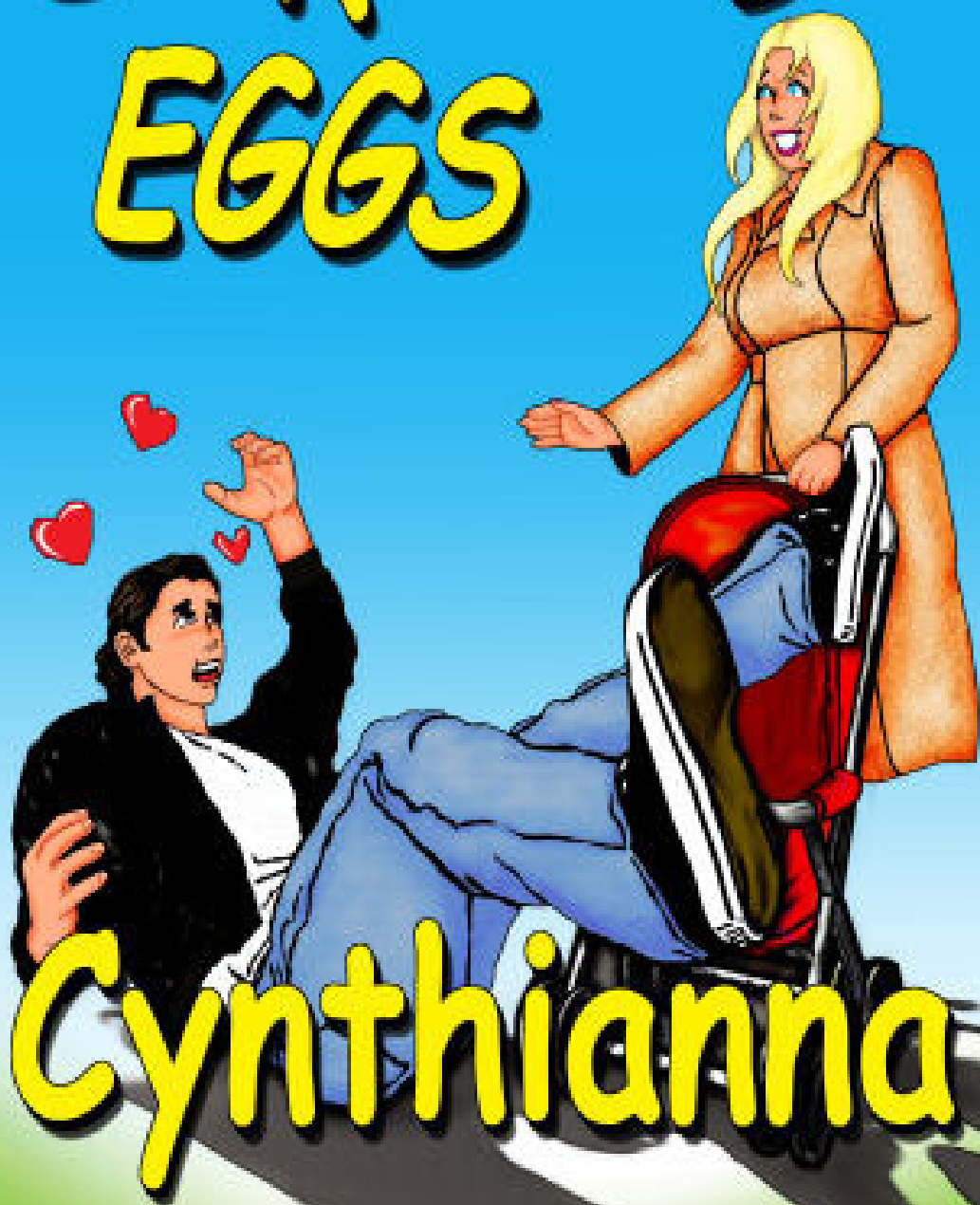


SCRAMBLED EGGS



Cynthianna

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Scrambled Eggs

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Scrambled
Eggs

Chapter One

“Everything went according to plan, except—”
Sharlene Pincher covered her ears and closed her eyes. She didn’t want to hear it. Not again. She didn’t want to hear their money had been completely wasted, and they weren’t going to have a baby. She just couldn’t take the bad news. No, better to sit like the chimpanzee on the popular poster—ears covered and eyes shut tight—in Doctor Fazoli’s upscale office than to hear the awful truth one more time.

“You’re not listening to what I’m saying,” Doctor Fazoli said, raising his volume, but still managing to speak in his usual gentle, if somewhat condescending manner. “Sharlene, you’re pregnant.”

Sharlene removed her hands and blinked twice in slow motion. “I’m w—what? You’re joking, aren’t you, Doc?”

The older gentleman settled back in his leather desk chair and steepled his fingers. “You should know after coming to this office for three years now that I never joke. Doctor Allen is the closest we come to a resident prankster on staff.”

“I—I’m really pregnant this time?” Sharlene’s heavy heart lifted, soaring as high as a bird flying over the Gateway Arch. It was too good to be true, too

unbelievable to be true. After five attempts in three years, it just had to be a joke. Pregnant? At last, she was going to have the family she always wanted. At last, their stalled-out marriage was actually going somewhere. At last, she was going to have the long-awaited heir to the Pincher fortune... *Doesn't it beat all that Jeffrey would be out of town when we finally receive the good news?*

The illustrious physician smiled briefly, focusing his attention on her medical folder lying open on the desk. "Yes, you're 'in the club', as my assistants are fond of saying. However, there's just one detail which needs explaining, quite an important detail —"

"Oh, Doctor F!" Sharlene cried. She jumped out of her chair and threw her arms around the distinguished man's neck, all but knocking the breath out of him. "I'm pregnant at last. Won't Jeffrey and his family be proud of me? I finally did something right for once in my life. What else needs explaining?"

He cleared his throat and tapped his pen on the blotter.

It's so unlike him to beat around the bush. A cold feeling of dread tickled up her spine. She immediately broke the impromptu embrace and settled herself in her chair.

"Sharlene, I don't know how to tell you this, but straight out—the baby's father is *not* your husband."

Huh? Doctor Allen wasn't the only joker on staff, it appeared. Sharlene tittered a 'country girl giggle' as Jeffrey called it, a totally unsophisticated guffaw not common to big city dwellers, she had been informed.

Doctor Fazoli's deadpan delivery had almost taken her in, but she couldn't be fooled. She wasn't all that blonde. "Of course, my husband's the father. You all told me that all you had to do in in-vitro fertilization was take a little bit of his sperm and one of my eggs and scramble them up in a dish and presto-chango! Instant baby. It's only February—way too early for April Fool's Day." She gave him an obvious wink and laid a finger aside her nose. "Oh, Doc. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for giving a gal such a fright."

A fleeting grimace of pain crossed the doctor's face, as if he were contemplating being named in a malpractice suit. "Unfortunately, it's not a joke. I only wish it were. My chief lab assistant informed me this morning that there was a mix-up with the containers, and..."

His words hung heavy in the air like a wet towel on a cold day at the beach. As their meaning sank in, Sharlene's heart boom-boomed wildly, her palms dampened, and her feet began to tap to the nervous beat of the pounding in her ears.

"Doc, are you saying the lab used someone else's sperm to make our baby?"

"Exactly," he said, visibly relieved that she seemed to be taking it so well. "We've discovered it very early on in the pregnancy. If you like, we can schedule a termination procedure—"

"Like hell you will!"

A strange, loud voice within her had taken over. Sharlene, who prided herself on keeping her country civility in the midst of living in the ill-mannered city,

was shocked by her response. What had gotten into her? Maybe this mix-up *was* for the best. After all, it had been primarily Jeffrey's fault that they couldn't have any children until now—a sperm count so low the lab technicians were hard pressed to find one decent tadpole to swim upstream at all. No wonder there had been a cock-up. Someone probably thought the test tube containing Jeffrey's semen was rinse water and poured it down the drain.

Did it really make a difference in the big scheme of things? A baby was a baby, after all. It would be *hers*, to love and to cherish from this day forth.

"Sorry about the outburst," Sharlene said softly, willing her nervousness to subside. "No, I don't want to terminate the pregnancy."

"As you wish, but I am obligated to inform your husband about the baby's true parentage. It may take a little while to determine exactly who the donor is, however, the lab reports being rather scattered about at the moment since the chief technician left town in rather a hurry..."

Doctor Fazoli cleared his throat again and reached for the phone. "Can we give your husband a quick call now and see if he can come on over to discuss the matter?"

"Call Jeffrey?" Sharlene absentmindedly twirled a thin strand of her silvery ash blond hair around a finger. "He's out of town on business this week."

"I see."

No, you don't, really. Sharlene sighed inwardly. This wasn't the kind of news Jeffrey would want to hear

from half a continent away. It was the kind of news that posed a problem—a big problem. Would Jeffrey's aunt and uncle accept an heir to their millions who genetically wasn't a Pincher? But why wouldn't they? After all, a baby was a human being, not an Afghan wolfhound like they were so found of... They'd love the baby, since it was being raised by their nephew and his wife—or at least by their nephew.

Sharlene tilted her head coyly and flashed a weak smile. "Doctor Fazoli, can't I tell Jeffrey myself? I'll tell him the very first thing when he comes back from his business trip. Promise. Cross my heart and hope to cry."

The deep furrow creasing the doctor's forehead faded. "Yes, please feel free to broach the subject with your husband first. I think information of a delicate nature should come from a trusted and loving source." He flipped a few pages over on his desk calendar. "I'll schedule another private consultation with the two of you in two weeks' time, and we can discuss the matter more then. In the meantime, Doctor Allen wants to see you next Tuesday at nine to run a few more tests and talk to you more about the pregnancy and delivery. Is that satisfactory?"

She nodded automatically. "Fine, just perfect." Of all the doctors at the Fazoli Infertility Clinic, she had always liked the sociable, sharp-witted Liza Allen the best. They had become good friends since Liza's first day on the job. Sharlene felt positively thrilled to be in need of Liza's excellent ob-gyn experience at long last.

"Great." The doctor's shoulders dropped. Relief

etched every feature of his face. "You don't know how happy I am to see how well you're taking this rather surprising revelation. Not many women would accept such news quite so calmly."

"Heck, my whole life's been one surprise after another," Sharlene confessed with a shrug. "I tend to roll with the punches. I'm just a little curious about one thing, though."

A silver eyebrow quirked. "Yes?"

"The baby's real daddy. Could you possibly give me his name?"

The good doctor suffered a sudden coughing spell at that moment, a small chink in the armor of his calm demeanor hinting at his eagerness to terminate the discussion. "It's not our clinic's policy to give out information about the donor to the inseminated woman other than physical and intellectual characteristics," he stated matter-of-factly. "Doctor Allen will gladly discuss it with you on Tuesday."

Sharlene sighed. Just another surprise to be dealt with later. She hated surprises, but she'd make herself live with it. "All right."

"You're an outstanding young woman, Sharlene, with a good head on your shoulders. Your baby is very lucky to have you as his or her mother." He stood and offered her his hand to dismiss her. "God bless."

Sharlene patted her belly tenderly before shaking his hand. "Thanks, Doc. I feel mighty blessed myself. Imagine that—a 'bun in the oven' after all this time in the kitchen. Don't worry a thing about sorting out the

details, we'll figure them out eventually. I have this strong feeling that the old man upstairs is looking out for me. He's finally given this orphaned gal from the hills what she always wanted—a full-fledged family. I'm certain He'll keep me on the straight and narrow, and keep me and the baby from running into anything down the road He doesn't want us to run into."

* * * * *

"Zack, man, you look like death warmed over. What gives?"

Zachary Richmond couldn't explain it. What poor young man wouldn't give his eyeteeth to be a sperm donor? After all, the pay for the time spent in the little back room in the clinic was excellent, and the reading material was more than stimulating... Still, he just didn't feel right doing it. Keith had it all wrong. This wasn't the easy way to make it through college.

"This visit was the second and last for me, bro," Zack said resolutely as he zipped his worn, second-hand leather jacket up over his wiry, toned physique before heading out into the cold. "I've made a couple of bucks, but now I think I'll spend my Tuesday mornings doing something more productive. But thanks all the same for telling me about this place. I owe you one."

Keith crammed his stocking cap hard over his short dreadlocks as they exited the plush lobby area, pushing his thick-lensed, wire frame specs back up

his nose. He fixed a dirty look at his slightly older foster brother. "What? You're giving up now? But it's so damn easy—and fun. You see Miss September in that issue over by the water cooler? We ain't ever going to have a chance to snag and hump girls like that, so we'd better just get over it and make some dough to further our education while we read about them."

Zack sighed. For an 'A' student in computer science, Keith Marshall acted awfully dense at times, especially when it came to the opposite sex. Zack drew his thin jacket closer to keep out the arctic wind gusts that whipped between the tall buildings. He'd be glad when it was spring. "I don't want to snag—or hump—Miss September. I want to marry a nice girl from a nice family and raise a couple of very nice kids. And if a woman can't love me as a poor, working slob... Well, I probably wouldn't be attracted to her in the first place."

Keith rubbed his bony hands together, then thrust them into the pockets of his baggy jeans. "Sister Mary Agnes would be proud of you, Richmond."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You always were the hopeless romantic type." Keith threw back his head and laughed raucously. "Remember that snooty rich girl in calc class who wouldn't even give you the time of day, but—"

Whap! Zack suddenly was sent airborne like a pigeon taking off in front of a Bi-State bus. He flipped over the unseen obstacle and landed in a crumpled heap on the pavement. What the hell did he trip over?

"Oh, my God! I'm so sorry. Are you hurt?" came a breathless female voice.

Zack shook his head, looking cross-eyed at the cause of his accident. He blinked once. Twice. He must have bumped his head harder than he thought on the sidewalk. An angel in the guise of a petite blonde with the brightest violet-blue eyes he'd ever seen stood directly in front of him. She possessed lush rosy lips and dimples nicely framed within a heart-shaped face. Lips perfect for singing praises. Lips that looked like they were just aching to be kissed...

"Did you hit your head?" the angel asked.

Zack basked in the warmth of her smile, a smile that easily penetrated the damp chill of a St. Louis winter. The wind tangled her long, straight hair around and around her camel-colored wool coat, giving her the appearance of a Venus on the half-shell. He blinked again, focusing on the object in front of her. A baby stroller had done him in. Why on earth was this gorgeous creature pushing an empty baby carriage?

"Damn it, woman, you shouldn't be out with one of those contraptions in this windy weather," Keith muttered. He offered Zack a hand. For some mysterious reason, Zack found himself unable to move. He lay motionless on his back like an overturned turtle, staring up at the goddess standing in front of him. He couldn't even breathe.

"Let me help you," Aphrodite said, bending down beside him. "I am so sorry I ran you over. The wheel thingies sticking out must have tripped you up. I

haven't gotten the hang of driving this baby buggy yet. I've got about seven and a half months to go, so I should be able to pass my test before then, huh?"

Then she laughed, a fairy-like giggle with a most interesting twang. Enthralled, Zack willingly allowed the vision to take him by the shoulders and pull him to a sitting position, only protesting when she attempted to pull him to vertical.

"No, please don't," he gasped, scrambling to his feet. "I'm okay. I wouldn't want someone in your delicate condition to strain herself."

The sparkle in her eyes sliced through the gloom of the overcast February day. "How gallant you are. I'm glad the breed hasn't died out with the Knights of the Round Table. You sure you're not hurt any?"

Keith snorted. "Only his brain."

Zack glared at his companion and dusted off the bottom of his nearly worn-out jeans. He felt a bit bruised, but he'd done worse. "Nothing but my pride, ma'am. Here, let me help you with your purchases." He quickly collected the packages off the sidewalk that he had knocked out of the stroller and carefully stacked them in the empty seat.

"There you go. Be careful in this wind. You need to take care of yourself – and the baby," he said softly.

His eyes met hers, locking in a delicious, lingering look. Their mutual admiration could have gone on forever if Keith's undisguised rude coughing hadn't destroyed the moment. *It's for the best*, Zack thought sadly, a lump forming in his throat as he spied a gold band on Venus' left hand. *All the good women are*

married.

"Thank you, I'll remember." She blushed a becoming rose color as she pushed the stroller in the opposite direction. "Good-bye."

"I see," Keith drawled, turning the corner toward the home stretch. "You got a thing for fertile women. You gotta admit it, but the bitch is fairly easy on the eyes for being knocked up."

Zack turned up his jacket collar against the cold. He was glad Mom and Dad weren't alive to hear Keith's language reverting back to its lowest common denominator. Maybe he ought to cut him some slack—what with all the stress he'd been under lately; his own language had become more colorful as well. He sighed and flashed a playful grin at the younger man. "What disgusting things are you jabbering on about now, Frizzhead?"

Keith rolled his eyes as they crossed Hanley and headed toward the shop. "Don't call me that. You know Mom used to tell you not to call me that. I can't help my hair acts this way when it's damp."

"Correction, it acts this way all the time."

"So what? This is St. Louis. Humidity is its middle name. And don't change the subject. I know exactly why you don't want to share any mo' of your tadpoles with the sperm bank. You want to do the job the old-fashioned way and get 'em knocked up the way God and nature intended. I respect that. Sister Mary Agnes would, too."

She certainly would, Zack silently acknowledged. One thing you learned from Sister Mary Agnes'

health class was that young men didn't need to be jerking off by themselves for any reason. The good sister definitely agreed with the lyrics of Monty Python's classic song, *Every Sperm is Sacred*.

"Your mind belongs in the sewer, Marshall." Zack blew out a long stream of breath, which condensed instantly into fog in the cold, wet air. "What can I expect from the man who catalogued every porn site on the net? You're definitely not the romantic type."

"Hey, somebody asked me to catalogue those sites, and the pay was good, too. How could I refuse? I'm a destitute college student. It might as well have been me."

Keith averted his eyes, softening his tone as they passed a pair of little old ladies out walking their lap dogs along the tree lined street. "And I *am* the romantic type, too, whatever the hell that means. I like wining and dining the ladies, provided it's two for one night at the bar and they agree to eat McDonald's."

Zack sighed. "We are a pair, aren't we? Too poor to date, too young to die. What a life."

"Yeah, what a life," Keith agreed. "Too bad the good ones are always taken, ain't it?"

"Yeah, too bad," Zack said, thinking of the blonde angel who had run him over. A familiar sadness sliced through his heart. He swallowed hard and focused his attention on pulling out the large ring of keys from his pocket and quickly unlocking the front door. "But what do we care? We're young entrepreneurs, and we've got work to do. We

certainly don't need any more distractions in our lives at this point in the game, do we?"

Keith smirked, mimicking in his best nun's voice, "Idle hands are the devil's own tools."

"Glad to know you learned something in Catholic school after all." Zack winked, flipping over the 'open' sign. A sad smile settled on his full lips. "Sister Mary Agnes would be proud."

* * * * *

Sharlene adjusted the pastel bow on the white straw wreath for the millionth time. She wanted everything to be perfect when Jeffrey returned—perfectly set up in the nursery, that is. And what a nursery! She had done it up in muted tones of blue, yellow, green and pink. It was any child's fantasy nursery, complete with a white Jenny Lind crib, matching diaper changing table and rocking chair in the corner. She hoped she hadn't gone too far overboard with the finishing touches, but she just couldn't resist all the beautiful quilts and stuffed animals at the baby store. After all, what was a credit card for if you weren't going to use it?

The sound of the garage door opening in the basement of their townhouse startled her from her daydreaming. She raced out of the nursery and jumped on the sofa, trying to achieve an intelligent yet casual mood. It would have worked if the *Parents* magazine in her hands wasn't upside down. "Jeffrey, is that you?"

"Who else would it be?" came the nasal reply she had come to know, if not quite love. Jeffrey had never been one for small talk or pleasantries, but he had many other good qualities Sharlene had convinced herself—a steady job, a good name, and an uncle who could get them free box seat tickets whenever they wanted to see a Cardinals game. "Seattle was shitty as usual. It rained all day, every day, and Murphy still didn't implement any of our suggestions. I could use a drink."

A tall figure in a rumpled navy blue suit shuffled past her open arms and tossed his briefcase on the coffee table before heading straight for the liquor cabinet. He grabbed a glass from the shelf above and made a face as he opened the ice bucket.

"Where're the ice cubes? You knew I was coming home this afternoon, so why didn't you put any cubes in here?"

"Oh, sorry. I forgot." Sharlene jumped up and ran to the kitchen to fetch the ice. "Sit down and relax. You look like you have a lot on your mind."

Jeffrey grimaced as he poured himself a whiskey straight up and plopped into the leather recliner to put his feet up. "Damn right I do. That's why I expect a little common courtesy like ice cubes when I come home. What have you been up to this week?"

Sharlene entered from the kitchen and dropped an ice cube into his glass with the tongs. "Me? Why, you remember I had an appointment at Doctor Fazoli's office."

"Oh, that quack again. Yeah, I remember." Jeffrey

took a big sip of his drink. "How much moola does he want this time? I'm about ready to give up on the whole baby-making business. If we both worked full-time and saved religiously, we'd have just as much in the bank at retirement age as we'd inherit from old Uncle Bart if we provide him an heir apparent. It's time we give up on the dream of instant millions. We'll have to make them the old-fashioned way—junk bonds."

Sharlene knelt beside her husband's chair and loosened his tie for him. "You know I'm not interested in making millions, Jeffrey."

He took a sip and grinned wryly. "Oh, yeah, I knew there had to be another reason why you married me. It certainly wasn't for my stock portfolio."

Sharlene clenched her fists and stood. Honestly! She just didn't know what to think about her husband's lack of sensitivity at times. Maybe all husbands and wives were like this after four years of marriage. Of course, she wouldn't know, since her own father hadn't bothered to stick around that long after she was born. Sometimes she felt growing up without a father gave her a distinct disadvantage when it came to dealing with the male of the species. She never could understand why guys were so obsessed with their careers and possessing big, fat wallets full of cash to show off. Wasn't there a man out there who thought raising a family was more important than his own selfish need for material wealth? "I married you because you said you loved

me and wanted us to have a baby together, and I wanted to become a mommy. You know that."

"I guess so. Still, I'd rather turn that spare bedroom into a home office and take some of Uncle Bart's pocket change and buy me a bass boat." He took another swig of his drink. "Who needs kids when you've got a bass boat?"

Sharlene's blood turned as cold as the ice in Jeffrey's drink. She slowly crossed their small living area and stood at the newly decorated nursery door. Placing her hand on the handle and shutting her eyes tight, she said a quick prayer, gathering courage from the contents inside.

"Jeffrey, I have something important to tell you. Doctor Fazoli says I'm pregnant."

She heard the clink of his highball glass on the coffee table. "He what?"

"He says I'm about a month along."

"The quack isn't so ducky after all, then!" Jeffrey cackled, slapping his knee. Jumping up from his chair, he almost knocked all the wind out of her with his bear hug. "Is it a boy? Uncle Bart would sure love it if it was a boy."

Sharlene swallowed hard and pulled away from him, forcing herself to look deeply into his dark brown eyes. "What would *you* like?"

"A cool seven million. Oh, and a boy would be good, too. That way we could name him Bartholomew Q. Pincher IV. The old geezer would really love that."

Sharlene blinked back burning tears and turned

away. She had ignored her suspicions about Jeffrey's true feelings toward children all along, but never before today had he been so obvious about them. She had to admit it to herself now—she had rushed into marriage with the good-looking, well-connected Jeffrey Pincher without thinking things through.

Hell, why lie to myself any longer? I didn't think it through at all. Sharlene had been so overwhelmed by Jeffrey's attentions that she didn't even think it odd how a rich boy from St. Louis could look twice at a poor twenty-year-old girl fresh from the Ozarks. And when he said he wanted to start a family right away...? That statement had been the real clincher. As quick as it took to line up a judge and sign the marriage license, they had become Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Pincher of posh Clayton, Missouri.

Only after a year of trying to conceive with nothing to show for it did Sharlene discover the real reason Jeffrey was so anxious to have a baby in the first place—to appease his rich uncle in order to gain some of his fortune. At that point, they contacted the fertility clinic and dutifully followed the doctors' advice. She quit her secretarial job and propped her feet up night and day. Spontaneous affection between them evaporated faster than fresh water in the Dead Sea. Their marriage went on automatic pilot.

Sharlene knew what she had to say next, but the words choked in her throat as if she had swallowed a handful of rocky Ozark soil. She gulped hard and faced her husband. "I don't know what gender the baby is, and frankly I don't care. I have something

important to tell you about the baby, it's —"

"Don't worry if it's a girl, Shar," Jeffrey interrupted, gesturing wildly with his drink glass. "Bart will get over it."

"That's good." She paused, then turned to look straight into her husband's beady brown eyes. "Jeffrey, the baby isn't yours."

At the sight of his pained expression, Sharlene flinched. He looked as if he had just been punched in the sensitive lower regions of the male anatomy. His pasty, office-cubicle face turned an unhealthy shade of gray. He stepped back from her and raised his hands as if she was carrying the plague and not a child. "You're getting back at me for that time you caught me at the office Christmas party with Margeaux, aren't you? I explained all about how we got in the closet together by accident, and —"

"No, that isn't it at all!" she screamed in exasperation, flailing her hands at his chest. "It was the lab. The lab made a mistake the last time they fertilized my eggs for implantation. They used a donor's sperm by mistake."

Color slowly returned to his cheeks. Sharlene stepped back, anchoring her angry fists at her sides.

