challenged, stunned that he believed she wanted Paul instead of him.

Dooley scooped up Andrea, and pressed her against his shoulder as he stomped out of the parents' room. The baby gave a muffled squawk, and then began howling in earnest. As soon as he passed through the door, Dooley held her up and peered into her scrunched up face. "Work with me, Andrea, or your mom will think you don't love me."

The baby's cries escalated to full out screaming, and he handed her to Cass with a sheepish expression.

"She doesn't like you yelling at me," Cass said calmly, cuddling the baby against her.

"I'm sure it works both ways," he said. "And where do you get off telling me I can never hold her again?"

"Since you were planning to abandon me, I just assumed you would probably be abandoning her also."

His expression of outrage almost made her giggle. "I am not the one doing the abandoning," he declared hotly. "I heard you on the phone telling that limp dick, Wiley, you wanted testing done to prove Andrea was his baby."

So that's it. Relief swept through her so strongly she wanted to hurl herself into his arms. The baby's cries had settled into a pathetic whimpering, as she nuzzled against Cass's chest.

Suddenly concern replaced Dooley's look of outrage. "Is she hungry, Cass? I've had her for nearly an hour. I never thought about feeding her."

"Well, you're not really equipped to, are you?" she said reasonably.

The baby, who had begun to suck on Cass's hospital gown, made a comical face before her lips puckered in a mewling cry.

Both Dooley and Cass chuckled. "We'd better try to feed her before we're arrested for child abuse," Dooley said, his eyes never leaving Andrea's face.

Cass sighed and her shoulders slumped. "Our first attempt at nursing didn't go well at all. Maybe we should try a bottle. I don't want her to starve."

Dooley put one arm around Cass and ushered her back to the rocking chair in the parent's room, his earlier animosity

momentarily forgotten. "Come on, babe. You can do this. The baby books say it takes a while."

Cass sat and tried to untie the string fastening of the gown with one hand while Andrea's cries began to escalate. "Can you take her," she asked, tugging at a stubborn knot.

He scooped up the baby just as the front flap of the gown fell open exposing Cass's turgid breast. At Dooley's sharp intake of breath, a slight smile lifted Cass's lips. She leaned back in the chair and reached for Andrea. The baby rooted around for a few seconds then opened her tiny rosebud mouth and latched on to Cass's nipple.

"Does that hurt?" Dooley asked, his eyes riveted on the tableau before him.

Cass started to shake her head, then winced at the ripple of pain centered right where Andrea sucked. "I don't think my milk's come in yet, so it's a little uncomfortable. Not bad though," she hastened to assure him.

He knelt before her, placing his hands on the side of her face, forcing her to look at him. "I'm sorry I was an ass," he said softly. "If you want ..." He paused as if he had to force the words out. "I'll give you a divorce if you want to marry Paul, but I'm hoping you'll still let me be a part of Andrea's life and yours. You've always been my best friend, and I don't want to lose either one of you completely."

She stared into his dear, handsome face. Tears welled in her eyes. He loved her, and yet he was willing to sacrifice his own happiness for what he thought she wanted. Lucky for her, they both wanted the same thing. Whatever she'd felt for

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Paul seemed like a playground infatuation compared to the love she felt for Dooley.

She blinked away the tears. "Can I have your wedding ring?" she asked softly.

His face blanched, and his hands shook as he moved slightly away from her and tugged off the plain gold band. A sheen of tears appeared in his eyes as he dropped the ring in her outstretched hand. He turned away and stood quickly, obviously meaning to leave.

"Thomas Dooley," she said in a commanding tone.

He turned back toward her, his jaw set. "What?"

"Will you marry me?" Cass stared into his hazel eyes, her mouth suddenly dry.

His face frowned in confusion. "What do you mean? We're already married."

Cass struggled to stand up without dislodging the baby. Dooley reached down and placed his hands beneath her elbows to help her, the confusion on his face gradually changing to a careful watchfulness.

Cass swallowed thickly. "I, um, I just thought that this time we'd get married for the right reasons."

His eyes, so solemn and sad only moments ago, now shone with hope. "And what are the right reasons, Cassandra Jane Vocjek?"

She smiled. "The right reasons, the best reasons. I love you, and you love me. We have a baby. We're a family. And I want my best friend to be my husband in every sense of the word."

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Dooley's joy and relief were evident in the wide smile that split his face. He placed his arms around Cass, cradling the baby between them, and kissed her. "Obviously, I misunderstood your phone conversation with what's his name. You want to tell me about it?"