"A mistake?" Jeffrey shuffled back to his recliner and sat back down. "They can correct it then, right?"

"Correct it?" Now it was her turn to blanch. "This is a child we're talking about here, not a typo."

"Yeah, sure it is..." Jeffrey leaned forward and placed his head between his knees to think. After a moment, he popped back up. "I suppose it's all right."

We wouldn't necessarily have to tell Uncle B about the mix-up in the lab. Unless the donor is a shade or two darker than I am."

Jeffrey Pincher you have to be the most shallow, callous man I've ever met... "They told me the donor has brown hair and brown eyes about the same color as yours and is not of a different ethnic group." She defiantly placed her hands on her hips. "Satisfied?"

He scratched his chin thoughtfully as the wheels and cogs slowly meshed inside his brain. He was definitely thinking up a new scheme. She could tell. "So far so good. What else did they tell you about him? Is he smart? Handsome? Got any money?"

Money. It was always money with him. Sharlene sighed and closed her eyes, leaning her weary forehead against the wall's cool comfort. "Probably not—the money, that is. Most sperm donors are college students out to make a few dollars to help with their schooling. I'll assume he's fairly smart if he's in college, and he's a regular movie star in the looks department. Happy?"

Jeffrey's shoulders dropped. He let out a long whistle. "Great! We're a perfect match then. I can't say I'm not disappointed, but since we weren't getting anywhere with my 'contribution' to the baby project, we might as well go all the way with the artificial insemination route. Doctor Fazoli and company, they can keep a secret, right?"

"Right."

"Then there's no problemo from this end of the deal. The doctor got his money, and we got a baby.

All's right in the world."

Jeffrey downed his drink and stood to fix another. "Wanna toast our little meal ticket?" he asked, chuckling under his breath. "Hey, Shar, where you going?"

Sharlene didn't know where she was going. All she knew was that she had to get away from Jeffrey. She headed for the sanctuary of their master bedroom suite and the solace of their king-sized bed. Climbing in fully dressed, she pulled the covers up to her chin. A long and shaky breath escaped her trembling lips. She realized now that she had some serious decisions to make.

She closed her eyes tight, but she couldn't block out either the world or her pain. What should have been the happiest day of her life had instead revealed the true nightmare that was her marriage. It was no real surprise. Deep down, she knew this day would come sooner or later. Her vain hope that a child would soften Jeffrey's gold-plated heart and allow some love to shine forth was just a silly notion of a poor orphan who dreamed of having the happy family fate had denied her. She realized now how silly this fantasy of hers had been all along. It would never happen.

Rolling to her side, she bunched a fist and planted it resolutely on the mattress. Tomorrow, she'd tell Uncle Bart about the baby situation. It was the least she could do, considering he was kin and all. Then she would take the next step. Whether or not it included Jeffrey was a different matter. Odds were, it

wouldn't.

Blinking back stinging tears, Sharlene tenderly stroked her belly. "From here on out it looks like it'll be just you and me, kid. I only wish your real daddy – whoever the heck he is – could be with us to help sort this mess out."

Chapter Two

Zack could have sworn he heard a baby's cry. He awoke with a start. It was a dream after all. He heaved a sigh of relief and sank back into the tangled mass of sheets and pillows on the battlefield otherwise known as his bed. He turned to his side and noted the time on the cracked face of his alarm clock: 4:30 AM. It was no use. Once he was awake, he was awake. No use wasting valuable time—he had Mr. McGregor's old Mac downstairs in the shop waiting for him to fix the serial port. He stood up slowly, searching the cluttered excuse for a bedroom for the jeans and a T-shirt he had discarded somewhere on the floor the night before.

An hour later, he sat sipping a cup of microwaved coffee in his office, congratulating himself on a job well done. Dad would have been proud. It had been difficult this past year without him. How many twenty-six-year-olds even attempted to run a small electronics store while simultaneously attending night classes in business and information technology? And at such a prestigious college, too. St. Genevieve's was listed among the top ten Catholic universities in the country, and it was his mother's alma mater. It's where she always wanted him to go.

Zack knew he had no right to complain. Sure, life

was a struggle, but he had nearly won the battle. The shop was making just enough money to keep a roof over his and Keith's heads *and* sometimes pay for his tuition and books without taking out another college loan. If there was anything he'd ever learned from his parents, it was the value of hard work and how to apply his energy towards reaching a goal. It may have taken him a bit longer than normal to get his degree, but at least he was going to do it before he hit thirty. Barely.

Still, hearing the sound of a baby's cry in the night bothered him.

Zack shook his head and laughed at himself. It probably was an attack of nerves—and guilt. Dad would *not* have been proud of him if he knew how he and Keith had financed their latest round of classes. And knowing how much Dad wouldn't have approved hurt—really hurt.

But he wouldn't think about it anymore. It was over and done with, and he hadn't done anything illegal. Immoral perhaps, but not illegal. The impregnated woman was probably overjoyed to be bearing a child whose biological father was intelligent, healthy and not too bad to look at, if he could say so himself. He had nothing to be ashamed of, he told himself over and over, although deep down he knew Dad would have counseled him to look harder to find another way to pay for his education.

Zack sighed. Rising from the workbench, he pulled down the next item to be fixed from the shelf—a

malfunctioning hard drive—and tried hard to focus his thoughts on the task at hand. If there was anyone to blame about feeling so damn guilty, it was himself. That day when Keith mentioned out of the blue reading something about a local infertility clinic actively looking for donors and how they were willing to pay good money, he should have said no. But the money had seemed a godsend at the time.

“No more visits for me—forever,” Zack promised himself, taking another swig of coffee and setting the mug down firmly on the desk. He’d think of another way to pay for next semester’s materials and fees without going further into debt. It was time to get off his lazy backside and clean out that attic apartment to rent again. Perhaps this time he’d get a better response to his ad.

He’d been astounded by how little interest his recent ad in the local street paper had incurred, particularly since moderately priced rental units were hard to come by in the affluent Clayton area. An efficiency in a half-way decent apartment building could rent for upwards to a thousand bucks a month, so when he advertised the small one bedroom, slanted-ceiling apartment directly above his own flat on the second floor, he had expected a fairly good response. Maybe it had something to do with the unusually cold winter weather St. Louis was experiencing? Whatever the reason, the extra eight hundred and fifty dollars a month would go a long way in helping pay off his college loans. He had to take a more aggressive tact this time...

Charming hideaway with dormer windows not far from Wash U. area, near Shaw Park, he penned on the back of an envelope. Perfect for a college student or a commuter. One month's free rent upon signing a year's lease.

Zack smiled as he put down the pen. That would do it. No one could resist a month's free rent. It was better than letting the place sit another month empty—or practically empty, since they had been storing old computer components up there for some time now. He'd go and shake Keith out of his warm bed and get him to help clean out the cobwebs. Keith would be royally pissed for being woken up early on his one free day of the week, but it was the least the Frizzhead could do for his 'big brother'. Besides, Keith was three months behind on paying his half of the utilities. A little blackmail never hurt.

* * * * *

Sharlene gathered up her courage, took a deep, fortifying breath and knocked firmly on the towering, oak-paneled office door with as much confidence as she could muster. No answer. She cautiously cracked the door an inch and peered inside.

"Uncle Bartholomew?"

Her hands were cold as the marble sculptures lining either side of the long, vaulted chamber. At the very end of the room sat the white-haired executive at his mile-wide desk, silhouetted in the dying sunlight emanating from the wall length window behind him. He reminded Sharlene of one of his alabaster

artworks, craggy faced and cool as stone. Perched like a hawk with pen poised in mid-air, his intense, dark gray eyes focused quickly on something irritating in the text below. With a flourish he struck out the offending passage, laid down the pen, adjusted his reading glasses and looked up, puzzled by the unusual interruption.

"Sharlene? This is a surprise. Where's that useless nephew of mine? Where's my useless secretary as well?"

Sharlene grinned, relaxing her clenched fists. By the warmth of his response, she could tell Uncle Bart was in a good mood today. She marched confidently toward the immense oak desk and took a seat in the ocher-colored leather wingback chair facing him.

"Mrs. Baylor had to run a few errands in the building, she said, and told me to go ahead and knock. Jeffrey, well, he's off somewhere, God knows where, someplace business-related, I guess." She paused, swallowed and plunged boldly forward. "It's Jeffrey I've come to talk to you about, Uncle Bart. It's about this inheritance situation."

Bartholomew Pincher took off his reading glasses, leaned back in his generously proportioned leather chair and folded his well-manicured hands in his lap. "I see. What's he up to now? Trying to make you convince me to rewrite my will?"

She shook her head. "No, it's not that. Jeffrey doesn't even know I'm here. I wanted to talk to you alone first and see how you felt about... about..."

He raised a bushy white eyebrow and leaned

forward. "Yes?"

Sharlene gulped, twisting her hands in her lap. She didn't know what else to say but come out with it. "I'm pregnant."

"Congratulations," he replied, relaxing his posture. "I suppose Jeffrey's already planned to spend the money on a yacht and an overpriced house instead of investing in the child's future? You want me to set up a separate college fund, perhaps?"

"No, that isn't necessary," Sharlene said softly, blinking back tears. "You see, Uncle Bart, we've been trying for three years to conceive, and when the doctor recommended in-vitro fertilization, we jumped at the chance..."

A frown creased his forehead. "A test-tube baby?"

"Yes, you could say that. It was sort of our last resort. Jeffrey has a very low sperm count."

A low, smug-sounding chuckle erupted from the millionaire's throat. "I should have known. His father was a ball-less, gutless wonder, so the revelation his son is the same is no real surprise. Are you worried that your unconventional conception negates the conditions of my will?"

Sharlene cleared her throat, trying to affect a calm, businesslike tone a man in Bartholomew Pincher's position expected from all his subordinates. "No, not at all. I just wanted to let you know that Jeffrey and I are splitting up. He's pretty much told me he doesn't want anything much to do with the child, and —"

"Hold on a minute," he interrupted brusquely. "You two are about to become parents, and you're

getting a divorce? I don't understand. Please explain yourself, young woman. Have you been unfaithful to my nephew?"

Sharlene straightened in her chair, looking the elderly businessman straight in the eye. "No, I haven't. I wish I could say the same about Jeffrey, but that's beside the point."

"But the child *is* his, isn't it?"

Sharlene bit her lip. This was the question she had been dreading.

"Yes and no."

"Yes and no?" he wondered, flashing her a skeptical glance.

"There was a mix-up at the lab. They accidentally used a donor's sperm instead of Jeffrey's to fertilize my egg cells before they implanted them. Jeffrey tells me he'll agree to stay married and call the child his own as long as he's able to receive his rightful inheritance from you."

"Greedy bastard. He reminds me of his father," Bart muttered. He rested his chin on his steeped his fingers. "Tell me, Sharlene, what do *you* want out of this whole sad affair?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Her voice trailed away, echoing in the large room, breaking along with her heart.

"Nothing?"

"I just thought you had the right to know about the true circumstances of our divorce, and that I wasn't trying to steal the Pincher heir away. I felt I owed you that much of an explanation."

Suddenly a strange look dawned in Bartholomew Pincher's gray eyes. Sharlene had never witnessed any real emotion in her uncle-in-law's face other than disgust or boredom before, but this—could this be true compassion? Standing, Bart circled around the desk and took her hand in his. "Thank you for your honesty, Sharlene. I've always admired your straightforwardness."

Blushing, she shifted uncomfortably in her squeaky leather seat. "Aunt Edwina never has—particularly after I drank a little too much and said her gown at the charity ball last year reminded me of a peacock strutting its stuff around Grant's Farm."

"Edwina is a fool, and half of St. Louis knows it." Bart chuckled. "The other half have their suspicions as well, but know how to keep them under their hats. You, on the other hand, have not a false bone in your body. I respect that."

Her eyes widened in astonishment. "You do?"

"Yes, I do. And I because I respect you, I want to do something special for you and the baby."

Reaching across his desk, he retrieved his checkbook. It took every ounce of will for Sharlene to keep her open jaw from landing on the plush carpeting.

"Even if this child isn't the Pincher heir, he's still the child of my niece-in-law. I think that means he's entitled to a little something."

Sharlene jumped up. "No! I'm not asking for a handout, Uncle Bart. I can go back to work to support myself and the baby. I just wanted you to know—"

He interrupted her with a wave of his hand. "Here's a little something in order to help your child start out on the right foot in life." He tore the check from its binder and handed it to her. "This should make up for my nephew's lack of chivalry and honor. I know it's been difficult being married all these years to the selfish lout, but you've been a loyal companion and probably have put up with your fair share of crap, if you forgive my language."

Sharlene's eyes rolled into the back of her head after gazing upon the figure. "You're completely and utterly forgiven! But I can't accept this. It's...it's too much."

"Call it an early 'baby shower' gift, if you like, from your Aunt Edwina and me."

It's some baby shower gift, Sharlene thought, her hand shaking as she held the thin slip of paper decorated with Bartholomew Q. Pincher's signature along with more than a few zeroes. She and the baby could live on this money for years, if she budgeted well and invested some of it. How could she ever thank him? Words simply were not enough.

She threw her arms around the aging financier and squeezed him tight. "Thank you. Oh, *thank you*. You're a real sweetie, Uncle Bart."

"Yes, yes, I know," he replied, a slight grin curling the corners of his mouth. He patted her back twice, then stepped back to resume his seat of authority behind the desk. "And don't you dare tell anyone—including Jeffrey—about this apparent lapse in my judgment, either. I have a reputation to uphold in this

community, after all."

Sharlene blinked back happy tears. "I promise. I won't. Cross my heart and hope to cry."

Bart sat stiffly in his chair and sighed. "If only we all got second chances in this life. Maybe things would have worked out differently for Edwina and I. Elaine would have married. We wouldn't have had to rely on Jeffrey to provide an heir."

Sharlene smiled kindly. What most people would have thought a blessing, Bartholomew Pincher had found a curse. "Please tell Sister Elaine the next time she contacts you that her prayers for me are finally answered."

"I will."

A momentary sadness came into his eyes, but he willed it away with a determined jut of his chin. "Don't you have something more important to be doing with your time, young woman?" he snapped, his familiar gruff tone once more firmly in place. "I know I do."

"Of course."

Sharlene accepted her abrupt dismissal graciously, quietly backing out of the room. She stifled the urge to giggle until she was well out of the building.

Bless his granite heart! Uncle Bart was turning into a regular softy in his old age. Who would have ever guessed? And who would have ever guessed that she, Sharlene Muldoon Pincher, an orphan from the Ozarks, could be transformed into one of the most financially sound single mothers in all of St. Louis simply by telling the plain truth?

* * * * *

Uncle Bart's unexpected generosity or not, the last few weeks had been tough, Sharlene thought sadly, crawling into the very large, very cold, very empty king-sized bed. Jeffrey had been gone much of the time on business—or so he said—leaving her alone in their townhouse with just her troubling thoughts about the baby she was going to have and the life she was going to lead.

Her life. No more putting Jeffrey's needs and desires before her own, above her own. And no need to scrounge to make ends meet. For the first time in her life, she was in the enviable position of not owing a single creditor a dime and still having enough left over to buy some much needed maternity clothes.

Sharlene's hands glided along the top of her rounded belly. At almost two and a half months along, there was a decided curviness to her form she had never possessed before. She actually had hips! And breasts? Heck, she had been practically flat-chested before Junior came to be.

Junior. It was a silly name, but what else could you call a fuzzy image on an ultrasound photo? What did Junior really look like, feel like? Did he take after his daddy?

She turned to her side and grabbed Jeffrey's pillow, bunching it up and placing it between her knees for support like it said to do in all the pregnancy magazines. There. She was much more comfortable

now. Hopefully Junior was, too.

Sharlene had been amazed how fast Jeffrey had agreed to file for a quickie divorce—so fast her head was practically swimming still. It was if he had been prepared for this eventuality in their marriage all along and was not afraid to plunge madly ahead with his plans. And for her part, she was more than happy to sign over her half of the townhouse and its contents, save her personal effects and the nursery furniture. She wanted a clean break and no unhappy reminders of her mistake in marrying Jeffrey. A clean break and a quick divorce would be a million times better than her own parent's breakup.

Still, she felt cheated. Cheated, because she had been dealt a rotten hand in the poker game of life. She took no comfort in the fact of knowing exactly why she felt the way she did. Sharlene realized it was because she never really knew her own father—other than the horror stories her mother had regaled her with for the first nineteen years of her life.

In spite of the tales, Sharlene had always wanted her own children to know their father in the flesh, warts and all. But could the baby growing in her womb *really* know his father? After all, all she really knew for certain about the sperm donor was that he passed all the health and psychological tests at the clinic, his ethnic group and hair and eye color. *Donor number 342*, Liza Allen had informed her. Daddy 342.

She closed her eyes and fantasized about what life with the father of her child would be like. He would be tall and handsome, of course. Handsome like a

movie star—and he would worship the ground she walked upon, without even once being told to do so. He'd bend and stoop and fetch and carry and wait on her hand and foot in every way possible and then... He'd tell her how gorgeous she looked in spite of the fact she was daily metamorphosing into a petite version of a beached whale. His love would be her mirror—and in it she would become a brilliant reflection of beauty and fulfillment, everything an expectant mother should be.

And the sex? Words alone could not describe it. When they'd come together in hot, unbridled passion, the sex would be mind-altering, earth shattering, cosmic in its intensity. He'd have her screaming and shouting and begging and—

Sharlene's eyes flew open as she woke up in a sweat, her cheeks red with the heat of her imaginings. "This is crazy," she said with a sigh. "You can't lust after a man you never even met, can you?"

* * * * *

"Charming hideaway with dormer windows not far from Wash U. area, near to Shaw Park," Liza Allen read aloud from the classifieds as Sharlene took another big bite of her turkey club sandwich. Morning sickness? Lack of appetite? So far, so good, but she was going to weigh a half-ton before her pregnancy was over if her appetite for St. Louis Bread Company sandwiches increased over the next few months.

"You think I should look for a place in the Clayton area in order to be near the clinic?" she asked between bites.

"Definitely. Joel and I love our townhouse near the park. It's a great place to go for a walk and meet all sorts of interesting people." Liza gave her a wicked wink and a saucy grin. The young MD was a social animal and couldn't wait to reintroduce Sharlene to the singles scene.

"Yes, doctors, bankers, lawyers, and tons of unemployed, single moms, I suspect," Sharlene mumbled between bites. "I've barely left my husband and already you have me picking up men in the park. I think the dating life can wait until I'm no longer the size of a small car, don't you?"

"From what my patients tell me, the sex is great during the second trimester," Liza purred.

"Oh, sex! Is that all?" Sharlene chuckled, giving her confidant a dismissive gesture. "Why didn't you say so? You don't have to date for just sex. Take a look at the personals on the back page of that rag you're holding. Wanted: Adventuresome seeker who wants to experience all the fascinating options of group sex —"

Liza slammed down the paper. She took another sip of her espresso, then gritted her teeth together in a tight smile. "All right, there's no need to weird out on me, girlfriend. How long have we known each other? About three years? You are not the 'adventuresome seeker' type and we both know it. Any person who would stay married to Jeffrey Pincher for as long as

you did is definitely not a 'seeker' by any means."

Sharlene sighed. She was the original homebody, no doubt about it. All she ever wanted to be was somebody's wife, mother and life-long companion. She hated to admit it, but she wasn't even ambitious when it came to her career as a secretary. She didn't even dream of eventually becoming a bigwig office manager like most secretaries did. Her dreams involved stenciling patterns of ivy on her freshly renovated kitchen walls and starting an herb garden on the patio and collecting antiques and refurbishing them. She and Carol Brady had way too much in common. The proverbial dinosaur of feminism she was, and she wasn't afraid to admit it.

"Ow, that hurts," Sharlene teased. "There's no need to kick me while I'm down."

Liza patted her hand. "Sorry about that. I have to think about yours and the baby's safety. Answering a personal ad in this publication wouldn't exactly be the wisest thing to do."

"Thanks for looking out for me. It's great to have a pal like you." Sharlene slipped her hand from Liza's grasp and licked the last crumbs of her sandwich from her fingers. "You got time to go check out that apartment near the park with me?"

"Hmm, maybe a few minutes." Liza checked her watch. "Hop in my car. If we hurry, we can take a quick look at it before my cell phone starts chirping like some insane cricket."

The outside of the brownstone brick building looked unpretentious, but promising.

"Richmond's Electronics," Sharlene read off the slightly weather-beaten wooden sign hanging over the tall, glass-paned, double front doors.

"Real impressive," Liza drawled, making a valiant attempt to parallel park her Lexus. "I'm surprised this place hasn't been turned into a coffee shop with a cutesy name or one of those weird, eclectic bookstores being so near the university area."

"It's amazing they haven't gone under what with all the huge chain electronic outlets popping up all over the place. And it's not exactly next door to the park, but I give them credit for trying to make it sound more attractive."

Liza looked the block up and down and switched off the engine. "Other than the rent, I'm not sure it's got much going for it. This isn't the flashiest section of Clayton, but at least it's not in the city proper. You want to pass on this one?"

Sharlene shook her head. "No, we might as well see what rents for eight hundred and fifty dollars in this neck of the woods, so I'll know to stay clear of what rents for less."

A melodic electronic buzzer heralded their entrance into the narrow shop. Glass cases filled with pagers, cell phones and the latest in pocket-sized computing and electronic book reading devices formed an L-shape to the left, while shelves upon shelves of video game cartridges and computer software manuals and disks took up the opposite side of the show room. Computers and monitors of various shapes and sizes lined the back wall near a

small cash register counter.

"How can I help you, ladies?" Keith Marshall asked in a husky tone, his dark eyes drifting from Sharlene's eager face to the guarded look of well-heeled Liza Allen's.

His stare lingered on Liza's pretty features a little longer than was comfortable for the young doctor. She raised her cafe-au-lait-colored hand and flashed what she called her 'engagement ring'—a rock the size of a first-class postage stamp—an excellent way to scare off prowling males without so much as a word.

"We've come in regards to the classified ad for the apartment. Can we take a quick look at it?" Liza asked coolly.

"Yeah, sure, no problem. Let me get the owner for you."

Sharlene could tell Liza had successfully put the hopeful flirt in his place as she watched the tall, gangly, 'eternal student' type shuffle to the back, his glasses sliding down his nose.

"Hey, Zack! We got potential renters out here."

A boyish face framed by an uncombed mop of chestnut hair popped out from around an 'employees only' marked doorway. "I'll be out in a sec. Please take a look around the store. Buy something if you like."

Sharlene froze. The voice sounded familiar. So was the face. Where had they met before? And why did she have a strange feeling that their first meeting had been important?

While Liza examined some of the latest in caller ID gadgets, Sharlene remained rooted to the spot in the center of the small sales area. A minute later the familiar face, attached to a lean, muscular body, reappeared.

"Zack Richmond," the familiar face said, shaking Sharlene's hand. "You've come to see about the apartment?"

Zack's coffee-brown eyes, flecked with golden highlights, sparkled brilliantly in the afternoon sunlight streaming in through the display window. They radiated true honesty and graciousness, Sharlene thought, gazing into them a bit longer than what was considered polite. Something in his smile implied a certain amount of shyness; however, his handshake revealed an unquestionable strength of both mind and body. A sensitive soul, a determined spirit... Zack Richmond reminded her of an angel dressed in an *Old Navy* sweatshirt and jeans.

Snap out of it! Sharlene silently scolded herself, driving her nails into her palm to bring herself back to reality. "Yes, I've come—come about the apartment."

He glanced over at a wary-looking Liza. "I'll have to warn you, it's rather small. More a one person flat than a double, but I'm not against renting to a couple."

"No, it's not for a couple. It'll be only for me."

"Just you?"

Sharlene bit her lip in thought. Suddenly it dawned on her where they had met. "Didn't I mow you down with a baby stroller not so long ago near the corner of

Hanley Road?" she blurted.

The look of recognition on his face instantly confirmed her suspicions. "Yes, that was me." He pointed to her growing abdomen, clearly evident under her striped knit top poking out from her denim jacket. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you right off. You've changed a little, haven't you?"

She giggled behind her hand. "Yes, I have—for the better, I hope. You don't mind renting to a single mother?"

The warmth of his tone touched her to the depths of her soul. "No, not at all. We can't have single moms living on the streets now, can we?"

"No, we can't," Liza interrupted. A knowing smile played at the corners of her mocha-painted lips. She grabbed Sharlene by the arm and guided her a few paces away from the mesmerizing Zack Richmond. "Shall we go up on and take a look?"

"Of course," Zack said, coloring slightly. "Forgive me for taking up so much of your valuable time. Follow me, ladies."

They followed him behind the cashier's counter, past several workbenches full of electronic components and computer monitors and up a long flight of stairs. Sharlene exhaled a series of long breaths as she patiently waited for Zack to find the correct key in a thick ring of keys in order to unlock the apartment door.

"Are you all right?" Liza whispered, her eyes widening.

"I know why it rents for so cheap," Sharlene

whispered back, still breathless from the exertion. "You get quite a workout just getting to it."

Liza checked Sharlene pulse at her wrist and made mental notes of her friend's crimson cheeks. "Let's forget about this place, okay? I can't risk one of my patients going into early labor because she lives on the third floor."

"This way, ladies," Zack said, leaning hard against the door. After several shoves, it popped open. "I apologize for the long climb up. I'm planning to have the elevator repaired soon."

Sharlene followed the tilt of Zack's strong chin, darkened by a five o'clock shadow at one-fifteen, as he nodded to a cage-like device in the corner.

"That's a Victorian cage lift if I ever saw one," Sharlene whispered in awe.

"When did you ever see one?" Liza wondered.

"On one of those antique shows on TV." Sharlene happily fingered the delicate intricacies of the metalwork door. "With a little cleaning up and a potted fern in the back, it could be really beautiful."

"I'll pay the free month's rent if it helps you get the elevator fixed faster." Sharlene was barely able to contain her excitement of finding both Zack and such a precious antique under one roof. "How about it?"

Zack's eyes bulged in amazement. "You'd actually do that?"

"Sure. Or how about I take my free month's rent toward the end of the lease?"

He flashed a toothy grin. "Perfect."

"You'd better get it in writing first," Liza warned,

knocking Sharlene out of her dream world. "Come on, Shar, we haven't got all day here."

Zack stepped from the door. "After you, ladies."

Small, but cozy, Sharlene thought, walking into the main living area. She headed directly for one of the two dormer windows that looked out onto the street. None of Clayton's towering steel and glass giants blocked the picturesque, tree-lined boulevard vista below.

"I'll take it," she said to no one in particular.

"Pardon me?" Liza said. "You haven't even checked out the bathroom or talked about what utilities are covered in the rent. Slow down, girlfriend."

"Water and gas is covered in the rent, but electricity, cable and phone are all left up to the tenant." Zack crossed to Sharlene at the window, casually leaning an elbow against the wall.

"Fair enough," Sharlene agreed, smiling. *You know, with a little cleaning up, he could pose for GQ, while I could be on the cover of Harpooner's Weekly...*

"You won't find any better deal in this area. And I'm not just saying that to rent this place out quicker, either."

"I know."

He isn't wearing any overpowering aftershave or cologne. Her sinuses appreciated it. Her nose had become acutely sensitive now that she was pregnant. Taking a quick whiff of the air, she noticed the smell of a recent paint job. So he took his duties as landlord seriously as well... How much of a stickler would he

be on the lease?

Sharlene cleared her throat nervously. "You realize that when I move in I'll be a single, but come the end of a year's lease I'll be a double. Is that all right?"

His dazzling smile wed her to the spot. "No problem. I love children."

"You do?" An image of Zack and her raising her baby together flashed through her mind. Sharlene's heart beat faster. "I mean, that's great. Let me check out at the rest of the place and if everything is as wonderful as your view here, you've got a deal."

Sharlene dashed into the side room after Liza. She desperately needed her friend's strength in order to keep from making a further fool of herself.

"It's not bad, not bad at all," Liza mumbled, mentally calculating the size of the bedroom. "The bath is good-sized, too. Other than the kitchen being more of a closet than a real chef's delight, I think this place is more than adequate for you and Junior to set up shop in."

"You really think so? Heck, what do I need a kitchen for when I'm living mere blocks from some of my favorite restaurants?"

Liza winked. "Touring the local culinary establishments on the arm of a handsome neighbor already? I saw that look in your eyes. You better find out if he's attached, girlfriend, before you make a fool out of yourself big-time. I don't want the new mama's heart breaking just because she's got an Adonis for a landlord."

Sharlene stepped into the bathroom to escape Liza's knowing look. Nicely polished powder blue and white tile and an oversized bathtub kept her mind focused firmly in reality. "I don't know what you are talking about, Doctor Allen," she replied in her most logical voice. "This mama's heart is never going to fall for any man's ever again, save her little boy's, if *she* turns out to be a *he*."

"Uh-huh, right. Now, let's go talk to Mr. Richmond about the deposit before my lunch hour becomes two." Liza put an arm around Sharlene's shoulders and guided her toward the front room. "I know I'll breathe a lot easier once you're tucked away all comfy-cozy in some place safe and sound."

"We'll be plenty safe. I can sense it. I just know we're going to love it here."

Liza's eyebrows came together in a questioning V. "By 'we', I do hope we're talking about you and the baby, right?"

"Why, certainly. Who else would I be talking about?" Sharlene thrust her hands deep into her jacket pockets. For some reason, they felt clammy.

Darn hormones! she cried inwardly. *One day I don't have enough and have to take them to conceive, and the next I'm practically drowning in them. Throw me a life preserver, somebody.*

"Convinced?" Zack asked, casting a hopeful glance at Sharlene as they re-entered the living area.

"Yes, I'll take it," she said slowly, praying she wouldn't say anything rash or stupid. "Can I move in right away?"

Visibly relaxing, he pulled a folded paper from his back pocket. "As soon as you put your name on the dotted line here and pay the deposit, it's as good as yours."

Liza whipped out a pen from her leather clutch. "Here you go. I hope you know what you're doing, girlfriend."

Sharlene took a deep breath, willing her hands to steady as she accepted the contract and pen with a smile. "Don't worry. I know exactly what I'm doing." She signed the paper against her knee and quickly handed it back to her new landlord.

"Your signature's as legible as a third year medical student's," Liza joked.

"Shirley Pender?" Zack read.

She blushed. "No, it's 'Sharlene Pincher.' Sorry about the scribble."

Zack grinned and winked. "As long as it's legal, that's all that matters."

"Yes, it's legal." Sharlene suddenly felt breathless. Her eyes riveted themselves on Zack's full lips. Her knees turned to Jell-O. Even with the heat turned down in the empty apartment, she felt sorely tempted to strip off her outer shell of clothing and most of her inner shell as well. Clenching her teeth in order to return Zack's smile without breaking into a drool, she quickly followed Liza out of the apartment.

As long as it's legal, that's all that matters, Sharlene thought, replaying Zack's last statement in her mind. *Gracious, what all I'm thinking about doing to your body right at this moment probably ain't legal...* She paused on

the landing and heaved a long sigh.

"You okay?" Liza asked. Her concern was frightening in its intensity.

"I'm winded, but I'll be fine." She leaned on Liza's strong arm as they slowly negotiated the staircase.

Darn hormones, Sharlene silently berated herself. All I can say is that you'd better have a good lock on your bedroom door, Zack Richmond...

Chapter Three

Sharlene basked in the slender warmth of the spring sunlight, happily observing the scene playing out directly below her half-open kitchen window. The fragrance of newly planted violets and pansies in the terra cotta planters located on either side of the shop doors drifted upwards on the breeze, along with the heated conversation taking place on the sidewalk.

"Only a moron would hang it straight across the window like that," Zack moaned, slapping his forehead in disgust. "Go in and take it down and hang it diagonally like I said."

"And block the rest of the display in the window?" Keith shouted back at him. "Hell, you might as well shove the whole damn banner up your lily-white ass for the amount of good hanging it diagonally will do you."

Zack turned around and bent over. "Hey, publicity is publicity, Frizzhead. Are you going to be the one to oblige me?"

"You've been hanging out in that faggot bar across from the art gallery, Richmond," Keith retorted, doing a double take as he spied a stoop-shouldered, elderly woman admiring the flowers. "Good morning, Mrs. Storey. How are you today?"

"Eh? Morning glory, you say? Those aren't morning glories, they're pansies, young man," the hard of hearing woman replied, shaking her cane at the planter.

Keith's eyes widened. "You're absolutely right. This flower is most definitely a pansy — just like good ol' Zack here is."

"Why, you —"

Sharlene stifled a chuckle and turned away from the window. It wouldn't do if Zack caught her spying on them. If she didn't know better, she'd swear Zack and Keith were bitter enemies instead of the best of friends. The two young men had provided her with an endless source of entertainment with their pithy put-downs and witty bickering these past three weeks since she had moved into her new apartment. She couldn't begin to thank them enough for lifting her spirits.

Sharlene picked up her cup of cocoa from beside the small sink and turned to check on her bread machine. The warm, yeasty smell of the baking honey-oatmeal bread was simply heavenly... She checked the timer for the hundredth time that hour. Darn! Forty-five minutes to go. She had been nursing a craving for home-baked bread all day. Yesterday, it had been pizza. For some reason she just couldn't get enough of it, promptly wolfing down an entire small Imo's St. Louis-styled pizza with hamburger and pepperoni all by herself in one sitting.

She drifted into the living area and seated herself among the dozens of small, floral-patterned throw

pillows littering her small wicker sofa. Liza was going to scold her about her rapid weight gain the next time she got on the office scales, but she couldn't help it. Her appetite for food had taken control of her, and showed no signs of relinquishing it anytime soon. Besides, 'Junior' needed all the good nutrition she could give him in order to grow up big and strong, to make his daddy proud...

Junior. That was assuming the baby was a boy.

That was also assuming that her baby had a father who wanted to be a part of his life. That was assuming *a lot*.

She took another comforting sip of cocoa. What was going on in her head? Her idle fantasies kept repeating the same theme over and over again recently. She constantly daydreamed of rendezvousing with her child's father. An impossible dream! She didn't even know his name or where he lived or what he looked like besides hair and eye color. But one thing she did know for sure was that he had passed muster with the Fazoli Infertility Clinic's strict donor standards.

"He must be a very special person to pass all their tests," she muttered to herself. "He's a sexy, intelligent, compassionate—"

Hold on a minute! How can I even think such things? I don't even know the guy.

Sharlene sighed. She was creating a daddy for her baby out of thin air, and then she making a whopping big assumption that he also would be the perfect man to meet *her* needs as well. It must be all the hormones

surging through her petite frame. She'd never been such a hopelessly romantic type before. She was Sharlene Renee Muldoon Pincher, a hard-working, practical homebody from the Ozarks, not particularly blessed with a lot of book smarts, but she usually demonstrated a lot of plain ol' common sense.

What would Ma have thought of her silly fantasies? "Horse manure, just a load of horse manure, Sharlene," Ma would say whenever she got to thinking of doing something completely off-the-wall like becoming an interior decorator or studying costume design.

"It's a load of horse manure, Sharlene," she said to herself. "Stop thinking about it."

"Damn it, Keith! I told you to leave that sign alone!"

Sharlene burst into a fit of giggles. She got up on her knees and looked out the window above the sofa and was rewarded with a pouting Keith stomping back into the shop with an irate Zack close on his heels. Those nutcases really were her salvation from complete and utter insanity.

And it didn't hurt her sanity any, either, having a landlord who was 'certifiably gorgeous' as Liza had promptly pointed out the day she helped Sharlene move in. The only problem with having Zack living right downstairs was that it reminded her how long she had been without a man. Jeffrey could be selfish and self-absorbed but when he wanted to make love, he at least knew what went where and why...

No, she promised herself, putting her cup down

firmly on the low coffee table. She wasn't going to play that game again. Look what happen when she dated—then married—someone working in the same building as she did four years ago. Close proximity to a body on a daily basis did *not* guarantee closeness in a personal relationship. Uh-uh. She'd learned her lesson the hard way. *It's better to have an imaginary lover in your head than a real one in your bed.*

Still, there was something about Zack Richmond Sharlene found very attractive apart from his looks. She stretched out across the cushions, closing her eyes, letting her fantasy run its course. Keith Marshall was a nice enough fellow, but he was a bit on the geeky, irresponsible side. He wasn't in any hurry to grow up or take life seriously, and she had her fill of geeks and rebels before she met Jeffrey. Small town Missouri was full of them. No, Keith was definitely not her type.

Zack, though? Zack was different. He was hardworking and conscientious. Respectful and easy mannered, Zack Richmond was the type of guy a girl could feel comfortable introducing to her parents, if she had any. He would make some lucky woman a very nice husband some day. A lucky woman from the right side of the tracks without a divorce on her record and a history of making rotten personal decisions.

Don't go there.

Sharlene opened her eyes and sat up. She picked up her cup and shuffled over to her small kitchen table, plunking herself down in a chair to sip the rest

of her cocoa while the bread finished baking. She allowed a long mournful sigh to escape her lips. She could tell Zack wasn't really attracted to her—at least not in a romantic sort of way. He treated her with respect like an old family friend or a schoolteacher. It took her a week and a half to get him to call her simply Sharlene and not Mrs. Pincher.

Worse of all, Sharlene could tell Zack wasn't the most comfortable around expectant women, either. Whenever he spotted her huffing and puffing down the street with her shopping bags, he would gallantly rush out and helped her through the door and into the rickety, yet now serviceable, elevator, but if he accidentally touched her in any way... She didn't know what to make of his abrupt jumping like he had just been burned action. It wasn't like what she had was contagious. At least, it wasn't for males, anyway.

Dependable, courteous Zack displayed all the makings of a good friend. Sharlene made a silent vow she wouldn't risk their budding friendship by idly daydreaming how her baby's father somehow looked exactly like one Zachary Richmond—

"Sheesh!" Sharlene exclaimed, dropping her now empty cup onto the table with a *thunk*. Whatever made me think *that*? Must be the brown hair, brown eyes bit...and the Special Agent Fox Mulder overtones in his smile. I've got to get a hold of myself, or else I'm going to start talking to myself and—"

Oh, no! Liza had predicted this day. She was going stir-crazy. Maybe she should look into taking a few temp jobs in the area as Liza had suggested after all?

It wasn't like the money wouldn't be welcomed—she could keep Uncle's Bart gift in savings as a nest egg for Junior. Working again would help dust off her old office skills, which had been rusting these past three years, plus she could make some new friends as well. Yes, that was it—she'd go out and snag a *Post-Dispatch* at the newsstand on the corner and start scanning the classifieds right away. After she ate some of the fresh-baked bread first, of course. Her stomach rumbled loudly in agreement.

"Another half hour to go on the bread," she groaned, laying her head on the table's smooth, pine surface. "Is there no God?"

Sharlene realized now she wasn't just going stir-crazy—she *was* certifiably stir-crazy. For the past three weeks she had done nothing but decorate the apartment. The nursery pieces, her old daybed, the wicker loveseat and matching armchair and the pine table and chairs she now owned had been scooted and cajoled into numerous positions only to find themselves scooted and cajoled into different positions on a whim the very next day. It was high time she got out of the house and experienced the world firsthand again. But she had to admit it, it had been fun fixing up the place according to *her* tastes and not to some color-blind males' whose idea of chic was leaving the price tag on the couch in a noticeable spot so people could tell you shopped at *Ethan Allen*.

Beep-beep-beep. The shrill tone of the bread machine signaled the end of the baking cycle. Twenty minutes to go in the cooling cycle and then she was going to

be in homemade bread and clover honey heaven. She rapped her fingers across the satiny surface of the pine table in anxious expectation.

“Ah, heck. Who wants to eat cooled bread anyway?”

She yanked the plug from the wall before her common sense could talk herself out of it.

* * * * *

Keith straightened up slowly. His back was killing him after bending over to pick up a pile of cell phone option pamphlets off the floor where they had been knocked by a customer’s hyperactive preschooler. “Wonder where she’s going?”

“Who’s going where?” Zack asked, curious, yet being careful not to take his eyes off the melted-down motherboard he was working on in front of him.

“You know damn well who I’m talking about. Miss Homebody. Miss Moneybags Divorcee who don’t have to work for a living. Your new – and paid up for six months in advance – tenant. She doesn’t get out much, that’s for sure.”

“Maybe she’s gone while we’re at classes in the evening? Besides, it’s none of our business. She’s quiet, pays her rent and probably needs her rest. I can imagine how stressful a divorce can be for someone who’s...uh, in a delicate condition.”

A smirk played at the corner of Keith’s lips as he slammed the pile of pamphlets back atop the case. “Delicate condition, my ass. She’s in great shape. And

she don't seem to be grieving the loss of her hubby none, either. Maybe the kid ain't his to begin with."

A chill ran up Zack's spine. Of course Sharlene's child was her husband's, correction, *ex*-husband's, he convinced himself. From what little he knew of her, he never doubted for a second Sharlene Pincher wasn't among the most trustworthy individuals who ever walked the face of the earth. He forced himself to concentrate on the computer circuitry in front of him. "Your mind's in the gutter again, Frizzhead. You spend way too much time online at porn sites."

"Hey, I'm just telling it like it is—or can be. I'm not living in a 'Pollyanna' world like you are, homeboy."

Zack gritted his teeth. At twenty-six years of age, he despised and detested being thought of as being naïve in any way, shape or form. "Okay, so what if the baby isn't her ex's? It's still none of our business. Sharlene hasn't broken any laws that we know of, and at least she understands how to pay her bills in a timely manner unlike some scrubs I know—"

"Chill out. I said I'd make good on the bills after the semester. Speaking of which—" Keith looked at his watch and headed straight for the door, "it's time to close shop so we can race over to our respective classes and become the high paid, in-demand individuals society wants us to become."

"It's six already?" Zack scratched his head, amazed. Not many customers had graced their presence today. It was going to be tough keeping the bills current if business didn't pick up a bit.

Keith flipped the open sign around, threw the

deadbolts and set the alarm. "Nah, homeboy, it's five. Remember? We close early on Wednesdays."

"Wednesday, right." Zack whistled a long sigh of relief and shuffled into his office. He picked up a pile of papers from the middle of his desk, catching a glimpse of forgotten books underneath. He was in big trouble.

"Oh, shit!"

Keith raced towards the back, knocking several stereo headphones off a display board in the process. "What's wrong? We got a letter from the IRS or something?"

"I wish. It's worse. I was supposed to have read and written a commentary on this book Dr. Markham gave us last week. I just never found the time." Zack threw the book down in disgust. "That's the third time this term. There goes my grade in that class."

"Not necessarily. Isn't Markham that mental-pausal, sex-crazed excuse for a business prof?"

The hairs on the back of Zack's arms suddenly stood at attention. He tightly crossed his arms against his chest. He didn't like to think too much about the signals his instructor had been broadcasting his way. "Yeah, that's the one. So what?"

Keith slid a conspiratorial arm around his shoulders. "Well, then, you get on the teacher's good side by asking her out for a drink after class. Explain to her how hard it is running a business and attending school simultaneously, and that you'll *make it up to her* if she'll give you some extra time for the assignment."

Zack faced puckered worse than if he had bitten into a sour lemon. He flung Keith's arm away like it was red-hot, molten lava. "No way, man! I don't ever want that woman to think I have an interest in her. Professionally, personally or otherwise."

"Why not? You got a girl stashed somewhere around here I don't know about?" Keith let loose with a wild chuckle. "Hey, you didn't order that blow-up dolly we saw on that web site, did ya? Remember, the one with the lifelike—"

"Get out of my face!"

Pushing his tormentor aside, Zack stomped up the stairs to sanctuary of the apartment.

"Touch-ee, touch-ee," Keith muttered. Curious, he picked up the textbook and skimmed a few pages. "Too bad I didn't take Markham this term. I'm so in need of some good, ol' fashioned lovin' I'd accept it from a woman of *any* age."

* * * * *

Zack blew out a long stream of air as he stomped up the steps of St. Genevieve's newly renovated lecture hall. There were days like these when he wished his mother was still alive. Mom always had a way of making Keith see when he was going off the deep end and pushing people's buttons. Dad had demanded respect from his foster son—and usually got it—but only Mom could really get Keith to lay off and act like a civilized human being. Zack's duty of being a good example to Keith was getting to be too much lately.

Something had to give.

But he'd promised Mom on her deathbed he would always look after Keith—and he'd promised Dad in his final days he'd always look after Keith. Too bad there wasn't anyone willing to look after *him*.

Zack froze on the top step, his hand poised and ready to swing up the heavy glass paned doors, each pane painted with a gold *fleur de lis* echoing the French heritage of St. Louis. No, he just didn't feel up to facing Dr. Markham tonight. Maybe next week, but not tonight. By next week he would find the time to catch up on his reading and turn in two reports.

Shaking his head, Zack turned around and slinked toward home. "Yeah, right. If Mom could see me now, she'd be so proud of me."

Chapter Four

Sharlene switched on the light and gave a long whistle as she surveyed the floor to ceiling stacks of student files lined along the basement walls.

"They weren't kidding when they said they were a little behind in their filing."

The stale musty air with its delicate sprinkling of cobwebs in the corners beneath the obnoxiously humming prehistoric fluorescent light fixtures only added to the room's charm. It was all she could do to keep herself from bursting out in hysterical laughter.

"Yep, for a business department, they sure aren't very businesslike, are they?" Connie Michaels, her fellow temp-in-arms, agreed. The painfully thin, sharp-featured middle-aged woman put her hands on the small, bony nubs she counted as hips and shook her head of dyed bright-copper curls in disgust. "This place is a regular health hazard."

Sharlene gulped. "Health hazard?"

"Sure. Think how flammable all this paper is. And the dust—yech! We're going to have be extra careful as we remove files from atop those towering infernos or else they may decide to collapse on top of us." She flashed a sympathetic grin at Sharlene and pointed to her growing belly. "Don't worry, Hon. I've been in similar situations before. I won't let anything happen

to your little bundle of joy there."

"Thanks," Sharlene breathed a sigh of relief. "I never imagined in a million years that being a temp would be anything but boring, but somehow working beside you, Connie, I have a feeling it's going to be a blast."

"Damn right it is. Lucky for us you brought along that mini boom box. A party without music just isn't any fun," Connie remarked, bending low. "Eureka, I've spotted an outlet. Let's crank some tunes before we tunnel into this paper Mt. Everest."

With the local oldies rock station pounding out a steady beat, the temps divided their task, separating the old student files from the active student files and then finding the appropriate drawers to place them in. The hours until lunch flew by quickly. Sharlene didn't realize she was ravenous until Connie told her to sit down.

"You can't stand up the whole day, Mom," Connie cautioned as she took a bite of her apple. "Your feet will swell up something awful if you do. You'll turn into the 'Elephant Woman' before you know it, and that ain't good."

"Sounds like you have experience in these matters." Sharlene plopped down in the room's only piece of furniture besides cabinets and a rickety conference table, an equal rickety secretary's swivel chair.

"I've raised three boys. I think that makes me experienced in something."

"Definitely. You're an authority in all things little

boy. You possess a lot more practical experience than I do, that's for sure."

Connie sat on the edge of the table and sighed. "Wish I could convince a full-time employer likewise. But temping does have its advantages."

"The flexible hours?"

"That too, but I was thinking more along the lines of the lack of a steady boss. Before you can get too tired of the bastard, the job is over and you can skip on out the door without so much as a glance behind. It's a very liberating feeling."

Sharlene scooted some stray files over to the side so she could remove her ham and Swiss on rye with extra ham and Swiss and an extra slice of rye from her lunch sack. "Oh, I agree. There's complete free —"

RICHMOND, ZACHARY F.

Sharlene eyes zoomed back to the label on the folder to her right. A folder with a green tag meant an active student.

"What are you staring at?" Connie asked.

"This file belongs to my landlord, Zack Richmond. I don't recall him telling me he was a student here."

Connie reached across her lunch and flipped the folder open. "Let's see how's he doing then, shall we?"

"I don't think we should," Sharlene began, but her curiosity got the better of her as she noticed a few poor marks on the printout of his most recent grades.

Connie kindly pointed out the more interesting bits of information to her. "Poor guy is just barely hanging in there, grade-point-wise. And he's paying full

tuition from what I can tell. It's always hard going to school and working full-time, and this file proves it."

Sharlene suddenly felt like she owed it to her handsome landlord to defend his efforts. "Hey, he's not doing so bad. It looks like he's almost done with his degree program, so I bet he's just slacking off in his last term. I myself never made it through more than two years of college, so I have a lot of respect for those who do."

"So do I," Connie agreed. "One of my boys started grad school not too long ago. I just hope he can pay on his college loan himself. I told all of them my temp money is going toward me and my honey-bun's retirement cruise."

"A cruise? Sounds wonderful. Can I come along?" Sharlene teased.

Connie howled with laughter. "Only after you burst that bubble of yours there."

Sharlene wistfully stroked her growing belly. "Yeah, who'd want to go to sea with someone about to receive a stork delivery, huh?"

"I see no wedding band on your hand, so I'm thinking a singles cruise would be more to your liking anyways. Am I right?" Connie asked, quirked a dyed eyebrow.

"Possibly...I don't know yet. The divorce sort of turned me off of men altogether."

It was an obvious lie, but Sharlene didn't need to rev up her hormones anymore. She slammed Zack's folder shut. "Okay, I'm ready to tackle the leaning towers of student files again. I'll take the left side this

time if you don't mind the right."

"Gotcha. You know, Shar—can I call you 'Shar?'" Connie asked a few moments later.

Sharlene nodded. "Sure. You just did."

"Well, you know, Shar, you could always get free or reduced tuition if you worked full-time at the school here. You ever thought about doing that?"

"Get a degree? Nah, I don't need one."

Connie dropped the file she was holding. "You don't?"

It was hard to put into words why she felt they way she did. "No, that's not what I meant. What I mean was I'm not smart enough to make it in college."

Connie's fists flew to her hips. "Them's fighting words. What fool ever told you such a thing?"

"Uh, my mother did."

"Horse manure."

Sharlene froze. *Ma?*

"What did you say?" she whispered.

"I said *horse manure*," Connie enunciated slowly as if Sharlene were deaf. "You're a very bright young lady who's got another mouth to feed on the way. Don't settle for less, and don't sell yourself short."

Sharlene smiled at her newfound mother substitute. "Thanks, Connie."

"For what?"

"For believing in me. I appreciate it."

"You're entirely welcome." The redhead plopped herself down in front of another stack of files. "You gonna think about going back to school now, Shar?"

"I don't know. I'm too afraid. What if I flunk out?"