She poked him in the ribs. "You should have asked me that right after you eavesdropped, instead of deciding I was going to dump you for a bottom feeder like *what's his name*."

"Men can feel insecure too, you know," he mumbled, looking contrite.

She patted his cheek. "I wanted Paul to drop the charges against you, so I suggested maybe the baby was his. I said I wasn't sure because I'd been sleeping with both of you at the same time."

"And he bought that?" Dooley said disgustedly.

"Yep. He's so terrified I'm going to ask for child support, I bet he's already called the police."

"Cass, I can fight my own battles. I wish you hadn't called him. I don't want him in our lives, even if he is Andrea's father."

Cass put her fingers over his mouth. "Don't say that again. He is not and never will be Andrea's father. You are her father. Paul won't bother us. And I wanted him out of our lives right now. Besides, I didn't want Andrea to have to visit her father in jail. So say, 'Thank you, Cass.'"

Dooley laughed. "Thank you, Cass. I love you, Cass. I'll marry you, Cass." He leaned over the baby to kiss her firmly on the mouth.

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"Okay. And I love you and will marry you, also. Hold out your hand."

Dooley stared as if mesmerized at the gold band she slipped on the ring finger of his left hand. "This is it, then. We are finally married. Why don't you give me your ring also."

Cass felt the tears gather as she handed him her wedding ring and he gently replaced it on her finger. "I, Thomas James Dooley, promise to love and cherish you until the day I die," Dooley said solemnly.

She grabbed his hand and kissed his wedding band. "And I promise to love and cherish *you* until the day I die," she repeated the vow, her cheeks glistening with tears.

Without saying another word they pressed their thumbs together.

Andrea pulled away from Cass's breast and stared up at her parents with a frown, as if to say, "That's all well and good, but where's my food."

Dooley took her from Cass and cuddled her against his chest while Cass retied the gown, then he resettled her in Cass's lap. He pushed Cass and the baby in the wheelchair out of the nursery, back to Cass's room.

Both of their mother's were there, their faces lit with excitement and their arms piled high with presents wrapped in pink paper.

"We just bought a few more things for the baby," Miriam crowed. "And Helen found the most adorable baby blanket. We had Andrea's name and birth date embroidered on it."

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"Mom, we can open up a baby store with the stuff we have now," Cass laughingly protested. As she climbed carefully back into the bed, her stitches made their presence known.

"I'm sure Andrea will love everything," Dooley said, gently placing the tiny, pink bundle back in the isolette at the foot of Cass's bed.

Helen moved beside her son and dipped her head to whisper in his ear, "The lawyer just called. I answered the phone because Cass wasn't here."

Dooley straightened. "What did he want?"

"He wants you to call him back right away." She backed away from him to stare up into his face. "What's this all about, son?"

Dooley grinned and patted her arm. "Don't worry, Mom. It's nothing important."

"When my only son is arrested for assault, it is important," she said, her voice rising.

Miriam glanced over at her friend. "Helen?"

Dooley gathered his mother into his arms. "I promise you. You have nothing to worry about."

Cass called sleepily from the bed. "He's telling the truth, Aunt Helen. It's a tempest in a teapot. Much ado about nothing. An ill wind that blew itself out."

The three other people in the room gaped at her then burst into laughter.

"That concussion must have been more serious than we thought if she's quoting Shakespeare," Dooley quipped.

After their mothers left, Dooley called his attorney who relayed Paul had dropped all charges against him.

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"I told you," Cass said smugly as Dooley sat on the bed with her and they both examined the perfection of babyhood that was Andrea.

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. "You were right. Thank you." He dropped another kiss on her nose. "Did I tell you I'm thrilled to finally have sleep-over privileges with my best friend?"

"You had sleep-over privileges when you were eight. It's not that big a deal." She grinned up at him.

The smile spread across his face as he tightened his arms and slowly lowered his lips to hers. "You're wrong Cass. It is a big deal. A very big deal."

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About The Author:

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Named the 2004 Utah Poet of the Year, Judy Rogers was a poet before she turned to writing romantic fiction. She has been an English instructor at Utah State University for 20 years and prior to that was a newspaper reporter and free lance writer for over ten years. Her non-fiction work has appeared in HomeLife, Women's World, Redbook, and Byline magazines.

She has been writing romances for nine years and was an RWA Golden Heart finalist in 2001 and 2004 in the contemporary romance category. She lives in Utah with her husband, and is the mother of six grown children.

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