"You have to take the class over again. You don't always get the material on the first try, you know. My youngest son's college transcript is living proof of that."

"He's on sort of a 'If at first you don't succeed' degree plan?"

"Yes, followed by a 'Try, try again to get an extension on your loans' strategy." Connie laughed. "Heck, I shouldn't complain. Some things in life are much better the second time round."

Sharlene slammed a drawer shut with a push of her hip before picking up another stack of files. "Like what?"

"Like love. You only been married the once?"

"Yep. Once was enough."

"Don't sell it short the second time. My Herbert's a gift from God above if there ever was one. He took me and my three little guys in and looked after us all ever since. I'm sure there's a Mr. Right somewhere out there in the world for you and your little one, too. Time will tell."

There could be one in here, too, Sharlene thought, lightly touching the file drawer marked 'R'. *Nah, don't be stupid.* She shook the cobwebs from her head and concentrated on filing the student folders marked with 'S'.

Sharlene knew deep down it was hopeless. And she had to face facts—even if 'Mr. Right' was living under her feet, would he ever think of her as his 'Ms. Right'?

Not in a million years. She probably had a better chance of finding her baby's 'mystery daddy' sperm bank donor than attracting her handsome landlord's attentions. And the odds on that ever happening had to be higher than winning a multi-million dollar lottery jackpot without buying a ticket.

* * * * *

"Sharlene?"

Sharlene jumped up and spun around on her heels as her can of Sprite dropped into the bin of the vending machine.

"Why...hello, Zack," she panted, breathless. After three days of working in the bowels of the business department of St. Genevieve's, she was beginning to wonder if Zack ever showed up for classes. She couldn't help but admire his attire. His aging leather jacket perfectly accentuated the outlines of his well-developed biceps. His faded jeans were like a second skin, tight against his well-molded legs. His plaid shirt was opened just a little more than necessary due to a lost button, exposing some delicious looking dark chest hairs. He looked like a little boy who needed a little loving and a lot of clothes mending.

Correction—little clothes and a lot of loving.

"Are you a student, too?" he asked, interrupting Sharlene's not quite so platonic thoughts.

She clenched her free hand into a tight fist behind her back and cleared her throat. "No, afraid not. I'm just a lowly temp worker in the business department

this week. They needed some help with their filing."

He nodded and shoved his hands deeper into his coat pockets, quickly scanning the hallway behind her. "I see."

Great answer – now he knows I'm not his intellectual equal and you've bored him to boot. Smooth move, Shar, smooth move...

"Uh, I haven't seen much of you lately," she blurted out in the deafening silence that had fallen between them. "The shop's keeping you busy, huh?"

Zack's jaw relaxed. He seemed relieved by the change of topic. "Yeah, it has. The repairs have, but I'm not sure they're worth it in the long run. There's more money to be made in selling new electronics than fixing old ones. I think it's called 'planned obsolescence.'" Zack shifted his weight from foot to foot, jamming his hands further into his pockets as he glanced up and down the hallway.

He was waiting for someone, Sharlene suddenly realized, observing Zack's odd stance. He was making conversation with her to be polite and spend a little time before someone better came along. The idea that Zack could be waiting for a fellow classmate who could be his girlfriend made her heart plummet all way down from her chest and into the dark, dank basement full of filing cabinets. She turned toward the staircase and her duties.

"I hope your business picks up real soon, Zack. I'll let you go to class now –"

"No, wait!" Zack interjected, grabbing her elbow and holding her fast. A wild look came over his deep

brown eyes. He quickly peered over his shoulder. "Let me accompany you."

She looked past him. The hall was empty. "All right."

Sharlene didn't know what to make of Zack's sudden interest in escorting her to the storage room, but she wasn't going to fight it. Besides, he was touching her—actually *touching* her—and he didn't act like she had the plague. What could be behind this sudden change of behavior?

The sound of madly clicking high heels echoing along the polished floor tiles directly behind them caused Sharlene to turn her head slightly. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of a woman who was closer to Connie's age than Zack's. The woman perched her reading glasses atop her head and wore an expensive red wool plaid jacket over a simple, yet elegant black sheath. It must be some type of college professor's uniform, Sharlene decided. Were they being intentionally followed?

"Gee, I've never been escorted to work before," Sharlene giggled, trying to make light of the situation. "What will your girlfriend in the red plaid think?"

Something in his eyes made Sharlene shiver. Was it fear?

He gulped hard. "G-girlfriend?"

"I'm joking, Zack. Ha, ha, see?" She lowered her voice. "Who is that behind us anyway?"

"Dr. Markham. I owe her a paper, and I didn't show for class the other night."

Approaching the steps, Zack helped Sharlene take

hold of the railing. "Ah, the plot thickens," Sharlene said, nodding. "You've been a naughty schoolboy and you don't want to be caught. You're avoiding the teacher, right?"

He shrugged. "Yes and no. I came over this afternoon in hopes I could persuade her to give me an extension on the work, but now..."

Zack peeked over his shoulder and allowed a long-held breath to escape. The muddle of animated voices confirmed that some other students had waylaid Dr. Markham in the hall. Relief instantly washed over his appealing features. "I don't think I'll talk to her after all. I think avoidance at all costs is the best policy when it comes to Dr. Markham."

Sharlene found herself more than curious over Zack's predicament. "Why wouldn't your professor give you an extension if you promise to get the work in before the term's over?" she asked. "You've been a good student up until now in her class, haven't you?"

Zack shrugged again. "A decent enough one, I guess. It's just that um, that uh, I've heard *rumors* about the good doctor, and I'm not sure I want to find out if they're true or not."

Sharlene turned to face him on the staircase landing. "Rumors? Like she does something horrible to students who turn in their papers late?"

A rosy blush flooded Zack's cheeks just then, a very flattering rosy blush Sharlene noted. "Exactly. And I don't care for her type of extortion."

Sharlene gave a long, low whistle and started down the steps again. "A teacher blackmailing her

students? Who would have thought! So this instructor knows you're independently wealthy now that you've got a renter upstairs, huh? What all does she want?"

"Just my body," Zack muttered.

Sharlene's eyes widened as she took the last step into the basement area. He couldn't be intimating a college professor would take advantage of him sexually, could he?

"Your body? She's not an anatomy professor, is she?"

"No, not by a long shot. She's just this very lonely woman who —"

Sharlene put up a hand. "No, don't go any further. It's really none of my business. I'd report her behavior to the head honchos, myself, but I won't tell you what to do. I'm sure you know how to best deal with this kind of situation."

Leaning against the doorframe, Zack's face beamed in gratitude. "Thank you."

"Thank *me*?" Sharlene frowned, puzzled. "Thank me for what?"

Zack looked down at his shoes, then straightened his posture. Gazing into her eyes, he smiled. "Thanks for believing that I can handle things myself. All my life long, people have acted like I didn't possess a brain and that I needed to be told what to do. First my parents, and now Keith—you can't possibly imagine how gratifying it is to know that someone in the world thinks of me as a full-fledged adult."

"Don't be ridiculous. I could tell from the very first

time we met that you were a very intelligent, kind and capable—”

“Zack? Zack Richmond?” Diana Markham called down the stairwell. “Come to my office. We need to talk.”

“Oh, no,” he groaned, grimacing as if all the air had been knocked out of him.

“You’ve been discovered,” Sharlene said with a sympathetic grin. “I hope the ordeal isn’t too painful.”

“Zack?” Diana called again. “You coming?”

“I’d better go,” he whispered. He shuffled toward the staircase, a resigned slump to his shoulders. At the first step, he paused, turned and looked at Sharlene as if he were considering her in a whole new light. “Thanks again, Sharlene.”

“You’re welcome. And good luck. I know you’ll do the right thing.”

He stood taller. “Yeah, I will. See you later.”

“See you,” she said softly as he ascended the staircase.

“Who’s that handsome hunk of male flesh you were talking with?” Connie asked as Sharlene re-entered the storage room. “That wasn’t the Mr. R., otherwise known as your landlord, was it?”

Sharlene plopped down into the dilapidated secretary’s swivel chair and breathed a loud sigh. “Yes, that’s him.”

Connie’s gray-green eyes twinkled. “Then the ‘R’ definitely stands for ‘right on’ in the looks department. And he owns the building you’re living in, too?”

Sharlene lazily spun the desk chair around and around with her big toe. "Yeah, Zack inherited the building from his father. He still runs the family business in the shop downstairs."

"Then he's all 'right' in the employment department, too. I guess we can excuse him a few bad grades if he can run his own business..."

Connie crossed over and abruptly stopped the chair spinning. "Whoa there! You're getting both me and the baby dizzy watching you spin like that."

"Oh, no," Sharlene cried, patting her belly. "I didn't hurt him or her, did I?"

Connie snorted. "Nah, your little bundle of joy is floating in a big bathtub of water. He or she is fine."

"That's a relief."

"Now what I'm trying to tell you," Connie said, looking Sharlene straight in the eye, "is that your Mr. 'R' appears to have what it takes to make it in the daddy department."

A shiver ran down Sharlene's spine. "The 'daddy department'?"

Connie winked. "Yeah, the daddy department. I peeked out and watched him helping you down those steps. A real gentleman there. You've got great potential in that one. Promise me you won't let him slip away."

"I won't," Sharlene promised.

"Good girl." Connie handed her a stack of folders. "Now, let's get back to filing the leaning tower of papers here before an earthquake knocks it over."

Sharlene saluted. "Roger on that."

I won't let Zack slip away. Sharlene busied herself with the monotonous filing tasks. But first I've got to catch him... And what will I do if Zack doesn't want to be caught?

* * * * *

"What was it this week?"

Liza Allen wasn't acting like her usual, light-hearted self at all today. Sharlene picked up on her ob-gyn's uptight mood as soon as she entered Liza's office and cautiously took a seat across from her. Sharlene's case file lay open on the desk, accusing her of some deep, dark crime no doubt. She coughed nervously to clear her throat while simultaneously fighting off an urge to run to the bathroom. She picked at a hangnail, summoning the courage to speak.

"What do you mean?" Sharlene asked innocently.

Liza snapped the folder shut. A long sigh of frustration escaped from her lips, nicely outlined in a flattering shade of mocha. "You know very well what I mean. Are you bingeing on toasted raviolis, Imo's pizza, Ted Drewes' custard or just plain, old-fashioned pickles and ice cream?"

A light bulb popped up over Sharlene's head. "I get you now. You're talking about my weight, aren't you?"

"Darn right I am, girlfriend. You're supposed to gain weight when you're pregnant, but five pounds a month is considered a normal amount at this point.

You've put on twenty-five in only three."

Sharlene wrung her hands. At the sight of Liza's stern countenance, a flood of tears burst the dam, wracking her frame with gut-wrenching sobs. "I-I know I shouldn't be eating as much as I do, b—but for some reason, I—I can't seem to help myself."

Liza shook her head and threw a tissue across the desk at her. "There, there. It's not all that bad. I'd rather you eat than starve yourself, but we've got to think about a little further down the road health wise. I don't want your poor heart to give out on you before you go into labor. How about we start you on an exercise program?"

"We did—remember? I go for walks around the park every afternoon, but they just make me feel even more ravenous. I come home after my walk and find myself alone in front of the TV, and there's all this food and just me in the apartment and... Well, I just lose control."

Liza nodded in sympathy. "I know where you're coming from. Whenever Joel stands me up for dinner because of business I find myself alone in front of the TV with a carton of Haagen-Das rum raisin." She rubbed her eyes, leaned back in her chair and sighed. "Okay, I know where you're coming from now. But I can't allow it to continue. The key word is 'alone.' You just can't eat dinner alone anymore."

"But I live alone," Sharlene protested. "You want me to go out to eat every night of the week? What about the chances of picking up germs or worse in a restaurant? And their portions are larger sometimes

than what I make for myself."

"That's true, but at least if you want seconds in a restaurant you have to order it, wait for it and pay for it, so there's some control over the *amount* you consume. Hmmm," Liza mused, tapping her pen against her lip. "What about you stay home and eat, but you invite someone else over to share your dinner with you? Conversation can help people from over-indulging at the table."

"I don't know about that," Sharlene pouted. "I could still talk while stuffing food in my mouth. After all, I can sing Shania Twain in the shower and brush my teeth all at the same time, too."

Liza made a pained face. "Ooo. It's not a very pretty image you're painting of yourself, girlfriend."

Sharlene shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a hick from the sticks originally."

"Come off it. You're not that bad in the manners department. You've used a salad fork correctly whenever we've gone out to a restaurant with silverware."

"I was just mimicking you. You know, 'monkey see, monkey do—'"

Liza cut her off with a tap of her pen on the desk pad. "Sharlene, you're just acting difficult now."

Sharlene sat up and proudly stuck out her chin. "That's me, Ms. Difficult."

"Stubborn probably is a more accurate word to describe you," Liza conceded, frowning. "But I won't give up. You've got to find yourself a dinner partner to help you control your food intake."

"I suppose I could put out a personal ad," Sharlene thought out loud, stroking her chin. "You know, the kind we always enjoy reading out loud, 'Single Pregnant Female seeks person who likes to eat. Table manners optional.'"

"No, I don't think so. I can just imagine the weirdoes a personal like that would attract. No, it's going to take a real sweetheart to put up with you over the dinner table—someone with the manners you claim to be lacking in..." A smile danced over Liza's pretty features. "I don't know why I didn't think of it before. I know just the person who would be your perfect dinner date."

"Someone from Overeaters Anonymous?" Sharlene joked.

"Better than that. Much, much better. He definitely has manners—or so you've told me—and he's got a great personality and he lives right under your feet."

Sharlene's heart raced. The air in the room became as hot and oppressively still as a July's day in Death Valley. Although the baby was too small to be pressing against her lungs, she found it difficult to breathe. Sweaty palms flew upwards to hide the crimson glow she knew was blossoming on her cheeks.

"Are you all right?" Liza jumped up and rushed to her side. "You appear to be suffering an allergic reaction."

"Yes, that's it." Sharlene rose on shaky legs and headed over to the small couch situated against the back wall.

Liza fluffed up a throw pillow and helped her lie down. "Put your feet up and breathe deeply," she commanded. "What did you eat today you think you could be allergic to?"

Sharlene placed her feet up on the arm of the sofa and slowly exhaled. After a few more deep breaths her symptoms started to fade. "I don't think this reaction has anything to do with food."

Liza raised a curious eyebrow. "You wearing a new type of cologne or deodorant?"

"No, that's not it, either."

"What is it then?"

"It's the mere thought of eating food with someone I'm allergic to which gave me the reaction."

"You're allergic to Zack Richmond?"

Liza plopped down in the chair Sharlene had recently vacated and laughed so hard she had to dab at the tears in her eyes. "How can anyone be allergic to that gorgeous guy? He's a prince. You haven't discovered a 'Mr. Hyde' side to him by chance, have you?"

"Oh, no, no, he's a prince like you said." Sharlene took a couple of deep, cleansing breaths and gathered her thoughts. "I guess I'm not really allergic to him. In fact, if I was given the choice between hijacking a truckload of bagels or hungrily staring into Zack's soulful brown eyes, I know which I'd rather do."

"Wonderful! You invite him up for dinner, he helps you maintain your weight, *and* you two can start a little exercise program of your own in the bedroom—"

Sharlene immediately sat up. "Liza! I thought you were a medical professional."

"I am, I am," she purred. "But sex is a great calorie burner. I've given you a go-ahead to resume a normal sex life, just as long as you and your partner follow safe sex practices."

Sharlene collapsed backwards onto the couch and rubbed her temples. Safe sex? She doubted the thought of going to bed with her had even crossed Zack's mind... The poor man didn't even find her the least bit attractive, and why should he? She resembled the Goodyear blimp.

Liza reseated herself behind the desk and pulled out her prescription pad. "So, how about it, girlfriend? You gonna ask Mr. Sexy over for dinner tonight yourself, or do I write you a prescription you can hand to him stating how eating together could be beneficial to you and your baby's health?"

Sharlene slowly pulled herself up to a shaky stand. "You don't have to practice your messy scrawl on my behalf. I'm a big girl. I can do it."

"Great. Okay, you're out of here. You've got an appointment with Staci and the ultrasound department next."

A sudden chill tingled down Sharlene's spine. "Ultrasound? Didn't I already have one this past month? Please tell me something isn't wrong with the baby."

"Don't worry. Everything's fine. I want to make doubly certain we didn't miss anything—or should I say *anybody*." Liza gave her a big wink. "We need to

be certain of the reason why you're putting on weight so quickly. It's just a precaution."

Sharlene gulped hard. "A precaution?"

"Yes. I prefer to know well in advance if I'm going to be delivering just the one or a whole set."

"A *set*? Of babies?" Sharlene gasped. She grabbed the side of Liza's desk for support.

"Slow down, girlfriend. Nothing surprising if it's a set and not a single. Lots of time they come in groups, particularly after in-vitro. Don't you remember Doctor Fazoli's little lecture on that possibility?"

"Sort of..."

Liza stood up and escorted her expectant friend by the elbow out the office door and over to a wheel chair parked beside the front desk.

"Deborah, could you please take Ms. Pincher over to Staci's office? She's going to need a little help getting there."

"Right away," the nurse replied.

"Twins," Sharlene murmured incoherently.

"Now don't get too upset. It might not be twins at all."

"Wonderful."

"It could be triplets," Liza teased.

Sharlene noticeably paled.

Liza turned to her colleague and whispered, "Oh and Deborah, be sure to tell Staci to have the smelling salts ready just in case."

Chapter Five

“What did she do when you told her?”

Zack knew how difficult it was for Keith to keep his curiosity in check, but he honestly didn't feel up to telling Mr. Loud Mouth one word more. Zack continued unpacking the box of hand-held video games, carefully placing each in their appropriate slot in the display rack, and prayed his foster brother would eventually tire of the topic of conversation and go back to his web surfing.

“Well?” Keith challenged him. “Did you volunteer to screw Old Lady Markham's brains out if she gave you a passing grade in the course or not?”

“Will you keep it down!” Zack barked. “A customer could walk in at any moment.”

Keith crossed his arms. “Yeah, right. We've had our allotted five already this morning, so what are the odds?”

Zack telegraphed him a dirty look. It was bad enough that their business was dropping off faster than lemmings off a cliff since Dad passed away; he didn't need everyone on the planet constantly reminding him.

“If you tell me how your date with the sex-crazed professor went, I'll tell you first about this hot babe I picked up at the Laundromat last night. Deal?”

Zack leaned his forehead against the rack and dropped his chin in defeat. "Deal."

"I knew you'd come around." Keith lowered his voice and peaked over his shoulder for any potential eavesdroppers. "This chick's name is Roxie, and she's a gorgeous redhead with a killer body and big green eyes. She works as a dancer at one of those men's clubs across the river."

Zack raised an eyebrow. "No kidding? What's she doing at a Laundromat in our neck of the woods? Slumming?"

Keith rolled his eyes. "Funny, very funny, homeboy. No, she's visiting with a friend who lives around here. She's a very nice person, actually. Mom and Dad both would have liked her."

"Sure they would have. They always approved of people in the performing arts," Zack deadpanned. "I bet they both would have loved to see her *perform*, too."

"Up yours, fool," Keith growled. "Roxie just happens to be studying psychology part-time. She told me she wants to work for the FBI in criminal personality profiling someday."

Zack grinned and bent down to unpack a few more game cartridges from the box. "She's gotta be pulling your leg. You're so gullible, Marshall. She's probably told you that she's worked as a prostitute as well to study human sexuality."

"Actually, yes and no." Keith shifted his weight uneasily. "She told me she was a prostitute for a while after she ran-away from home at fifteen, but

then she realized that she could make more money helping to put the sickos who preyed on little girls like her behind bars—plus dress like Dana Scully. So, she got into exotic dancing, passed her GED and started taking college classes.”

Zack shook his head in disbelief. “You honestly believe her?”

“Sure. She showed me her college ID, and she had one of her texts with her. *Abnormal Psych*, I think it was called.”

Zack stood tall and let out a long whistle. “Yeah, and I bet she thinks you walked straight out of the pages of her book.”

“You don’t think I’ve got what it takes to attract a decent-looking, intelligent babe, do you?” Keith shouted. He stuck out his lower lip and scowled. “You think bad boys like me don’t ever attract good women.”

Oops. Zack realized it was he who was pushing somebody else’s hot buttons now.

“No, that’s not it,” Zack explained gently. “I was just ragging on you for fun. I’m just trying to show my brotherly concern for your safety. That’s all.”

Keith’s eyes narrowed. “Safety? What about her makes you worry?”

“You guys must have really hit it off if she was able to open up to you and relate her whole life story like that, but how can you be sure this Roxie isn’t a pathological liar? Maybe she’s just a normal working bum like us, and she just wanted to impress you with a tale of woe and intrigue.”

Keith shrugged. "Could be... but why invite me to come up to the club and see her dance this evening if wasn't true?"

"Good point." Zack scratched his head. "Her story may check out after all." He crouched to retrieve the last of the game packages from the crate. "I take it you'll be dining out tonight and our weekly pizza night is canceled."

"Yep, it shore is." Keith sighed happily. "Gorgeous women gyrating their hips on a catwalk override pizza, brewskis and the Blues playing on the tube any day of the week. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

Keith lowered his voice and squatted beside Zack. "Unless you want to come along with me tonight. I'm sure Roxie could introduce you to a few of her equally attractive co-workers. It's about time you came out of mourning and being Mr. Super-Responsible and start dating again. Live a little while you're young. You'll be turning thirty before you know it."

Zack shuttered. The big three-oh. He could visualize the dreaded birthday even now creeping up on him, readying itself to leap upon him and strangle the last of his vitality with all the deadliness of a lion attacking an antelope. He certainly didn't like thinking about thirty's inevitability. A noisy, smoke-filled nightclub could go a long way to drown out all his morbid thoughts. But, no, he had a business to run and a reputation to maintain in the community.

"Not tonight, Super-Stud. I've got a headache—

and my own laundry to take down to the Wash Tub. Maybe some other time."

Keith *tsked*, slowly shaking his head as he rose. "I don't think you realize how much excitement you'll be missing, but I ain't gonna force you into a life of debauchery if you don't wanna go."

"And I don't wanna go," Zack repeated, trying to convince himself as much as Keith. He lifted the empty packing crate and placed it on his shoulder before heading for garbage bin out back. "Just promise me you'll watch out for yourself in such a classy establishment, okay?"

Keith smiled. "No problemo, big bro. I know how to take care of myself."

"Yeah, yeah, sure you do."

"Hey!" Keith yelled as the front door buzzer alerted them to a customer. "You didn't tell me what happened between you and Markham."

"Nothing," Zack yelled, turning the corner into the employees-only area. "Absolutely nothing. Go tend to our next victim, will ya?"

"Aw, come on. I told you all about my night," Keith grumbled as he slid behind the counter. "You can't be serious—"

"Hi, Keith. Is Zack around?" Sharlene crossed her fingers and said a quick prayer, concentrating her energies on the image she was projecting—relaxed and casual—since she felt anything but. She prayed she appeared as innocent as a lamb, because in fact she felt more like an evil jungle predator stalking its

frightened prey through the thick, dark vegetation, salivating at the mere thought of pouncing upon its dinner and devouring it whole.

Keith leaned over the counter top and turned on the charm. "Zack's dumping an empty carton out back. Is there anything I can do for such a fine-looking lady on this fine Friday afternoon?"

Sharlene laughed at Keith's playfulness. "You're certainly in a good mood. Things going well for the little online enterprise you told me about the other day?"

"Sh!" Keith hushed her with a slashing motion to his throat. "Remember, the boss-man could be listening. He don't know about my latest attempt at becoming the richest man in the world —"

"You attempting to swindle some fools out of their hard earned cash again, Marshall?"

Zack bounded into the store proper, a winsome grin on his full, soft lips. Dressed in tan cords and a rumpled brown and yellow plaid shirt that brought out the soft gold highlights in his hair, he couldn't have looked any more handsome than a movie star on Oscar night, Sharlene thought.

"If the FBI ever comes knocking around here, you better believe it's your butt that's going to fry and not mine," Zack joked. "Hmm, maybe your little friend Roxie will be partnering with Fox Mulder by then and get you out of jail."

Sharlene smiled at their friendly game of one-upmanship. "Roxie?" Her gaze focused on the younger man's reddening cheeks. "Why, you didn't

tell me about this FBI agent named Roxie the other day, Keith. Is she someone special?"

"You could say that." He quickly checked his watch. "Five o'clock. Time for me to get ready for my big night out. Feel free to call me 'Foxy Mulder' from now on."

"In your dreams," Zack chuckled. "Be careful now, remember?"

Keith spun around and headed for the back stairs. "I will. Trust me. You taught me how to be a good boy, remember?"

"Me, Mom, Dad and Sister Mary Agnes at least *tried*," Zack said under his breath.

"Good luck on the date," Sharlene added.

He saluted them good-bye. "Thanks. Later."

The jovial atmosphere abruptly dissipated as Keith left the shop. Sharlene turned to find Zack straightening several of the counter displays with his back to her as if he didn't realize she was still in the room.

"Zack?"

"Sorry. I'm bit preoccupied." He stopped fidgeting with the computer bug key chains next to the till as she approached. "Is there something you needed?"

Needed? It was more like wanted. Sharlene gulped hard and licked her suddenly dry lips. "Uh, yes. I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me tonight."

"Dinner? Tonight?" Zack looked as if the words were stuck in his throat and choking him.

She rushed in to rescue him. "Strictly for medicinal

purposes. Honest."

His expression remained an utter blank. "Medicinal purposes?"

Sharlene bit a nail, then launched headlong into her convoluted explanation. "Well, it's like this. Liza, my friend, you know her, right? She's also my doctor and she's worried that I am putting on too much weight. She wants me to slow down and eat less, but when I'm alone I don't slow down or eat less, and about the only time I do slow down and eat less is when I'm sharing my dinner with company—so I thought I'd ask you."

He acted a bit dazed by her breathless rationale. "Ask me what?"

"Would you like to be my dinner companion tonight?" she enunciated carefully. "For dinner. My place. Seven o'clock?"

"I'd love to." A definite smile was developing at the corners of his mouth, his luscious, kissable mouth Sharlene couldn't help but notice.

"So what are we having?"

Having? What about me? She bit the inside of her lip. "You mean to eat?"

"Yeah."

Sharlene drew in a long breath and blew it out slowly. She hadn't gotten that far in her plans. It had taken her an hour walking around and around the park just to summon the courage to ask Zack to her table. She'd forgotten to come up with a menu!

"How about lasagna and salad?" she suggested, praying that she hadn't eaten up all the mozzarella

and lettuce in the refrigerator or else it was a quick trip over to the overpriced eclectic grocery on the corner.

He grinned. "My favorite."

"Mine too."

Mission accomplished! Sharlene gritted her teeth to keep from yelling. The whole invitation thing had been easier than she thought it would be. She started toward the elevator. "I'll see you at seven?" she asked.

"Seven sounds great." He nodded. "Dress is casual?"

"Very casual," she called out, hopping into the lift.

Why don't you show up in nothing but a bow tie and a smile? She closed the cage shut and leaned on the button. *You could be dessert.* "Darn hormones," Sharlene muttered, slumping against the side. If she hurried, she'd have time to take a quick shower before she started making dinner. A very quick, very *cold* shower.

* * * * *

Zack stared a long time at the strange man facing him in the mirror, the lucky man who had been fortunate enough to lose his roommate on their usual pizza and hockey night, only to be picked up by his beautiful tenant in the apartment above his own.

Whoa! He needed to get a grip on himself here. Sharlene wasn't exactly picking him up. She was being neighborly. Besides, it had been her doctor had

made the suggestion not to eat alone. You couldn't very well call this impromptu dinner invite a *date* in the strictest of terms. Still, he figured it couldn't hurt to splash on a little of that expensive cologne his cousin who worked at the perfume counter at Lord and Taylor's had given him for Christmas.

Chestnut hair combed in place, freshly washed and shaven, now all he had to do was choose his attire for the evening. *Casual*, she had said. "No problem, I always dress casual," he muttered to himself as he rummaged through his closet. The only suit he possessed had been purchased for his father's funeral last summer.

He froze as he touched the smooth black sleeve of the suit jacket. What would Dad thought of him seeing a pregnant divorcee with very little visible means of support? A woman who obviously didn't believe in the sanctity of the home and family, since she was willing to divorce her husband and raise her child alone —

"He'd be happy she wasn't an exotic dancer in a strip club, that's what," he said aloud, convincing himself that he was doing the right thing. A much better thing than date a stripper like Keith was doing. Before he could change his mind, he grabbed one of his nicer button collared shirts and some clean khakis out of the closet and kicked the door shut.

Upstairs, things hovered from bad to worse and back again.

"Oh, how could I have burned them?" Sharlene moaned, pulling the charbroiled rolls from the oven.

"I set the timer, didn't I?"

She scraped the blackened chunks of dough off the baking sheet and dumped them into the bin before chucking the entire mess into the sink with a solid *clink* of humiliation.

"Great. Lasagna, but no bread. I guess I could run on down the block to—"

The knock at the door caused her heart to skip a beat. He was early.

"Just a minute," she called out in her sweetest voice, madly fanning the burnt bread fumes out the window. Frantic, she grabbed the can of deodorizer spray from atop the refrigerator and doused the kitchen area with a thick mist of the germ-killing fragrance before heading toward the door.

"Come on in if you dare." Sharlene covered a cough with one hand while simultaneously depositing the can of antiseptic spray behind her back into the umbrella stand with the other.

"I'm sorry if I'm a bit late or early," Zack apologized. "I forgot to put my watch on, and I wasn't sure how long it would take me to pick up a few things down the street. This is for you—"

"Oh, you brought French bread!" Sharlene clapped her hands in delight before happily accepting the gift and taking it into the kitchen. "Now I don't have to come up with some elaborate explanation for the rolls."

"The rolls?"

"Never mind, it's not important now. Please, won't you come in and sit down while I slice this up."

Zack took a seat on the small wicker couch decorated with numerous throw pillows in soft pinks and beige. *She's done wonders with the place.* There were floral curtains with tiebacks at the windows, knick-knacks on the coffee table, a soft wool rug on the floor. It really looked like a human being lived here. His place was merely an assortment of piles of unwashed, unfolded clothes, boxes of textbooks and wholesale computer component magazines in search of a decent bookcase. Somehow, he had never thought of finding someone to help him decorate, give it what his dad had termed a 'woman's touch'.

He smiled at her attempts to tackle the hard, crusty bread at the kitchen counter with a serrated knife and a little elbow grease. It would have taken a huge bouquet of roses and a box of chocolates to excite most women, but Sharlene Pincher was a very different kind of woman. A special kind of woman. His kind of—

Zack bit the inside of his cheek. The pain brought him back to reality. Sharlene was his tenant, neighbor, and a very nice person, but that was it and that was all there was ever going to be of it. No more. He straightened in his seat and cleared his throat to speak.

"I didn't bring a bottle of wine, since you're uh, um, you're not supposed to drink when you're, uh... you know."

"Pregnant?" she suggested, slicing another thick slice of bread. "It's okay, you can say the word. I know I am."

"Of course you do," Zack babbled on, wiping a drop of nervous perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. "I'm just not sure of the politically correct way of stating your, uh, *condition* in polite conversation."

Sharlene arranged the bread on a platter and placed it on the table. "Hmmm, I guess you could say I was 'VC'."

"VC?"

She giggled a twangy little laugh. Zack had never heard a woman's laughter like it before. It was mesmerizing.

"Yeah, VC. You know...virginally challenged." Sharlene's cheeks flashed a becoming shade of pink, contrasting nicely with the warm tones in her ivory colored silk sweater. She cleared her throat and put down the knife.

"I can't believe I just said something like that. Please forgive me. Let's sit down. You hungry? I'm ravenous."

Zack stood and took three quick steps to the small table. It was covered with a red and white-checkered cloth and decorated with an old wine bottle doing double duty as a candleholder. "Your table is more authentic than any Italian restaurant on The Hill," he complimented, sitting down beside her.

Her face glowed as she passed him the salad. "You really think so? You're not just saying that, are you? Of course, I wouldn't know much about any of those fancy establishments on The Hill. Jeffrey only took his business contacts to eat out there. I never got to go."

Zack's eyes widened with disbelief. "He never took you out on the town?"

"We sort of went out on occasion. We attended several Cardinals games whenever his uncle gave him a couple of freebie tickets, and once he took me to show down at the Fox Theater. It was the revival of *The Sound of Music*. I had to get on my knees and beg him for about three months to go see it."

Zack understood now why she left the bum. His folks would have agreed that a woman had the right to divorce in such an obvious case of spousal neglect, wouldn't they? If the guy was such an obvious jerk and didn't appreciate the treasure of who she was, then it was for the best they separated. "You ever go to the Muny?" he asked.

"The big amphitheater over in Forest Park? Yeah, I snuck in those free seats in the way, way back all by myself once just for the heck of it. I couldn't see much past the chain-link fence, though. I believe the show was *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. I couldn't be too sure without binoculars."

"That's too bad." Zack desperately wanted to swing the conversation to a more upbeat topic. "But you can go to the theater all you want now that you're single again, so maybe all's well that ends well—"

Zack's fork slipped from his finger and hit his plate with a *plonk* before bouncing to the floor. *What a stupid thing to say. Get hold of yourself, Richmond!*

Sharlene jumped up. "Let me get you another fork."

Dashing to the silverware drawer, Sharlene used

the few moments she had as she rummaged around for a fork to collect her thoughts. What was wrong with her? Here she had her landlord in her home not more than ten minutes and already she was scaring him to death with her whiny tales of her horrible marriage. Not exactly a topic for polite dinner conversation, was it?

"Here you go," she said, handing him another utensil. "Sorry I didn't set the table the right way – you know, two forks, one for salad and one for the main course. Which reminds me..." She turned around to peek in the oven. "The lasagna is almost done. Just give it a few minutes to set up."

"It smells wonderful. Something else smells good, too. Smoky, sort of like barbecue?"

Sharlene laughed and threw her oven mitt down on the counter. "Okay. You found me out. I burnt the rolls right before you arrived. Thank heaven you arrived with the French bread. It's like you're, uh, what's the word?"

"Psychic?" he volunteered.

Their eyes met and locked for one brief, yet intense moment. Sharlene couldn't be sure which one of them had cast the spell that had somehow hypnotized her, holding her in place until she had to force herself to turn away. She blinked hard and glanced at him a second later. Zack seemed to be intently studying the salad on his plate. She must have imagined the whole thing.

The timer buzzed just then. Sharlene sighed, grateful for the interruption in the atmosphere of

awkwardness. "I hope you're hungry, 'cause dinner's ready."

From the corner of his eye, Zack observed Sharlene's well-rounded form twirl around and intercept the entree from the oven. He watched, fascinated, as she bent down to test the casserole with a knife. The view was great from where he was sitting... The smooth knit fabric of her long, lightweight ivory sweater clung to her hips above her black leggings, outlining every inch of her luscious curves.

He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. He'd always been a hip man. Those curves were enough to make his khakis take on a second skin-like appearance, but fortunately the tightest spot was covered by the napkin in his lap. Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself once again this vision of loveliness, this angel, was his hostess and neighbor. Nothing more.

"Ta da! Dinner is served." Sharlene brought the dish and serving spoon over to the table and placed in front of him. "Come on. Eat up. Anything left over I'll promptly consume around midnight, so please feel free to make a total glutton of yourself."

Grinning, Zack scooped out an extra large portion. "If you say so. How can I turn down such a gracious offer to pig out?"

"You can't, so don't even try." Sharlene accepted the serving spoon from him and served herself an ample amount. "You need to put some meat on those bones anyhow."

He laughed. "You sound like my mother."

"I feel like I am your mother sitting here saying, 'Eat, eat!' So, tuck in, and please don't disappoint your *mother*," she teased.

The image of his mother serving him his favorite dinner flashed through Zack's mind at that precise moment. Mom standing over him, dishing out a second helping of spaghetti and meatballs, complaining about how he was always growing taller but not any wider... Mom with big, dark eyes and a decidedly Italian round waistline. What would she have thought of Sharlene?

He dished out a bit more salad onto his plate and winked. "Don't worry. I always hated disappointing my mother."

Sharlene returned his wink with one of her own before shoveling another forkful of lasagna into her mouth. "Good boy."

They ate in silence for a few moments, Zack observing his energetic hostess clean her plate in less than half the time it took him to clear his own. Obviously she never committed the sin of wasting food. Mom would have adored Sharlene's appetite.

"You know, in some ways you do remind me of my mother." He dished another helping of lasagna onto his plate. "Funny, huh?"

Sharlene put down her fork and arched a curious eyebrow. "Really? How do I remind you of your mother? Don't tell me her stomach rivals this over-inflated beach ball I have stuffed up my top?"

Zack couldn't be sure if she was joking or not.

"You're not that large for a... for being... you know."

"The word's 'pregnant.' You seem to have a mental block with the word, Zack." She cast a serious look at him. "Do babies somehow make you nervous?"

He swallowed hard under Sharlene's searching gaze. How could he tell her in a word yes? How could he tell her he still suffered an attack of the guilts whenever he contemplated last term's fund-raising method? It was impossible. He couldn't tell her, so he'd just have to laugh it off.

"No, not at all." Zack forced a chuckle. "I love playing with my cousins' little ones at family get-togethers all the time."

"How nice. You have many cousins?"

"Only thirty or so on my mother's side. My dad's side is smaller. There's about twenty."

Sharlene promptly dropped the bread she was buttering. "Fifty cousins, did you say? Sounds like it's quite a party when you all get together."

"It is. Half of them live in the area, and the other half are off at college or in the service and living elsewhere, but they like to drop into town now and again. My folks claimed we had a relative in just about every state in the union."

Sharlene put down her knife and sighed. "Wow. I envy you. You're so lucky. I can count the number of living relatives I have on one hand minus four fingers and a thumb."

Zack's heart went out to her. She sounded so utterly lost and lonely. It had never occurred to him that anyone could be completely without relatives.

"You're all alone in the world?"

"Yes. But don't let me bring you down with my tales of woe."

Sharlene took a bite of bread, chewed it carefully, swallowed and then asked thoughtfully, "Tell me some more about your mother. What does she look like?"

Zack cleared his throat and did his best to sound cheerful. "My mother was third-generation Italian and had curly, dark-brown hair. She stood a bit shorter than you do and dressed..."

His eyes wandered to Sharlene's gold heart-shaped locket necklace, beautifully framed by her long, flowing silvery corn silk-colored hair and her décolletage showing at the V-neck opening of her sweater.

"Um, she dressed a bit more—I mean she wore very conservative clothing. No jewelry, little makeup, that sort of thing." Zack shoveled a bite of lasagna into his mouth to keep his gaze and thoughts from meandering down toward a pair of Sharlene's most attractive features.

"Some women are naturally beautiful without makeup," Sharlene commented.

"Yeah, Mom was definitely one of them."

Zack relaxed, but just as he finally steered his gaze from his hostess's entertaining neckline, she leaned forward in her seat and lightly touched his hand resting on the table.

"I just realized you used the past tense in regards to your mother," Sharlene said softly. Unshed tears

glistened in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I thought maybe your mom was retired and living somewhere else. Has she been gone long?"

"Ten years this fall."

"Oh, you poor thing."

Touched by her concern, Zack instinctively squeezed her hand. "It's all right. I can talk about Mom without turning on the waterworks now. She died of an aneurysm, a month before my seventeenth birthday."

Her free hand flew to her heart. "You must have been crushed. And your father? Her death was hard on him, too, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. He never really recovered from it. Dad adored Mom. They both married for the first time rather late in life and figured they'd never have children."

"You were a miracle baby, huh?"

Zack grinned. His aunts and uncles still referred to him as the 'miracle kid'. "Yes, I was. They couldn't have been happier when I came into the picture. When Mom died, Dad threw all his energies into getting the shop ready for me to 'take over', as he liked to say."

"He must have missed her a lot."

Zack swallowed a lump in his throat and tried to control the trembling in his voice. "He did. Dad's heart just stopped one day. I don't think he wanted to go on any longer without her."

A lone tear graced Sharlene's porcelain cheek. Without thinking, Zack reached over and gently

brushed it away with the back of his hand. Her free hand covered his and clasped it, and for a moment... for a moment Zack fought the incredible urge to pull his tenant into his arms and caress her soft skin, twine his fingers in the silkiness of her hair and luxuriate in the warmth of her curves as he took possession of her delectable lips...

No! Zack knew he had to resist. This wasn't the time to be taking advantage of a very kind, a very thoughtful and emotionally sensitive neighbor. *Think about the store and school and Keith and Mom and Dad and Sister Mary Agnes... Ooo, that's done it.*

Zack gently pulled his hand away and refocused his attention on his plate. "Hmm-hmm, good lasagna."

Sharlene sniffed loudly and grabbed the serving spoon. "Want some more?"

"Yes, please."

She loaded up his plate once again. For someone who'd just related so many unhappy things about his life, he had a terrific appetite, Sharlene noted. After a few moments of silence and steady eating, she figured it was as good a time as any to voice what she termed her 'dinner proposition'.

"Zack, do you really like my cooking, or are you just being polite?"

"Puhl-wite?" he mumbled, his mouth full. He swallowed. "Hardly. I have no manners whatsoever...just ask Keith."

"Like Keith's the resident expert on manners around here!" She laughed her twangy laugh again. "I

can hear him through the walls shouting obscenities at the top of his lungs in the bathtub whenever he clogs it up or something."

"Yep, that's Keith singing in the shower for you," Zack said, sighing. "So, since I'm without manners, you now know I'd never just shovel food into my mouth unless I liked it."

"And?"

He smiled. "It means you're a good cook."

Sharlene relaxed. That was one less problem to deal with, then. She took a deep breath before continuing. "That's great to know, because I was going to ask you to eat dinner with me again tomorrow night. Will you?"

"Tomorrow?" Zack scraped his food directly from his plate straight into his mouth. He chewed a few seconds then cleared his throat. "Are you sure you want to have me over again? After watching my performance tonight, you may find yourself unable to *stomach* my lack of manners." He patted his belly for emphasis.

She wrinkled her nose. "Cute, very cute, but I'm serious. Liza told me that I've got to slow down eating my meals, and what better way than by sharing them with a friend? I promise I won't charge you anything. How about it? We start our own 'dinner club' here?" She batted her long lashes in supplication. "Pretty please?"

He lowered his dishes. "Look, Sharlene, I—"

"I know exactly what you're going to say," she cried out before she could stop herself. "You can't

stand the idea of being pent up in an apartment eating with a woman who makes the fat lady in the circus look anorexic. That's it, isn't it?"

Throwing down her napkin, Sharlene ran to the bathroom to grab a tissue. Darn hormones! They were always kicking in at the wrong times. But she wasn't being fair to Zack. He could very well have a legitimate reason why he couldn't eat with her every night of the week.

She glanced in the mirror and cringed at the sight. Puffy eyes and puffy feet—what a combination. But she had issued the invitation, and she couldn't very well stay in the bathroom all night. Wiping her nose, she stuck out her chin and marched back to the table in to apologize. But instead of clearing the bedroom doorway, she barreled right into Zack's brawny chest.

Gasping, she jumped backwards. "Oh! You scared me."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to upset you in your... your condition," he muttered.

"It's all right. And I'm sorry about my little outburst. It's the baby chemicals running amok in my system. I'm not always so whiny and demanding of my guests." She batted her tear-kissed lashes at him for effect. "You believe me?"

"Of course." Zack reached over and brushed away a lock of her silky hair away from her damp face and took a deep breath. She looked so damn kissable at that very instant. Sharlene Pincher was a delectable dish to partake of, standing there looking up at him,

her violet-blue eyes sparkling like sapphires. But he knew what the right thing to do was. He had to resist her charms.

Maybe he could receive a sainthood for this?

Zack cleared his throat. "What I was about to say before was that I have a study appointment around dinner time to keep tomorrow night, but possibly the night after would be okay. How about it?"

"That's fine." A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. She headed back to the table. "I guess I could invite Keith up for dinner tomorrow night. I was thinking of having pot roast."

Zack started to drool as he sat back down. "Pot roast? Did you say pot roast?"

"Yes, with homemade mashed potatoes and all the gravy you like," she purred. "Too bad you're too busy to —"

"My study date has just been canceled," he cut in, picking up a piece of French bread. "Hey, I'll bring the rolls, if you like."

Smiling, Sharlene sat down to help herself to another slice as well. *Those old wives' tales are right after all. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.*

Chapter Six

"You can't put her off forever, bro," Keith chided. "Markham's got more than just those long claws of hers. She's got a bite as well."

"I know, I know," Zack grumbled. He lazily tossed a dart from his seat on their broken-down excuse for a sofa at the poster of a bug-eyed, bald-headed alien, hitting the ubiquitous icon right between the eyes. Ten points.

Keith picked up a dart from the floor in front of the couch and aimed for the nose of the yellow, mouse-like character on the children's video game poster. "So, how are you going to get out of showing up on her doorstep tomorrow night?"

"Same way I've been doing it for the last couple of weeks. Tell her I'm visiting with a sick friend."

Keith arched his arm, pulling it all the way back before hurling the dart at his intended target. The dart echoed with a resounding *boing* as it made contact with the wall beneath the paper, hitting a Japanese anime princess with her mouth open wide to the right of the yellow rodent. Only two points.

"I think I've won this round," Zack congratulated himself as he rose to leave. "I'm out of here."

A wicked grin graced the corner of Keith's lips. "Going upstairs to enjoy a little *dessert*, big bubba?

Can I watch?"

Zack snorted. "In your dreams, pervert. My relationship with Sharlene is strictly platonic. Besides, I thought you could get your own *dessert*. Whatever happened between you and Roxie?"

"She's on the road this week. I think things are starting to cool off between us anyhow."

"Really? What makes you say that?"

Keith's shoulders slumped as he sighed. "She's got a thing for another dancer at the club, some new chick who's all dyed hair and implants. I don't know what she sees in her, 'cause I sure as heck don't like the looks of her."

"Oh... That's too bad."

Zack quickly made his escape from the living room before he was forced to hear any more of Keith's sordid story. Lately, he had come to realize how much he preferred the company of his neighbor on the third floor to his foster brother's. Much preferred it.

He entered his bedroom and stood in front of his mirror, taking a good look at himself. Hair a mess—as usual—clothes wrinkled—not bad. It was his eyes that didn't seem right in his face. Something had changed inside him, and he couldn't deny it any longer.

He hated to admit it even to himself, but there was no way around it any longer—he was finding it more and more difficult with each passing day to keep his passion for his beautiful neighbor in check. He actually believed he could rip the heart out of anyone

who could ever dare crush the sweet, fragrant blossom that was Sharlene, including himself.

It amazed Zack how protective he felt towards her. At first, he wasn't even sure why. Sharlene seemed a more than capable individual, able to take care of herself and her unborn child, find work and a start a brand new life minus her egotistical ex-husband without so much as batting an eye. She was a real survivor. Still, he wanted to hold her, keep her close by his side while he helped her fight off her demons like a knight protecting a damsel in distress from a marauding dragon.

"Get real, Richmond," he muttered, combing his hair. "She's a very independent woman. She doesn't need your help."

Yeah, but one day she might need your love.

The comb slipped from his fingers and bounced off the dresser top, landing on the floor beside his unmade bed. He bent to pick it up, catching a glimpse of his parents' photo on the nightstand. Times like these made him really miss them, miss their quiet understanding and strong direction. He was fortunate to have had them in his life. Sharlene had said so.

"How wonderful to be an eyewitness to such a beautiful partnership," she had told him last Friday after they had polished off an entire roasted chicken with cornbread stuffing. "I'm jealous. You'd think a poor girl dreams of having new toys or new clothes, wouldn't you? I used to dream of having parents like yours."

And I used to dream of meeting and marrying a girl just

like you, he had thought, shoveling more stuffing into his mouth to keep from blurting out how he felt. It was too soon, too soon in their relationship to start thinking along those lines, wasn't it?

But tonight, yes, tonight could be the night...

Zack pulled the comb through his mussed up hair one last time, grabbed the package from the end of his bed and raced out the apartment and up the steps. His staccato knocking brought Sharlene's radiant face to the door.

"Howdy, stranger," she teased. "I was just about to give up on you and eat this entire casserole by myself. Come in, come in."

He shuffled through the doorway and offered her a box of ginger snaps, since she had mentioned having a craving for them last night. "Sorry for the delay, but I have to check up on Keith at least once a week after hours."

"And you do take your responsibilities towards raising a twenty-four year old 'child' very seriously, I've noticed." She laughed, grabbing the cookies from him and promptly opening them. "Thanks for taking my 'subtle hint' about the ginger snaps. Want one?"

He followed her to his customary seat. "What? And spoil my dinner? What's cooking tonight?"

"Turkey tetrazzini. I loved it in high school. Those cafeteria ladies could whip up a mean casserole, let me tell ya."

"God bless those ladies at Harry S. Truman High," Zack said with a smile and a mock salute.

Sharlene handed him the serving spoon. "All right,

don't go dissin' on my culinary heroes now. Dig in, skinny. I've already had my first helping."

"You don't wait a minute, do you?" He loaded up his plate. "And I don't think anyone will be calling me skinny after these last three weeks—I've put on at least five pounds."

"So have I!" She giggled. "But at least it's better than me putting on ten or twelve like I did last checkup."

"Thash's great," he mumbled, mouth full. "I'm so glad I can be of service."

I would like you to 'be of service' in a few other ways as well, Sharlene mused as she ladled a few more bites of the casserole onto her plate. She had been eating more these last few evenings out of sheer nervous energy. The urge to stand up and grab her amiable dinner companion by the collar and kiss him long and thoroughly was growing more and more difficult to resist. Something or someone had to give sooner or later, or else she'd have to check herself into a mental ward.

Zack picked up on her pensive state. "What's up? You look a million miles away. The baby doing okay?"

Sharlene shook her head and focused her attention back on the here and now. "The baby's been okay ever since I found out for sure it's *a* baby and not *the* babies. The thought of having triplets was enough to put me in a wheelchair, you know."

"It's tough enough being a single mom to a single baby, isn't it?" He slowly pulled apart his biscuit,

then look at her thoughtfully. "Will your ex show up someday out of the blue and become a proper dad to the kid, do you think?"

Sharlene had been dreading this moment. What should she tell Zack about the baby's father? Anything? Nothing? Everything? What harm was there in letting him think Jeffrey was the child's biological parent?

"Nope, 'fraid not." She turned her attention to wiping crumbs off the table so she didn't have to look her dinner partner in the eye. "I'd rather not discuss it any further, if you don't mind."

"I think understand exactly where you're coming from. He's a selfish bastard, isn't he? Always thinking about his career and his next chance for promotion and never about you, or — "

"No, that's not it," she cut in, instinctively grabbing his hand resting on the table surface. "I-I didn't mean to interrupt you so rudely there. It's just that I can't handle the topic in detail right at the present. Give me a little time, please?"

Zack's eyes met hers and glowed with compassion. He placed his other hand on top of hers. "I'll give you all the time in the world, Sharlene. You don't have to explain anything to me that makes you feel uncomfortable."

"Thanks," she whispered. His touch sent shivers of delight up her arms, around her shoulders and down her spine, all the way to her toes. She bit her tongue — hard. That was it. She was going to check herself into the mental ward. Zack was a good friend and her

landlord and that's all there was to it. She wasn't going ruin it by throwing herself at him like some kind of cheap floozy at a truck stop... The kind of loose women who had lured her father away from her mother.

His brow furrowed. "You okay? You look like you just bit your tongue."

"Ah, dith." She smiled like a fool. "I'm real hungry, I gueth."

He pulled his hands away. "Don't let me keep you from eating."

Sharlene ladled another helping of casserole onto her plate. Eating slowly, she observed her handsome table companion out of the corner of her eye. Zack was so polite, so sincere in everything he said or did that it just didn't feel right keeping the truth from him any longer.

"I do want to tell you more about the baby, Zack," she said slowly, putting her fork down. "It's just that I... well, I..."

"You're afraid?"

He really *was* psychic. She nodded. "Yes. Afraid you wouldn't understand."

Zack leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table, looking her straight in the eye. "Don't be afraid, Sharlene. What wouldn't I understand? You've already told me some about your situation. I can read between the lines. Your ex is an evil excuse of a man who's running for 'the world's most lousiest father of all time' and he's assured a win. You don't have to explain any of that to me."

"But there's more to it than that. Lots more."

"Like what?"

"Like... Jeffrey isn't the baby's real father."

Sharlene gasped as soon as the words escaped her lips. What had gotten into her? She hadn't meant to be that blunt... Zack immediately pulled back from the table.

"It's not what you think," she said slowly. "Really, it isn't. You see it's like this—"

"That's okay." His tone had become cool, brittle. "It's none of my business. You don't have tell anymore about it. Pass the biscuits, please."

They sat mere inches apart, but the chasm of hurt and confusion yawning between them was a million miles wide Sharlene realized. Her heart shriveled to the size of a raisin in the sun. She had blown her big chance to convince him she wasn't some cheating slut who had fooled around on her husband and been caught pregnant with another man's child. She opened her mouth to begin her convoluted explanation, but the words died on her lips as she gazed upon the broken glass in the mirrors of his soul.

Horse manure! You've screwed up again, Sharlene chided herself. You're no good for him just like you were no good for Jeffrey. It's better to let Zack go now before anything more serious developed between the two of you he'd later regret...

Her appetite faded and a sad, empty feeling replaced it as she watched him dutifully scrape his plate clean, put down his fork and stand to leave.

"Ginger snap?" she offered.

"No, thanks. They're for you." Zack gazed down at the table surface, avoiding her eyes. "I better be going. I've got a study date tomorrow. You'll only have to cook half as much for a change."

Sharlene forced herself to smile. "Yes, it will be a change. Good night."

"Night."

The door clicked quietly behind him. In the strained silence of the room, the sound echoed with the finality of a cell door locking behind a criminal sentenced to spend eternity in a deep, dark dungeon.

Her crime? She simply wasn't the right kind of woman for someone like Zack Richmond. Her punishment? Living the rest of her life without ever knowing if she and Zack could have been more than just a great dinner companions. A fate infinitely worse than putting on another twenty pounds alone...

* * * * *

Sharlene leaned her head against the passenger window of Liza's silver Lexus. It was nice of Liza to take her out for some fresh air and exercise on such a beautiful spring day, but she was hard-pressed to come up with much enthusiasm for their excursion.

"A stroll through the zoo will do you good," Liza gently suggested to her distracted companion as she exited off Highway Forty. "I read that one of the mother baboons recently had a baby. You two could compare notes."

"Yeah, sure we could," Sharlene deadpanned. "Hey, I got an idea. Maybe she's got some extra diaper coupons she wouldn't mind sharing?"

Liza turned into the parking lot and accepted a ticket from the attendant before pulling through the gate to find a space. "Ha, ha. You're such a comedienne. It certainly couldn't have been your lively dinner conversation that drove your guest away."

But it had driven him away. *Me and my big mouth!* she reprimanded. *I could kick myself. Why did I have to be so truthful, so direct? Couldn't I've lied a little?*

It hadn't been so bad the first night without a dinner companion. Keith had caught her acting dejected earlier in the afternoon when she unloaded groceries from her car and had gallantly offered to help her polish off a mac-cheese pie and ambrosia salad, her all-time favorite comfort foods. The night after that had been the worse. Keith was out, probably searching for his next conquest and Zack? Zack was nowhere to be seen. Another 'study date' perhaps, or did he join Keith on his outing? She had been too hurt to find out and had purposely avoided going into the store, instead making a point of entering the building from the alleyway door.

A week had passed now and neither she nor Zack had made any moves to close the widening gap between them. And here she had thought he genuinely cared for her, at least in a platonic way. How could she have been so wrong?

"Hey, girlfriend. Snap out of it."

Liza was looking at her with her physician's hat on, Sharlene could tell. If she didn't act somewhat normal this afternoon, the good doctor might stick her in the loony bin where she belonged. She beamed a broad smile at her friend, opening the car door as Liza switched off the engine. "I'm out of it. Let's go look at those monkey babies."

They toured the new River's Edge exhibit first. After a brief visit to the herpetarium, they admired the exotic colors and grace of the waterfowl in the 1904 World's Fair Bird Cage, ending up eventually at the sea lions' pond.

Sharlene plopped herself down on a park bench opposite the long pool to catch her breath. Moms and dads of every description were gathered around with their children, laughing at the popular animal entertainers. A nostalgic feeling washed over her. It was odd, since she had never visited the zoo as a child with her mother, only once with her Brownie troop. She vowed she wouldn't make the same mistakes her mother did. Her kid would practically live at the Zoo, the City Museum, the Gateway Arch and all the other attractions for families in the St. Louis area. Her newfound determination lifted her spirits.

"Too bad Joel is away on business and missing out on all the fun this weekend," she said, playfully nudging her companion on the arm.

"Yeah, too bad," Liza muttered, her chin dropping to her hands resting on her knees. She stared straight ahead.

And I thought I was having a bad day. Something was definitely rotten over at Liza and Joel's condo. Sharlene treaded carefully into the conversation. "Joel's been quite the traveler lately. You never said where he was going to this week, did you?"

"Antarctica."

"Pardon?"

Liza rolled her eyes. "Hell and back then. I don't care where he's gone to this weekend. He can stay there as long as he likes."

"Oh," Sharlene mouthed. *Trouble in paradise.*

They sat in amiable silence a few moments and observed the sea lions happily frolicking in the spring sunshine. It was hard to feel down while watching Mother Nature's clowns happily splashing and barking at each other.

Liza leaned back against the park bench and heaved a long sigh. "Sorry for being so snippy. Joel's not on my good side lately, if you haven't guessed already."

"No need to explain," Sharlene assured her friend. "I've already decided it's gotta be something in the water this week. Your man bugged out again and didn't take you with him—my dinner companion has walked out on my casseroles. Coincidence? I think not."

Liza laughed. She sat up and put an arm around Sharlene's shoulders. "Now, there's that funny lady I admire so much. Something in the water, yeah, right. Some mad scientist somewhere had infected the St. Louis Municipal Water District with a virus that

makes all single men turn into selfish, insensitive slob."

As if in retort, the biggest male sea lion gave out a raucous bark and did a giant belly flop from his rocky perch into the pond.

"Get out of here! You're getting us wet!" Liza protested, then paused. A knowing look dawned in her deep mocha-colored eyes.

Sharlene dabbed at her slightly dampened arms with her zoo map. "You okay? A light bulb just popped up over your head."

Liza grinned. "I'm fine. I just realized why Joel rushed out of town with no notice this weekend. We were washing dishes together a couple of weeks ago—splashing each other like these silly seals here—when he first mentioned this trip. I remember I said off hand, "Isn't that the conference the other district managers usually bring their wives with them as a sort of mini-vacation?" And then I remember Joel giving me this odd look and bolting from the kitchen."

Sharlene nodded in understanding. "Ah, you committed the cardinal sin. You mentioned the 'W' word to him. He likes to call you his *girlfriend*, I've noticed. I can't even peg him on *fiancée* very often."

"You're right. He must have thought I was trying to rush him to the altar."

Sharlene raised an eyebrow. "You too have lived together for how long? Almost two years? I don't think you've rushed him at all. In fact, if anything, you haven't rushed him enough."

Liza sighed and slumped against the bench. "I agree with you, but try to get a man to see it that way. I don't think it can be done. Some men are just genetically predisposed to be anti-marriage, I guess."

"Maybe a water-borne virus which compels men to pop the question could do the trick?" Sharlene suggested.

"You've got something there, girlfriend. I'm sure the single female populace of the greater St. Louis area would have us canonized if we could pull it off."

Sharlene grinned. "Yes, but the male populace would deep-fry us alive like a couple of toasted raviolis."

"They'd have to catch us first," Liza laughed maniacally. Her burst of highly contagious giggles took Sharlene by surprise. After a few minutes, Sharlene's side ached from the rollicking exercise.

"Come on, Ms. Comedienne," Liza said under her breath after they received one too many stares from the crowd. "Let's go visit our friends in the monkey house."

Laughing, they entered the primate building. As they exited, Sharlene felt close to tears. Liza guided her to a bench in front of the building, where she blinked the dew off her lashes and loudly blew her nose in a crumpled tissue.

"What's with the waterworks?" Liza asked gently.

"It's the hormones, I guess." Sharlene sniffed.

"Hormones? The monkey house brings on your hormones?"

"Not exactly. What I meant is how nice I think it is

that the zookeepers put up those signs announcing the animal babies' births. I really liked the baboon baby's — 'Jerry, son of Regis and Kathie Lee.'"

Liza tilted her head, looking at her friend oddly. "Uh-huh."

"It made me think, what kind of a sign would they make for my baby? 'Baby X, child of Sharlene and Daddy X.' At least Kathie Lee knows who her baby's father is. I'm jealous, that's all."

Liza frowned. "I didn't realize how much pain it was causing you not to know who the real father is. I'll try to find out more, but it'll be difficult if not next to impossible. Policy is policy."

"Thanks. I appreciate anything you can tell me. I really do. It's so hard not knowing."

"Not knowing his name?"

"That too. But what's worse is not knowing what his face looks like."

"His face?"

Sharlene blew her nose again. "Yeah. In my dreams I have to substitute someone else's face for Daddy X. Lately it's been Zack's face. Now that he's no longer 'in the picture' I've reverted back to some kind of hazy 'masked man' image in my head." She shuddered. "It really gives me nightmares."

Liza squeezed Sharlene's hand tightly. "I promise I'll do my best to get some more information for you. Meanwhile, how about substituting your favorite movie star for Daddy X's face? How about David Duchovny? Isn't he your favorite actor?"

Sharlene wiped her cheeks with the back of her

hand and forced a grin. "Yeah, he is. I suppose I could cut off my hair and dye it red and pretend I'm Gillian Anderson, right?"

"Right on, girlfriend!" Standing, Liza put her hands on her hips. "I say we've had enough of the zoo for today. Let's go hit a beauty salon big time. There's nothing like a complete makeover to make you feel better when you're blue. Come on."

Liza pulled Sharlene up from the bench and boldly led her toward the exit gate. "You know, now the more I think about it, the more I think I deserve a makeover myself. What's the sense of being a doctor and having all these dang credit cards if you can't max them out from time to time?"

* * * * *

"Come in. You're late."

The low, sultry tones of Professor Diana Markham sent a cold shiver of fear and revulsion down Zack's spine. It had taken him a bit longer than he thought it would to locate the tastefully appointed, Federalist-style mansion tucked away like a precious gem between the velvety rolling hills and dark tree-lined drives of one of the most exclusive areas of the county.

Zack crossed over the castle-sized threshold crafted in etched glass and intricately carved oak and heard it shut ominously behind him. He swallowed hard, shuffling slowly down the marble tiled hallway behind the rhythmic clicking of Diana's stiletto heels.

Dressed in an elegant black silk pantsuit and pearls, accentuated by her blood red lips and auburn bouffant piled atop her head like a helmet, Diana Markham looked ready for battle. Zack shuddered. There had to be an easier way to raise his grade.

The sudden remembrance of what his options were—writing up ten reports to make up for the lateness of the three he had missed or simply installing a new memory chip on Diana’s personal computer—brought Zack back down to reality. This was an easy enough job, an easy penance, Keith had agreed. He could do the job and be out the good professor’s door in less than half an hour. He could grin and bear any situation for that long.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Doctor Markham. I just had to stop by and grab some tools and visit a moment—”

“With your sick friend?” She raised a delicately plucked eyebrow and pushed open the massive pocket doors leading to her library. Zack meekly followed her into the stately paneled room where she took a seat on a camel-colored leather sofa in front of a roaring blaze in the marble fireplace. She indicated with a nod he should do likewise. He chose to remain standing, gripping his small toolbox tightly in order to hide his shaky hands.

“My, your friend is a very lucky person to have such a devoted companion as you. Please, do sit down and call me Diana when we’re not in class. I hate formalities.”

“Is this the computer you need help with...Diana?”

Zack asked, swiftly taking refuge behind a large oak desk opposite the cozy reading area.

"Yes, I suppose it is. Damn thing keeps telling me that I don't have enough memory and what not to run the programs I want to use. I figured it was time to upgrade a bit."

She shifted her weight onto her elbows and peered over the top of the sofa, a coquettish grin dancing across her sharp features. "Why don't you come over here and sit and chat with me a bit first before you get into all that technical mumbo-jumbo. It's been waiting for the past three weeks and it can wait a while longer. I'd like to get to know you better."

Zack took a deep breath to steady his nerves. It was hard enough trying to think clearly, let alone hold a conversation, with his palms turning into puddles and his throat constricting. He forced a smile through quivering lips.

"I'm in a bit of hurry, Doctor, er, Diana. Let me get at your computer first, okay?"

Diana slid down into the crook of couch. "All right," she purred.

Zack's heartbeat raced. There was no way on earth he was going to sit on that sofa with Diana Markham. No way. The rumors about her were all true. Recently widowed, Diana's husband had been the chief executive officer of a multinational headquartered in St. Louis. Filthy rich, well-connected, intelligent and not all that bad looking at fifty, it was obvious what she was up to—she was on the prowl for a good-looking younger man to spend some time with. He

made a vow right then and there the lucky guy wouldn't be him even if he did flunk her course and had to pay full tuition to take it over again in the fall – hopefully next time with another instructor.

“So, tell me, Zack,” Diana began slowly, “who is this mysterious ‘sick friend’ of yours? A relative? I thought you told us in class both your parents had passed on.”

“That’s right,” he mumbled, placing the small screwdriver between his lips as he carefully pulled the casing off the PC in order to access the motherboard.

“How is this person related to you then?”

The screwdriver slipped from his mouth as his jaw dropped open in surprise. He hadn't worked out his excuse for avoiding her all this time very well. His thoughts flashed back to all the agreeable evening he had enjoyed at Sharlene's apartment...eating her delicious food...laughing at her stories of stumbling through life in the big city after leaving the farm... simply spending time gazing into her beautiful violet-blue eyes...

“I was with my girlfriend,” he lied. “Uh, she's not feeling the best these days.” Maybe the mere mention of another woman in his life would call off his professor's attempted seduction?

“Your girlfriend?” Diana's tone turned cool. She sat up straighter. “You never told us about her in your personal introduction to the class. Have you two been going out very long?”

Zack's mind wandered as he got down to the real

work of gutting the computer. "Just a few weeks."

She smiled broadly. "Oh, so this is a new *affair-de-coeur*, I take it? I can see why you wouldn't want to leave her alone. Consideration and compassion are very admirable traits in man. Nothing serious, I hope."

"Nothing according to the latest ultrasound," he replied, readying the new memory stick to be installed.

"Ultrasound?"

Zack coughed. Lying took a lot more effort than he thought. "Uh, yeah, her doctor wanted her to have another one to see if anything was up."

"Sounds serious to me, Zack. About the only time a woman has ultrasounds routinely is when she's..." Diana stood up and came around the sofa to face him, her eyes wide, her red lips gaping. "Your girlfriend's pregnant already?"

Zack dropped the screwdriver again. What could he say?

"And here all along I pegged you as the shy type. You're a fast worker, Zack Richmond." A seductive smile graced the corners of Diana's large mouth as she bent over to whisper in his ear. "A closed mouth and a passionate nature are admirable traits in a man."

Zack willed his shaking hands to stop. A few quick adjustments and he was ready to pop the cover back on the machine and get the hell away from Diana's clutches.

"There you go. The new memory is installed.

That's all there is to it." He immediately exited the library and headed down the long hallway towards the front door.

"Wait!" Diana cried, running after him. "Don't you have to run a program first and make sure it's functioning properly?"

Zack took a deep breath and paused at the front door, giving his pursuer a chance to catch up to him. "The computer will recognize it as soon as it reboots. You shouldn't have any problems with it at all, Doctor Markham."

"It's Diana, remember?" She leaned against the doorjamb suggestively.

Zack nodded his head. "Yeah, I remember. Good night, Diana."

The rush of cool night air brought Zack welcome relief. He hopped into his trusty ten-year-old Tercel, started the engine and floored it down the long, sloping driveway towards freedom.

Passing the Clayton city limits signs, he exhaled a long breath of relief. At Diana's, he felt like a bird in a cage dangling over a hungry cat ready to devour him in a single move. Trapped. It was the same feeling he had whenever he remembered the promise he'd made to Dad about keeping the store open instead of selling out and using the funds to finish his college education that much faster. Trapped like Sharlene must feel having a baby without a husband, or even the father of her child standing by her for support...

Sharlene. He hadn't even said hello to her in over a week. Here they had been good friends sharing food

and companionship, and he'd simply walked out on her when she'd shared a small bit of upsetting news. All right, it wasn't small news by any means, but it shouldn't have caused him to react the way he did. She needed a friend, not a judge, and he had posed as the first and acted as the second. The more he thought about it, the more he didn't like himself or what he had done. Not at all.

What was it that Mom had always told him whenever he got angry with one of his pals and wanted to take it out his hide? "You're not the judge, jury and executioner, Zack," she would say. "Forgive and forget and go on from there."

"Right Mom," Zack said to himself, his stomach rumbling with hunger. He realized he'd forgotten to eat in all his nervousness over going to Diana's, but his appetite wouldn't stop him from doing the right thing by Sharlene. First thing when he got home, he'd head upstairs and apologize to her for his unkind actions over the past week. And, if he was lucky, maybe she had some leftovers to share.

* * * * *

Sharlene flipped aimlessly through the channels. Nothing on TV worth watching, nothing happening in town worth doing, absolutely nothing good happening at all in her life...

"It's just you and me, kid," she said out loud, tenderly stroking her belly. What she wouldn't give at this moment to know who her baby's father was!

What did he look like? Was he a brilliant conversationalist or a timid bookworm? Did he love sports? And, most importantly, did he love children? What would he think of her? Would he love her as much as she loved his unborn child?

"Would he love my new hairstyle, do you think, Junior?" she said out loud as she fingered the gentle waves caressing her neck. She had gone ahead and had her long mop styled in a mid-length layered cut, which gave her a more sophisticated look as the beautician suggested, but she couldn't go for the dye job. She would never forgive herself for putting chemicals on her head if it harmed her tiny passenger.

A sort of static electricity tickling sensation slowly crept across her stomach muscles and made her laugh. "Hello? Is that you, Junior? Are you kicking me? I thought Liza said it would be another few weeks until you'd kick me where I would know for sure."

A knock abruptly ended their happy conversation. She pushed her growing bulk out of the chair and waddled over to the door, harboring a hope that somehow the visitor behind her portal was the mystery man of her waking dreams and her nights of restlessness. It wasn't.

"Oh, it's you," she said, allowing the door to slam rudely behind her guest as he entered.

"Thanks for the enthusiastic welcome," Jeffrey quipped. "So, this is the pigeon hole where you've been holding yourself up at." He quickly scanned her modest abode with his usual sarcastic air and wiped

imaginary dust off his paisley silk tie. "Lots easier to clean up, I take it. Nice haircut. You join a lesbian group, or did you get tired of brushing out the stringy mop?"

Sharlene gritted her teeth. At the moment she felt like booting her ex's ugly face right out the window, but her manners got the better of her. "If you're through with the insults now, Jeffrey, you can sit down. What brings you to my corner of the universe? You miss me, by chance?"

"Alas, no. It was actually Uncle Bart who instructed me to visit." He deposited himself on the wicker, floral-pillowed sofa and casually put his feet up on the glass coffee table. "I never liked this thing. Not high enough to rest your feet up on. That's why it belongs on a sun porch and not in a proper living room."

Sharlene cleared her throat, crossed her arms and impatiently tapped her foot. "This isn't be the only reason you came by—to insult my interior decorating—is it?"

"Sorry." He put his Gucci loafers back on the floor. "I'd forgotten how much you liked this... this... *furniture* here. The real reason I stopped by was because the old guy invited us both to the big annual fund-raising event for Children's Hospital. Bart said he wanted us both to come," Jeffrey raised his hand quickly to stop her comment, "but not necessarily together. He just said he wanted us to both be there. He was quite adamant about it. Uncle Bart's getting a bit soft in his old age, I guess."

Sharlene raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms even tighter across her expanding middle. "Is that all? He or Aunt Edwina could have called me. I'm in the book. Tell him it's fine with me. Just give me the details, and I'll get to work letting out one of my cocktail dresses right away."

"Shit! You're not planning to show up in *last year's* outfit, are you?"

Sharlene plopped unceremoniously into the wicker armchair facing him. "Why not? It's a bit on the loose side, and I think I can let it out some under the arms."

"What would people think? Jeffrey Pincher's wife—"

"That's *ex-wife* to you, remember?"

"Okay. What would people think of Jeffrey Pincher's ex-wife wearing the same dress two years in a row. It's like you suddenly became a bag lady or something."

"Hey, I happen to know some very nice bag ladies, so watch your nasty comments," Sharlene growled. He really was something. The snobbery, the airs. Jeffrey was nothing but a mule dressed up in horse harness. She sighed inwardly. She wasn't being polite, and Sharlene had always prided herself on having manners, even if she was a hillbilly at heart. She blew out a long breath of exasperation and softened her tone.

"Why should I spend a bundle on a dress which I'll only wear once? My budget isn't set up for that kind of extravagance these days." She patted her belly. "People have to eat, you know."

He smirked as he reached into his back pocket for his wallet. "All right, if you insist. I'll float you a small loan so you don't come wearing some dishtowel and burlap sack creation. Let it not be said that Jeffrey Pincher isn't a generous man..."

Sharlene clenched her teeth. Her blood boiled. How dare he! Jeffrey was treating her in the same condescending fashion he had all through their marriage, and here she was putting up with it. Well, no more!

"Go on, take it," he ordered, waving the bill in front of her.

"Stuff it up your sinuses, Jeffrey." Standing up as gracefully as she could, Sharlene showed him the door. "It'll do you more good than it will me. I don't want it."

He took the hint and headed towards the door. "Suit yourself. Just don't make a fool of yourself. Bunny's coming in a hot pink number she picked up at Bloomingdale's during her last shoot."

"Bunny?"

"Yes, my date. I forgot to tell you, didn't I? I've got a new *roomie* at Casa Pincher. She's completely redone both bedrooms in a pseudo-Arab harem theme or something she tells me. I'm the sheik. The place is really coming alive."

Jeffrey always did want to decorate their place in a tacky '60's, *Austin Powers* motif. Obviously, he found someone with similar tastes.

"Wonderful. I'm so happy for you both." She graciously pointed to the exit. "Now get the hell out

of my apartment, will ya?"

Flinging open the door with flair, Sharlene almost caught Zack in mid-knock.

"Whoa there!" Zack cried. "I was just about to knock—"

"And I was just about to leave," Jeffrey barked. "Who the hell are you?"

"Zack Richmond, Sharlene's nei—"

"New boyfriend," Sharlene interrupted, throwing an arm around Zack's neck and planting a big, sloppy kiss on his cheek. "Zack's my new boyfriend."

Chapter Seven

Zack blinked. Could this be happening? It was as if he had walked onto the set of a TV situation comedy. There was no doubt about it. His life was quickly turning into some kind of wacky bedroom farce. But it wasn't all that bad—his cheek tingled where Sharlene's soft lips had pressed against his skin. Maybe he should turn around and go back outside and knock on the door again?

"Zack, dear, this is my ex-husband, Jeffrey. Remember I told you about him over dinner one night?" Sharlene hinted. Her eyes silently pleaded for him to go along with her scheme.

What the heck? Zack decided. I'll play along with the charade and see how it works out. She's probably trying to make the guy jealous. From what all I know about the jerk, he deserves to be put in his place.

"Nice to meet you." Zack thrust out a hand and vigorously pumped Jeffrey's arm up and down, not quite strong enough to cause whiplash but enough to make him think twice about shaking hands with a stranger ever again. "Thanks for giving me a chance to date your beautiful ex-wife."

Jeffrey winced as he extricated his hand from Zack's grip. "Er, you're welcome. I guess."

"Now, Jeffrey, don't you have to leave now and

report back to Uncle Bart?" Sharlene said cheerfully. "Tell him I'll be bringing a friend along to the festivities as well. You and Bunny can share a table with us if you like."

Zack immediately put an arm around Sharlene's waist. It felt good, *natural* for his hand to rest there at the swell of her hips. A smile of satisfaction dawned on his lips. "Yes, let's make it a foursome, shall we?"

Jeffrey rubbed his hand and grimaced. "Yeah, sure, why not? We're all adults. No reason why we can't all be friends, is there?"

"No, there isn't. Good night, Jeffrey. Give my regards to Bunny. Bye."

Sharlene reluctantly disengaged herself from Zack's strong hold, gently shoved her ex-husband through the door and quickly shut it behind him. She let out a long sigh of relief, then slumped against the jamb. "I thought he'd never leave. Thanks for playing along with me."

Zack fluffed up the disarrayed pillows before plopping himself down on the couch. You're entirely welcome. Charming person, your ex."

She grinned. "Yes, isn't he? You can tell it was love at first sight. And I didn't even know I was nearsighted."

Zack chuckled. "He's a snazzy dresser, but can he install a new hard drive into a computer in under five minutes? To quote the great Red Green, 'If the women don't find you handsome, they should at least find you handy.'"

She sat down in the chair across from him. "Then

Jeffrey fails miserably on both accounts—handsome *and* handy.”

“You don’t find tall, well-groomed men in expensive suits even marginally good-looking?” Zack wondered aloud.

“No, I don’t. There’s a lot more to being attractive than wearing designer clothes, you know. There’s personality and manners for one thing.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure, of course.” Zack shook his head in agreement, but he didn’t really understand her. *Beautiful women certainly have discriminating tastes*, was all he could think. It went a long way to explain why his track record in dating wasn’t particularly stellar. He was lacking in everything—natural good looks, clothes, personality and manners. He might as well hang up his spurs and become a monk like his Uncle Frank did right now.

They sat in silence nervously eyeing each other for several moments until Zack felt like he would explode if he didn’t open his mouth.

“You’ve cut your hair, haven’t you?” he finally blurted, realizing why she had looked so different, so drop-dead gorgeous when he first saw her at the door.

Sharlene’s hand flew to her neck as she absentmindedly fingered a strand. “Yes, I did. Liza and I made a trip to the salon this afternoon. You like it?”

He nodded. “I like it a lot.”

“Thanks.” She averted her eyes and continued to twine her hair around a finger. “I’ve missed you this

past week."

"I've missed you, too," Zack confessed. "I'm—I'm so sorry for walking out so abruptly the other night. I was acting like some kind of self-righteous, uptight fool. Do you have it in your heart to forgive me?"

"You're forgiven." She reached over and gently took his hand in hers. "Friends?"

He stared down at her delicate hand, fighting off the urge to kiss it, caress it, to hold it close to his heart so she could feel how she made his heart beat just a little faster.

"Friends," he said at last, giving her hand a quick squeeze before letting it go.

Sharlene smiled and settled back into her seat. She tilted her head, observing him from the corner of her eye. "So, what have you been doing with yourself lately? I haven't seen you around much. Life been treating you well?"

Zack instantly thought of Diana Markham. The mere thought of his visit to Diana's earlier in the evening caused him to break out in a cold sweat. He swallowed the bile in the back of his throat and took a long, shaky breath.

"Life has been treating me to a big, black, high-heeled walk in the park, you could say."

"Pardon?"

"Er, it's no one—nothing."

Sharlene's eyes flashed concern. "You feeling all right, Zack? You don't look so well. You turned pale all of a sudden and I swear you're—"

"It's nothing...really." He raised a hand to cover his

cheek. "I've just been working hard at finishing up projects for my classes."

Sharlene didn't act dissuaded. "Why don't you lie down right where you're at, and I'll get a blanket—and the thermometer."

Zack reached and caught her by the elbow before she could leave the room and grab her first aid kit. The warmth of her soft skin caused the chill spreading through his limbs to instantly disappear. If only all of life's problems could be as easily eliminated.

"I'm okay. Really, I am. I just forgot to eat dinner tonight, and it's catching up with me."

Sharlene playfully smacked her forehead with the back of her hand. "Duh! Why didn't you say so? I have plenty of leftovers in the freezer. Just name your poison. Lasagna? Pot roast? Tuna casserole?"

"Pot roast sounds good."

"Pot roast it is then. Sit yourself in your regular spot and I'll fix you a plate."

Zack allowed himself to be fed and pampered for the next half-hour without regret. He truly had missed his evenings with Sharlene.

What had gotten into him the last time he was here? She hadn't made any demands on him. She had only wanted his company to help control her appetite. Why had her sudden admission that her ex-husband wasn't the baby's father given him such a scare? He should be happy for her that Jeffrey wasn't the father. The guy was a first class jerk. And it wasn't as if she was accusing *him* of being the baby's father—

He paused in mid-bite. That was it. He was suffering from another attack of the guilts. His decision to quit giving samples to the sperm bank was a good one, a very good one. He could see that now. He silently vowed never do anything so foolish ever again. He would never risk his good name and reputation ever again.

Sharlene's pleasing voice distracted him from his reverie. Zack put down his fork. "I'm sorry, my mind was miles away. What did you say?"

"You certainly did take a mental vacation, Mr. Landlord." She showered him with yet another one of her twangy laughs. "You almost poured gravy on your napkin instead of your biscuit."

"I did?" Zack blushed, dabbing at the brown drops on the tablecloth. "You gotta admit the biscuit and napkin are about the same color. I should wear my reading glasses at the table next time."

"I think that would be an excellent course of action to take," Sharlene said, grinning. "Your glasses *and* your hearing aid."

Zack cupped his hands around his ears. "Eh?"

"I said you need a hearing aid, too," she said in a slow, loud voice before clearing her throat and lowering her volume. "Um, what I wanted to say before was that I'm sorry for my untoward behavior earlier this evening."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Untoward behavior? Whatever do you mean?"

Sharlene's cheeks colored a brilliant shade of rose. "What I mean is that I'm apologizing for putting my

arm around you and, um, er, *kissing* you like I did at the front door. I promise it won't happen again."

She quickly stood and took his empty plate to the sink, denying Zack the chance to see how long the attractive blush on her face would last. He grabbed a dishtowel from the counter and followed her. "There's no need to apologize. In fact, I rather liked it."

He watched in fascination as Sharlene's eyes widened and her lower lip trembled in surprise. She quickly spun around and turned the sink taps on full force, practically drowning out their conversation.

"I mean, I liked the whole charade, that is," Zack shouted over the water. "Your ex won't bother you anymore if he thinks you have a...a man about the house, will he?"

Her lip stopped trembling. She picked up the dish soap and poured a dollop of the liquid into the sink before turning to face him again. "Probably not. Still, I need to be honest with you about that whole, um, *act*."

"Uh, Sharlene, you really should —"

"No, let me finish here. That craziness with Jeffrey earlier was about a big gala going on this weekend. My former uncle-in-law has invited me to a big, ritzy-ditzy fund-raiser. I didn't want to sit there by myself all evening and have people feeling sorry for me."

Zack involuntarily took a step forward. "No one would ever feel sorry for you. But you really need to —"

"Yes, I know I need to stand up for myself better. I

just didn't want Jeffrey to think I couldn't get a date, so I took advantage of your being at my front door at the right time. I apologize." She sighed. "Now, what was it you wanted to say?"

Zack smiled wryly. "I was trying to say that the gravy spill will be nothing in comparison if you let the sink overflow."

"Oh!" she squealed, spinning around to cut off the water in the nick of time. "Why didn't you say something? Didn't you see it?"

"I guess you're right about my needing both glasses and a hearing aid."

Sharlene grinned. Soon her twangy laughter filled the room and lightened his heart. Zack couldn't imagine being anywhere else in the world or with anyone else at this very moment. He had never met a woman like Sharlene before. And, deep down, he knew he would never again. Perhaps pretending to be her boyfriend could work out after all...

Zack handed her a pot to wash. "You really want to make it a foursome—you, me and Jeffrey and his new bimbo?"

"Well, I'd rather skip out altogether, but Uncle Bart has been very kind to me. I don't want him to think I don't appreciate it."

Zack nodded. "I understand completely about making the relatives happy. It's an art form at times. So, what's this big charity event? Bowling for Jerry's Kids?"

Sharlene blew a soap bubble off the back of her hand at him. "No, silly, it's more like a champagne

and caviar event that takes place at a mansion. You don't happen to own a tux, do you?"

His eyebrows rose a foot. A tux? He wasn't the tux type of guy by a long shot.

"Uh, no, I don't own a tux," he reluctantly admitted. "I own a pair of bowling shoes, though."

She grinned and shook her head. "You're such a card, Zack. Don't you dare wear them."

"Why not? They're gray with red stripes. I can see myself in a matching gray tux with a red cummerbund."

"Bowling shoes with a tux at multimillion dollar fund-raising event!" Sharlene snorted. "Aunt Edwina – self-appointed queen of the fashion police – will be stunned by your creativity. I can't wait to see her face."

Zack smiled. "I aim to please. Hey, maybe it'll start a whole new trend. Next year people can dress to match their golf shoes."

"Golf shoes? Now I've heard everything!" Sharlene laughed so hard she lost hold of the soapy roasting pan she was scrubbing. It tumbled over the side of the sink and fell to the floor with a *clank*. Instinctively, they both bent to pick it up.

"Ouch!" Sharlene cried as their heads bumped each other.

"Sorry," Zack mumbled, trying to gain a stronger grasp on the slippery pan's surface.

Their damp hands touched each other along the rim and a jolt of electricity surged between them. Both instantly jumped a step backward.

Sharlene's heart beat a little faster. *The sparks are flying after only one silly, little peck on the cheek...*

"Are you okay?" Zack asked, placing the pan into the sink.

"Perfectly," she lied.

Sharlene forced her attention back on unloading the dish rack and putting things away in the cupboards. Zack turned to retrieve his towel.

Zack didn't seem to notice the electricity between us, Sharlene thought a moment later. Maybe she was imagining how his touch had affected her. Yes, that had to be it. There was no use bringing it to his attention then and embarrassing him she thought sadly. She deftly turned the conversation to a more important matter. "You really don't know who Jeffrey's uncle is, do you?"

"No, I can't say that I do. He doesn't bowl, I take it?"

"No, he doesn't bowl." Sharlene turned from the cupboard and faced him. It was now or never to make her confession. "Uncle Bart's full name is Bartholomew Q. Pincher III."

A frown creased Zack's brow. "Bartholomew Pincher? Isn't he that rich old coot who owns the Clemens Bank Building? The guy who made the cover of *Forbes* recently?"

Sharlene grimaced. "One and the same."

Zack's eyes widened. He took a step backward. "You mean to say you married a member of one of the wealthiest families in St. Louis?"

Sharlene let her shoulders sag and her chin drop.

"Exactly."

Zack gave a long whistle. "Woo-wee. The man's worth mega-millions by all accounts."

"Pitiful, isn't it?"

"Very. Well, don't worry. I don't hold it against you."

Sharlene's head popped back up. Her lips curled into an irresistible smile. "You don't?"

"Remember, you told me before of your humble beginnings?" Zack reminded her. "I'm sure if Jeffrey Pincher had asked for my hand in marriage, I would have gladly given it to him. Who am I to judge?"

"But that's not what happened..." She closed her eyes, took a deep breath to calm herself and slowly opened them. "It wasn't like that. I didn't know who the hell the Pincher family was when I first met Jeffrey. And, technically, *he* doesn't inherit a dime's worth of the family fortune—only his heirs will. I married Jeffrey because he told me how much he wanted to start a family."

"Jeffrey?"

Sharlene had to admit, in retrospective, the idea did seem rather ludicrous. "Yes, he was very adamant about starting a family when we were dating and I wanted to start one, too. It was only my mother and me when I was growing up, and I very much wanted a family I could call my own. Jeffrey bowled me over faster than Prince Charles bowled over Princess Diana—and with almost the same results. We seemed well-suited for each other at the time, but later, well..."

Zack scratched his head. Sharlene could tell he was thinking, *How could a country-bumpkin have anything in common with a city kid?*

She shrugged. "It doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"I don't know. Maybe it does. But there is one thing I want to ask. Let's sit down, okay?"

"Okay."

She sat directly across from him at the table, folding her hands tightly in front of her. "Ask away – I'm ready."

"Sharlene, I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

Zack tap his fingers nervously across the table surface. How could he phrase this tactfully? After a moment's debate, he decided there really wasn't any way he could. He cleared his throat and barreled straight into his question. "If Jeffrey and you wanted a family so much, why did the two of you break up after you found out you were pregnant?"

Sharlene bit her lip in a most attractive way and shifted uneasily, side to side, in her chair. "Well, I, uh, I mean we..."

Zack swallowed hard. He had to know the truth, even if he didn't want to hear it. "Did you meet someone else?"

Her violet-blue eyes flashed, then calmed as the brief storm of pain within her passed. "No, that wasn't it at all. We were having trouble conceiving and the infertility clinic made this big mistake, you see..."

Zack felt his ears tingling. "Mistake?"

"Yes, and when the clinic folks found out that some donor sperm was used to do the in-vitro fertilization process instead of Jeffrey's, well, he told me to keep it to myself and not tell Uncle Bart so he could inherit seven million dollars by providing a heir to the Pincher dynasty."

Fertility clinic? Zack felt all the color draining from his cheeks.

"Zack! Are you all right?" A worried expression crossed Sharlene's delicate features. "You look pale again. Let me help you to the couch."

"No, no, I'm fine," he protested weakly. A strange queasiness throbbed in the pit of his stomach, threatening to encompass his entire body.

"Zack? Here, let's put your head down lower than your feet."

Zack allowed himself to be guided gently over to the wicker sofa. Sharlene provided a pillow under his knees and covered him with a floral-printed quilt. Her hand felt cool and inviting on his forehead.

"I hope you're not coming down with something contagious." She tucked the quilt tightly around him. "Maybe you ought to stay right here for the night?"

"Yeah, that sounds good," he muttered. Then the entire world went black.

* * * * *

"It was a good thing Zack showed up when he did," Sharlene thought aloud, sitting on the edge of her daybed, brushing her hair. Who knows what might

have happened to him if he had fainted all alone in his apartment – or worse yet on the street? Singlehood did have its drawbacks.

She put down the antique brush that had belonged to her grandmother, her one and only heirloom, and peeked out into the dark living area to check on how Zack was doing. He was lying on his back, snoring comfortably, his feet hanging off the end on her horribly short couch. She had tried to talk him into borrowing her bed for the night while she slept on the couch or the floor, but when he sleepily shuffled into the bedroom and noticed the crib and changing table in the corner, his face turned that ghastly shade of green again. Could he be allergic to Jenny Lind baby furniture?

She walked back into the bedroom and plopped down on her bed. “Maybe he’s allergic to what comes with the baby furniture?”

Sharlene sighed. He wouldn’t be the first adult male to demonstrate such an aversion. Her own father had run out on her mother when she was a mere three months old. He had hopped into the cab of his semi and never turned back, dying in a drunk driving accident several years later, leaving her frail mom to raise her single-handedly. Early on in life, Sharlene promised herself she would never put her own child through the childhood she had to endure – the scrimping and saving and never having enough and never knowing what catastrophe tomorrow was going to bring.

It had been a blessing that her mother had died

only three weeks after suffering a stroke. Sharlene's meager salary as a secretary in a small town law firm had been stretched to the limits by her mother's illness, allowing for no luxuries such as a private convalescent home. Her mother's small life insurance policy barely covered half the funeral expenses. Sharlene realized now just how lucky she was to land a good-paying job in St. Louis as she slowly paid off each and every one of her mother's creditors.

"If there's one thing Zack and I have in common, it's that we feel responsible for taking care of our family's business," she said to herself, gazing wistfully at her mother's photo on the wall opposite. "And we both like kids—haven't I seen him demonstrating the latest video games to the neighborhood children who obviously adore and admire him? So why did he react so strangely tonight when I explained about my baby's father?"

Sharlene switched off the lamp, fluffed up her pillows and lay down, but sleep refused to share the darkness with her. She rolled to her side—about the only position she could sleep in comfortably anymore—and closed her eyes, only to focus her attention on the sounds emanating from the next room. Zack's soft snoring punctuated by the occasional raspy cough competed with the sound of distant traffic. After an eternity of listening to the symphony of coughs and cars, Sharlene began to drift off.

"Mom, where'd you go?"

"Huh?" she said sleepily at the muffled sound of

Zack's voice.

"Mom?"

Sharlene's heart felt like breaking. Zack was talking in his delirium, crying out for his mother, his mother long gone just like hers. She pricked up her ears and heard the small sounds of tossing and turning, then settling down and snoring softly once again.

Poor Zack... The awful thought of how the both of them were orphans broke open the floodgate Sharlene had closed tight on her emotions. Her tears fell silently upon her cheeks.

"Sharlene?"

Zack's voice at the doorway immediately brought her back to the present. Sharlene sniffed and wiped her eyes on the back of her arm, then pulled herself up onto her elbows.

"Zack? Whatever are you doing up? Get back under the covers and keep warm. Your temp was 102 the last time I took it. From what I read in Dr. Spock that isn't too bad in a child, but for an adult it's rough. You need some more Tylenol?"

"Yes, please."

His voice sounded gravelly. He sat down slowly at the edge of her bed, affording Sharlene with a clear view of his lean, muscled body in the moonlight streaming through the half-open blinds. The fever had caused him to strip down to his boxers.

"Have you been crying?" he asked.

"A little, maybe, but it's okay. Pregnant women cry all the time. It's our hormones, you know."

"I... I hope it wasn't because of anything I said or

did. I'm sorry if it is, I—"

Sharlene pulled herself to a sitting position and put a finger to his lips. "Sh, it's not because of you. Let me get you some water to take the pills with, okay?"

"Thanks. For everything. I owe you one."

He took her hand in his and lightly kissed her fingers. A shiver of pleasure washed over her, engulfing her in a cloud of desire. The thin, satiny material of her nightgown stretched tight against her breasts, barely covering the evidence of how much his barely clad presence excited her.

"You're welcome," she managed to reply at last, slipping from his grasp and springing from the bed as fast as her rounded frame would allow. "You're very, very welcome. Excuse me a minute while I go get you the medicine."

He closed his eyes and allowed his head to drop onto her pillow, stretching across her bed. "You'll make a terrific mom someday."

Grabbing her bathrobe hanging over the side of the crib, Sharlene darted into the kitchen. She desperately needed the heavy, thick material between her and her handsome houseguest.

"It's just the fever talking." She pulled a cup down from the shelf and filling it with cold water. Zack's male physique alone was enough to raise her own body temperature a few notches. Grabbing the Tylenol bottle from the counter, she walked back into her bedroom only to find Zack sprawled out across her quilt, snoring loudly.

She knelt down, shaking his shoulder as hard as

she dared. "Come on, Zack. You've got to sit up so you can take another pill. Please?"

"Later," he replied groggily. He flung an arm out to the side and captured her, pulling her tight against his form. Her loosely tied robe opened wide.

Sharlene's pulse quickened as her breasts enjoyed the warmth of male skin beneath her and the firmness of his brawny chest through the thin material of her gown. His hands slowly roved down her sides beneath her robe, gently cupping her buttocks. She arched her back in response to the hardness growing between his legs. How she longed to press herself tighter against him, to quench her yearning...

"Oh, Zack," she whispered. His head rolled to the side and his hands dropped. He was still asleep!

She pulled back, frowning. "I guess I'm not exciting enough to keep you awake, huh?"

Sharlene scrambled to her feet and placed her hands on her hips. She didn't have the heart to wake him. It was obvious by his actions he was having quite an enjoyable dream, and certainly he needed his rest. Besides, what would people think of her taking advantage of a sick man? Sighing, she pulled the loose corner of the quilt over his exposed form.

"I bet your mother thought you were adorable when you were asleep, too." She smoothed the wrinkles from her gown and sashed her robe in a double knot. "But where the heck do *I* sleep now? Looks like it's the sofa for me."

Sharlene shuffled into the living area, lay down on the couch and pulled the blanket over her, falling into

a deep sleep as soon as her head hit the pillow...a pillow that contained the intriguing male aroma and warmth of its most recent user.

* * * * *

“What the — ”

Zack startled awake. He sat up and looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings. Where was he?

The sight of the baby crib brought him back to his senses. Now he remembered. He was in Sharlene’s apartment. He had spent the night in Sharlene’s apartment...

But what the hell was he doing in her bed?

Chapter Eight

“Good morning, sleepy head,” Sharlene said from the foot of the daybed an hour later. “You’re sounding much better. The coughing is almost gone. Still, I think you’d better get to the doctor and have your throat checked out. Better safe than sorry.”

Zack laid back down and tugged the blanket over his bare chest. Where were his clothes? He yawned to hide his nervousness and ran his finger through his sweat-dampened hair.

“I’ll go to the doctor tomorrow—maybe. I have to work in the store today until Keith gets back from class and then I go to class... We have this system all worked out, you see.”

“Uh-huh. I see that you’ve let yourself get worn down so much that you’ve caught the latest bug going around.” She smiled at him as if he were a child. “Don’t worry about the shop. Keith told me his class was cancelled today. He said he didn’t mind filling in for you some since he owed you a bit of money. He had no problem with letting you sleep in a bit.”

“You talked with Keith this morning?”

“Yes. He stopped by when he didn’t find you in your bed... He highly commended me on my *mothering* skills, whatever that means.”

"I guess he thought you took real good care of me last night."

The sudden implication of what all Keith's comments insinuated jarred Zack's groggy consciousness awake. "Not that anything improper happened here last night... Right?"

The blush on Sharlene's cheeks perfectly matched the color of the bright pink terry cloth robe she wore loosely belted over her growing abdomen. "I'm heading back to the kitchen now," she said, dodging his question. "You ready for some breakfast?"

"Yes, please. Um, Sharlene?"

She paused at the door and looked over her shoulder. "Yeah?"

He scooted further beneath the covers. "You wouldn't happen to know where my clothes are, would you?"

"They're in the living area right where you pitched them. You were in an awful hurry last night to take them off, it seems. Here let me go get them for you."

She returned a moment later holding his shirt, socks, and jeans in a nicely folded pile.

"I'm surprised you didn't catch cold last night with only my thin quilt on top of you what with the little you have on. I guess all the *activity* kept you warm, huh?"

Winking, Sharlene exited for a second time so he could dress.

"Activity?"

Now it was Zack's turn to blush. What had gone on last night? Had he stripped his clothes off in her

living room? Could a fever make a person do such an outrageous thing? And what did Sharlene do after he had done his Chippendales number?

He bolted upright. Here he was lying in her bed in a state of almost complete undress and she was in the kitchen wearing very little but a robe herself. And she had blushed and hadn't answered him outright... Had he acted on his carnal impulses last night and accepted more of her hospitality than just food and shelter?

The image of Sharlene, lying naked in his arms sprang to mind. His hands tingled as if roving over her smooth skin, caressing the roundness of her womanly curves... His fingers actually pulsed with pleasure as if they had caressed her intimately.

"Come and get it!" Sharlene shouted.

Oh, no... Had he gotten *it* already? And if they had done it—why couldn't he remember it?

Zack hastily jumped into his jeans, tugged his shirt over his head and took a deep breath. They had some serious talking to do and then he was going to seriously consider going to confession. The last time he had uncovered his sins before the priest he had been about thirteen years old. He had borrowed a set of walkie-talkies out of the store behind his father's back and gotten caught and his mother had made him go. But he was sure it was like riding a bicycle—once you learned how to do it, you never forget.

Sharlene was eating when he approached the table. He paused as the scents of hazelnut coffee and fresh from the oven cinnamon rolls assailed his nostrils. He

took the seat beside her.

"Hmmm, smells good. What's on the menu?"

"It's one of my favorite breakfasts, scrambled eggs and cinnamon rolls. Plus I made coffee for you. Liza says I gotta cut back on the espresso or else this kid will be tap dancing in the delivery room, he'll be so dang jittery."

Zack laughed nervously and dropped into the seat across from her. "A little caffeine never harmed anybody. Just look at me—I practically live on the stuff during finals week and I'm perfectly healthy." A sudden coughing fit overtook him. "Well, mostly healthy."

She poured him a big glass of juice. "Drink your O.J. first. How else can you grow up if you don't drink your juice? You don't want to be a little boy forever, don't you?"

Little boy? That clinched it. They must have been intimate last night. How else would she know?

"Want some scrambled eggs?" she asked, turning the skillet handle towards him so he could serve himself better. "You could say they're my specialty—scrambled eggs. Get it?"

He shook his head mutely.

"Like my egg got scrambled the wrong way over at Dr. Fazoli's clinic," she joked. "Right eggs, wrong rooster."

"Fazoli's clinic?" Zack asked, blinking. Why did that name sound familiar? He helped himself to a sizable portion of eggs as he mulled it over.

"Yes, the clinic is where I had the in vitro

fertilization procedure done. It's near the spot where I tried to commit vehicular homicide on you with my baby stroller, remember?"

"Sure, I know where it is now. It's near to the place where Keith and I—"

Zack dropped the spatula with a *clunk* against the side of the pan. His words died a merciful death on his lips. The clinic she was talking about was right next door to the sperm bank.

He tried hard to swallow the jagged lump building in his throat. What would Sharlene think if she knew how he paid for last semester's textbooks?

Sharlene raised an eyebrow. "Where Keith and you what?"

"Uh, nothing." A nervous sheen of perspiration broke out over his forehead. He hoped it wasn't noticeable. "Hmm, good eggs."

She tilted her head and observed him closely. "Thanks. You sure you feel okay? I told Keith not to worry, that I'd substitute for you in the store if he had to run to class or the library today. I know I don't know jack about anything electronic or computer-wise, but I know enough to keep folks' hands out of the till and flip over the closed sign at six. So, how about it?"

Zack gulped. His mouth felt drier than a county smack in the middle of the Bible Belt. "How about what?"

"How about I take your shift at the store today. I'm not really needed over at the college. The temp job is just about over. Connie will cover for me down in the

dark dungeon of the endless filing cabinets.”

“Connie?”

“My partner in crime in the temping business.” Sharlene stood and took the pan back to the stove. “I think you’ve had enough to eat for now. You’re looking pretty green about the gills again, mister. Go crawl back into bed. I’ll be there in a moment with something to keep you warm.”

The thought of what that something could be caused more than just his fever to spike... Zack took a deep breath and collected his thoughts the best he could. “Look, about last night, I—I don’t remember a thing.”

She smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “I don’t doubt it for a moment. Your temp was very, very high. You were even talking in your sleep. I never could wake you up to get the Tylenol down your throat. You tossed and turned back and forth and back and forth and even moaned...”

Sharlene paused. A warm feeling grew in the pit of her stomach as she thought about how Zack in his confusion had caught her in his arms, held her tight and caressed her. But it wouldn’t do to embarrass him by telling him about that portion of the evening’s activities.

“What with all the noise, no wonder Keith thought we were up to no good,” she said, giggling. “He wouldn’t believe me even after I told him how I ended up sleeping on the couch the entire night.”

Zack’s eyes widened. “You slept on the couch the entire night?”

Sharlene yawned loud and long. "I tried to sleep, you could say."

A long sigh involuntarily escaped Zack's lips. "That's a relief."

"That I was forced out of my bed by a delirious sick man, or that I was able to sleep any at all?"

Zack slowly raised his gaze to meet Sharlene's and smiled. "I sincerely apologize about last night. I promise I won't let it happen ever again. From now on you'll sleep in your bed, and I'll sleep in mine."

For a fleeting moment her expression almost looked sad, Zack thought, but her grin and quick wit rebounded. She quirked an eyebrow. "And Keith will keep his big fat nose out of other peoples' sleeping arrangements from now on, right?"

"Right."

"Eat your eggs, they're getting cold." She finished clearing the table and turned on the taps. "I'll boil some water for another hot water bottle, if you like."

Hot water bottle? It wasn't her next to him last night in bed keeping him warm? Zack couldn't help but feel disappointed. "No, it's not necessary," he said. " And don't worry about the dishes. I'll wash up."

Sharlene put the kettle onto boil. "That'll be hard to do while you're lying down, won't it?"

"Look, I can't lie around your house all day. I have work to do, and I don't want to impose —"

"The work has been covered, remember? And it's not an imposition." She averted her eyes and adjusted the tantalizing end of her robe tie. "I could use the

company."

He closed his eyes to the throbbing in his head and massaged his temples. "But what would we do all day?"

Sharlene tilted her head then tapped her finger against her cheek. "Hmm, first, you're going to rest up and get to feeling better and then—"

I'll take a cold shower fully dressed, Zack thought, sighing.

"I'll do some alterations on my dress for the big party this Saturday," she continued brightly. "You are still interested in being my escort, aren't you?"

"Escort?"

"To Uncle Bart's fund-raising shindig, remember? We're going to be a foursome with my ex, or so you told Jeffrey. If you've changed your mind, just tell me. I promise I won't be get mad."

"Of course I'm going with you. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Sharlene stacked the dishes in the sink and filled the hot water bottle. "Good, I'm glad we're still on. Now off to bed you go, little boy. I'll bring you lunch in bed."

"Yes, Mom," Zack replied, shuffling off to bed, hugging the warm bottle close to him. How long had it been since someone had taken care of *him*? If he could keep his filthy thoughts at bay, he could lie back and enjoy being pampered all day long. Being sick with an attentive neighbor wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Zack crawled into Sharlene's sheets and pulled the

covers over him. Mmm. The sheets were soft and warm as their owner and smelled of dryer softener fragrance and *woman*. His cock grew painfully and undeniably hard.

"Lying in your beautiful neighbor's bed maybe isn't such a good thing after all," he groaned, placing the hot water bottle next to his groin.

* * * * *

"It's probably not strep from what you told me, but a woman in your condition can never be too careful," Liza warned Sharlene over the phone the next day. "Speaking of which—"

Sharlene bit her lip and clenched the phone receiver tight. From the preachy tone in Liza's voice, she knew what was coming next.

"I hope you two took the recommended safety measures when you were, ahem, close."

"Liza!"

"As your physician, I have to make you aware of things out there which you need to protect yourself and your baby from."

"Really! Just what kind of person do you think I am?"

"A very lonely pregnant woman who is madly in love with a number on a test tube, but who probably wouldn't turn down an offer for some good lovin' from a very handsome, very *real* man lying in her bed."

Sharlene sighed. It was true. She still dreamed

every night about her baby's 'mystery dad'. Her handsome landlord hanging about her apartment half-dressed yesterday didn't help matters much. She had to face reality. Zack Richmond was her friend, and he probably didn't find her the least bit attractive. If anything, watching over her sick neighbor only intensified her maternal instincts and her deep desire to meet the baby's sperm donor father.

"My baby's dad is still a number, huh?"

Liza exhaled in frustration. "Shar, just because the depository is practically next door to our building and does business with us on a regular basis doesn't mean we're always on good speaking terms with them. The vast majority of sperm banks are not into the 'open donor' option like a few out on the west coast are. I'm sorry. I'll try talking to the director again if you like and explain the circumstances, but I'm afraid it's hopeless."

"Couldn't you break in and take a peek at their files? All you'd have to do is log into their computer and find the file with his name and code number together—"

"And risk getting caught?" Liza cried. "Risk losing my license to practice medicine? Hang it up, girlfriend. You're just going to have to face facts that you may never know the father's true identity. Start looking for a daddy of the flesh and blood variety. There's more to a man than just his genetic code, you know."

"I know," Sharlene said softly. It was time she got over this stupid obsession and got on with her life.

She squared her shoulders and sat tall in her rocking chair. "Hey, going on to other matters, did I tell you that Zack and I are attending a big to-do this Saturday night courtesy of dear old Uncle Bart?"

"No, you didn't. Sounds promising. Is it for the children's hospital?"

"You got it."

"But we didn't—get tickets for it, that is." An exasperated tone had crept into Liza's voice. "Joel made up some lame excuse about a having to attend another meeting out-of-town this weekend. I think I need to prescribe myself some of those anti-depressants he peddles all over the place. Both my social and my sex lives totally suck at the moment."

Sharlene physically felt the pain of her friend's words. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the chair. "I was hoping you two had straightened things out on the commitment issue. I'm sorry."

Liza sighed. "Don't be. I'll get over it. Besides, I have a patient due to deliver this weekend anyway. No need getting tickets to a gala when you're probably going to be interrupted. Is this going to be a black tie affair?"

Sharlene rolled her eyes. "Yes, unfortunately it is. I plan on curling my hair up a bit and wearing some makeup for an exciting change of pace."

Liza paused thoughtfully. "You don't sound very enthusiastic."

There simply was no keeping a secret from the astute Dr. Allen. "I'm not. Jeffrey's going to be there."

"Ugh!"

"With some bimbo named Bunny."

"Ooo, worse. But you'll have Zack on your arm and be as radiant as ever. Just tell those two assholes to bugger off."

"Liza!" Sharlene laughed. "You really know how to cheer a person up. I feel better already."

"That's why I got into this profession in the first place." The smile was evident in her voice. "Listen I gotta go. You two take it easy. You'll be going nowhere if you come down with Zack's cold on Friday night. Bye now."

"Bye."

Sharlene put the phone down and immediately headed for the oversized spray can of Lysol she had stored under the sink. What was she thinking of when she let a sick man cough all over her house?

"I was thinking how sexy he looked in his boxers, that's what I was thinking," she mumbled, giggling to herself, as she misted every surface Zack could have conceivably touched in her apartment with disinfectant spray.

Too bad she couldn't wipe away the memory of his hot flesh pressed against her own as easily as she could the germs. The feel of his rippling biceps beneath her touch, the growing pulse in his pants...

Sharlene dropped the spray can and put her cool hands to her burning cheeks. "Lord, give me strength. If I can't keep my hands off him Friday night, it might be our first *and* last date ever."

* * * * *

"There you go, Timmy." Zack handed the video game console to the young boy at the counter with mock seriousness, trying hard not to laugh. "Next time you get angry with your brother for beating your high score, make sure you don't shove his peanut butter and jelly sandwich into the game cartridge slot. It's not a pretty sight."

A grin minus a couple of teeth said it all. "Thanks, Mr. Richmond."

"You're welcome." Zack winked. "Now get out of here quick before I tell your parents where you've been spending all your allowance."

Laughing, the boy ran out the door, trailing cords and joysticks behind him.

"Cute, really cute," Keith quipped, entering from the back. He stopped and leaned a long arm across the counter. "How are you ever going to keep this place afloat if you only charge a fraction of what other places charge for repairs? You're worse than the old man was."

Zack shook his head in agreement, staring at the closing door. "Yes, Dad was a hopeless sucker when it came to cute kids. Isn't that why he took you in? How could he resist a seven-year-old boy with an interest in things electronic? The foster home placement people didn't even have to show your papers to convince him after you said you'd always wanted to own a ham radio. Dad was in heaven."

"Yeah, he was, considering his own flesh and

blood was more interested in his mom's bookkeeping activities and reading the *Wall Street Journal*." Keith sighed. "It's times like this when I sure do miss the folks."

Zack gave Keith a gentle pat on the back. "I do too."

"But we've gotta live in the here and now, homeboy," Keith said, straightening up. "This store has got to start turning a profit or else," he made a slashing motion across the throat, "we'll both be working for Radio Shack."

Zack frowned. "It will, it will. Don't you have any faith in my business sense? I have some long range plans for the place, but first I've gotta finish my degree like I promised Mom."

"You've got to finish old lady Markham's class, you mean."

"Don't remind me," Zack groaned, flipping through a stack of recent repair work receipts. He could feel his blood pressure peaking at the mere mention of the woman's name. It was stressful times like these when he missed his parents even more than usual.

Zack sighed. Mom would have understood the daily pressure he was operating under, but Dad? Dad would have told him to, "Buck up and bite the bullet and get back to work." Other than having sex outside the blessed union of marriage there was no worse sin than wasting time when you had other more important things to do according to his father.

Keith started straightening watch batteries on the

counter display rack. "I'm sure glad I'm on scholarship at a large public institution. There's a much bigger selection of profs and majors at UMSL. You ought to think about transferring, Big Bro."

"I should, but I promised Mom I'd graduate from St. Genevieve's. Remember?"

Keith raised an eyebrow. "And you always make good on your promises, don't you?"

Zack looked daggers at his foster brother. "What's that quip suppose to mean?"

"Nothing, nothing," Keith replied, raising his hands in defense.

"I wouldn't talk, Marshall," Zack grumbled. "You haven't been paying on the lights for over four months now."

"Chill out. I'm getting some grant money at the end of the term. I'll make good on my debts then."

"You damn well better..."

Zack caught himself before his tirade could ramble on. He ran his fingers through his thick chestnut hair and exhaled slowly. This kind of bellyaching wasn't at all like him.

"Sorry. I didn't mean what I said," he said quietly.

Keith grinned sheepishly. "Apology accepted. I would have meant it if it were me. Who likes supporting a deadbeat?"

"Deadbeat?" Zack shook his head sadly and turned to check the till for change. "Don't worry. I won't kick you out on the street if I'm forced to close the store. In fact, I may just turn the shop space into another rental unit. It's got to be more profitable than video game

repairs.”

The shop door buzzer interrupted his sad musings. “A customer just in the nick of time. We’ll be able to pay the electric bill.”

Keith snorted, turning on the charm full force as their visitor approached the counter. “Why, good afternoon, Ms. Pincher. Why, ain’t we lovely today? The hair is definitely happening.”

Sharlene patted a side curl in place and smiled shyly. “Good afternoon, Mr. Marshall, and thank you. I went all out and had them shellac it into place for me. You still helping out the recovering invalid?”

“It beats watching reruns of *Judge Judy*, but just barely.”

“Ha, ha,” Zack deadpanned. “What’s all this about your hair and shellac—”

Zack’s jaw dropped open. He was stunned speechless by the vision standing in front of him. Sharlene’s silvery-blond hair was swept up in a mass of curls and ringlets that framed her oval face perfectly. Her luscious lips were tinted with just the right shade of seashell pink and her violet-blue eyes were set off with just the right shade of amethyst eye shadow, blue mascara and eyeliner. Zack could have sworn he had never laid eyes on any woman so beautiful before.

“You like it? It’s not too much, is it?” Sharlene queried.

Zack’s brain immediately went offline due to beauty overload. “No, no, it’s great. You look like some of the girls at our high school prom—only

better."

Keith shook his head and chuckled. "What a lame comment! Ms. Pincher, I think you look like the Mona Lisa and the Venus de Milo rolled into one. With arms, of course."

Sharlene blushed. "What a nice compliment, Keith. I guess it was better than the Lady Godiva look I had going for years with the long hair. I figured a bouffant would receive Aunt Edwina's approval."

Lady Godiva? Zack instantly pictured Sharlene naked with long flowing blond tresses riding atop a white horse... The sunshine glistening off her fair, soft skin, the lush curves of her breasts, bouncing with the quick rhythm of her mount's gallop.

"Hmmm, Lady Godiva," he murmured.

She narrowed her eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

Zack came crashing back into reality. "Uh, I was just thinking I'd should have bought you a present for inviting me to your uncle's party, like some Godiva chocolates?"

Sharlene patted her belly and grinned. "Yum, we'd love some, but I gotta watch what all I'm eating these days. I still got food from last night in the fridge calling to me."

"You guys were too busy to eat last night?" Keith winked and gave Zack a playful nudge in the ribs. Zack returned the nudge to his foster brother's ribs—only harder.

"Yowza! Watch it, Richmond."

Zack ignored Keith's yelp and gazed dreamily at Sharlene. "Speaking of leftovers, I sure am going to

look like leftovers standing next you. My attire is not quite up to country club standards, I'm afraid.

"Don't worry. Your black suit is perfect, and I got a little something to make it even better." She reached into her shopping bag and pulled out a silk tie in a rich brown paisley with a hint of burgundy and gold. She placed it gently in Zack's hands. "I made a quick trip to the Galleria this morning before my hair appointment. You like it?"

Keith gave a long whistle. "The boy had better like it. No chick's ever bought me anything that nice before."

Sharlene arched an eyebrow. "What do you think, Zack?"

"It's very nice," he said softly. A sudden sadness filled his heart. The last time he had worn a suit and tie was at his father's funeral. He wound the cloth about his left hand and took a step toward the cash register. "Here, let me pay you for it."

"Don't you dare!" She placed her hands on her hips. "Think of it as a bribe to get you to accompany me to this snobatorium event. I owe you big time for putting Jeffrey in his place the other night, too."

"So she didn't *thank* you the old-fashioned way?" Keith whispered loudly. "Why all that moaning and groaning I heard, then?"

Zack elbowed him in the side again. "Keep your gutter thoughts to yourself, Marshall."

"Ow!" Keith groaned. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did. Now stuff a sock in it, Frizzhead."

Sharlene grinned at their clowning. "Promise me you'll wear the tie tonight?" She batted her long lashes playfully. "It would make me ever so happy."

Zack sighed. How could he resist those bottomless oceans of blue? Still, he didn't feel right accepting an obviously costly gift from her on top of the big invite. "I'll accept the tie, but only on one condition."

The corner of her delectably full lips turned upward. "Oh? And what condition would that be?"

"That you let *me* invite *you* over for dinner sometime."

"You've got yourself a deal," she said, shaking his hand.

"Be sure to bring along some Pepto-Bismol. You haven't tried his cooking before," Keith interjected. "He about killed me once making mac-cheese with sour milk and—"

Zack elbowed his big-mouthed foster brother again.

"Yeow! That hurts."

"It was supposed to," Zack muttered out of the corner of his mouth, his gaze never once leaving her Sharlene's face. Reluctantly he let go of her hand as she backed away.

"I need to get dressed now. Promise me you won't give him a black eye, Keith. I need him presentable for tonight."

Keith averted his eyes and kicked the counter skirt board with a toe. "Ah, okay. I promise, but only 'cause you're a nice lady who doesn't make fun of my *Star Trek* figurine collection. Come tomorrow, I'm

going to grind Richmond's sorry ass into the ground. He's hamburger."

Sharlene gave a twangy chuckle as she stepped into the lift. "What a coincidence. I was thinking of making meatloaf tomorrow night. See you in an hour?"

"An hour it is," Zack agreed. "I'll be ready." Whistling, he went about tidying the store.

Keith shook his head sadly. "I'm outta here. All this moony-eyed business between the two of you is making me nauseous."

Zack stopped straightening the software shelves. "What are you going on about?"

Keith shrugged. "If you haven't figured out the woman is as attracted to you every bit as much as you are to her, then you're hopeless, Richmond. I think I'll hit the road tonight and see how Roxie's doing. Later."

"Later."

Zack finished his reorganizing, then sat behind the cell phone counter. He watched the clock over the front door slowly tick the minutes down until closing, his mind wandering back to what Keith had just said.

Sharlene was attracted to him? How? In a motherly sort of way? She hadn't shown any overt signs that she found him desirable except for the quick kiss and hug the other night in front of Jeffrey—and that was purely for show. She didn't even comment on his state of almost undress in her apartment while he was practically dying of a fever.

Nah, she wasn't interested in him in a romantic

sort of way. They were just friends. Keith had his mind in the sewer half the time and the other half on an Internet porn web page. What did he know?

"And you should never mix business with pleasure," Zack said slowly to himself. Dad would be proud of how well he had followed that piece of advice over the years. He hadn't even seriously been tempted to date a single customer who had entered the shop, a single co-ed who sat beside him in any of his classes, nor any of his college instructors...

Brrr! Zack felt a chill just thinking about the oversexed Diana Markham. The woman was worse than the plague.

Forcing all upsetting thoughts from his mind Zack told himself that tonight was a night to relax and enjoy himself—not mope about his practically non-existent love life. Because other than one semi-serious relationship which lasted all of two months, his parents and Sister Mary Agnes would be extremely proud of him.

Still, there was that vivid dream he had the other night, the dream he had of making love to Sharlene. Curvy, sexy, playful Sharlene, who probably despised every male on the planet after being married to that self-absorbed Jeffrey Pincher.

"Frizzhead is so off target on this one," Zack muttered to himself. "Sharlene is attracted to me. Uh-huh. Yeah, right. Sure she is."

At straight up six o'clock Zack slid off his stool, flipped over the closed sign and turned out the lights. He'd better hurry up and take a shower and shave.

And splash on some of that sexy aftershave, too...

After all, there was no reason to take any chances,
just in case Keith happened to be right.

Chapter Nine

From the moment they entered the twelve foot high, hand-carved oak doors to be escorted by a butler through the maze of echoing, marble-tiled hallways to the lush garden terraces beyond, Sharlene dreaded how the whole evening was going to turn out. She clung to Zack's arm like a drowning woman holding fast to a life preserver and discovered that greeting former acquaintances with a bulge in her belly the size and shape of an over-inflated basketball was much tougher than she thought it would be.

"Why, Sharlene, you're positively glowing!"

"Wonders will never cease..."

"You look absolutely radiant, Sharlene. Congratulations!"

People who had politely ignored her at these snobby functions over the years were practically falling all over her now. Sharlene bit her lip in thought. Something was definitely up. They were all acting weird.

Zack smiled politely and finally managed to wedge Sharlene and himself into a corner of the verandah. Seeking refuge behind a tall potted fern, he quickly scanned both directions.

"The coast is clear," he whispered. "You can let up on the death grip now."

"Oh!" Sharlene blushed in embarrassment and dropped her hand. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to grab you like that."

"It's perfectly understandable." He vigorously rubbed his forearm to return the circulation. "This pool of diamond-studded piranhas scares the shit out of me, too."

"You're scared? You certainly don't show it."

Zack grinned and continued rubbing his forearm. "Couldn't you tell I was afraid by the way I was clutching you in return?" He pointed at the faint red hand mark on her wrist. "I guess you could say we're even."

She laughed. "Hey, at least everyone bought into it that we're a 'couple' and didn't bother to ask me about Jeffrey."

"I take it good news travels fast in the upper stratosphere social circles?"

"It does. Still, it's odd. Maybe Aunt Edwina had some hand in keeping their tongues from wagging. I wouldn't put it past her."

Zack's eyes widened. "Your aunt has that much control over the conversations of her party guests? She must be some woman."

"Former aunt-in-law," Sharlene corrected him. "Judge for yourself. It looks like you're going to get to meet her now."

A tall, thin pillar of sophistication in floor length scarlet silk, Edwina Pincher's close-cropped silver hair, fire-red lips and matching manicure set off her designer outfit to its fullest effect. She skillfully

floated her way through the crowd, a cloud that couldn't wait to envelop her next victims.

"Dear Sharlene." Edwina lightly kissed both of Sharlene's cheeks, then stepped back to take in her recycled ensemble. The loose-fitting, capped-sleeved, rayon-silk gown flowed gracefully unfettered from its scooped neck to mid-calf, its violet-blue color a perfect foil for Sharlene's eyes. "You're looking quite well tonight."

Sharlene nervously smoothed the wrinkles from her skirt. "Thank you, Aunt Edwina. You're looking very smart yourself. Red is your color."

"Yes, it is." She coolly surveyed Zack's humble suit and unusual footwear as she perfunctorily offered her hand. "And who might this young man be?"

"Zack Richmond, and it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Pincher." Taking her hand politely, Zack bit the inside of his cheek to keep from jumping. From the coldness of her touch, he surmised Edwina's body temperature registered somewhere around absolute zero.

"Likewise. I hear you're in the electronics business, Mr. Richmond."

Zack was momentarily taken aback. "Yes, yes I am. Only in a small way, though. I'm working on my business degree currently, and —"

"Wonderful," Edwina cried with false enthusiasm, cutting off his sentence with a slight wave of her hand. The rock on her finger sparkled hypnotically in the torchlight. "If you two will excuse me, I see some guests I haven't talked to yet."

With that dismissal, Edwina departed as quickly and stealthily as she had arrived.

"Gee, was it my breath or my bowling shoes?" Zack joked.

"Don't pay her any mind." Sharlene patted his shoulder. "You get used to it. Edwina's like that with everyone. One moment you feel you're the center of attention, and the next, she's written you off as the lowest piece of scum to ever stick to the bottom of her spike heels. I think it's something genetic."

"Her ability to put people in their place?"

Sharlene winked conspiratorially. "That's a nice way of putting it. But I prefer to call it plain, old fashioned, stuck-up snobbery myself."

"I can see now why you didn't want to stick it out with a family like this," Zack muttered under his breath.

"Pardon?"

He grinned. "I said I doubt Edwina's ever been bowling. She doesn't know what she's missed."

Sharlene laughed. "You got that right. Edwina's missed out on a lot in life holding onto such narrow-minded attitudes but just try telling her that. It'll go in one ear and out the other. It's a common enough character trait in this part of the world I'm afraid."

Zack scanned the growing throng of Edwina Pincher-like socialites before shifting his focus back to his companion. He couldn't help admiring how beautiful and sexy Sharlene looked tonight in her violet-blue and tumbling golden curls. Compared to the overdone designer-dressed women encircling

them, Sharlene shone forth with the beauty of an alabaster Greek goddess standing beside him in the starlight and flickering torches.

"Earth to Zack," Sharlene said, raising an eyebrow. "What are you staring at? Did I forget to zip my dress or something?"

"What? Oh, nothing." He shook his head to snap out of his daydreaming, offering his arm to her as cover for his odd behavior. "Would *Madame* like to partake of the obscenely fattening goodies on that football length hor d'oeuvres table over there?"

"But of course." Grinning, she took his arm and they strolled toward the sumptuous spread. "Just promise me one thing tonight, will ya, Zack?"

"Anything, *Madame*."

"That's it—don't say *Madame* too loud. It sounds like I'm a Hollywood hooker." She patted her belly. "One that got caught obviously."

Zack handed her a plate, his face turning crimson. "Oh, yeah, right. Sorry about that."

"And promise you'll keep me away from those chocolate-covered strawberries on the end, too. Edwina only orders six or seven cases worth of them for these cozy little gatherings."

"I promise, Mad—er, ma'am." He gave her a mock salute. "Keeping you from the strawberries shouldn't be too difficult, since I'm planning to eat at least five cases myself."

They stacked their plates high with luscious goodies, then searched for a quiet place to pig out far from the milling throng. A small glass table with two

metal chairs located just beyond the reflecting pool provided the ideal spot. They sat and happily began to nibble their mountains of fresh fruit, savory tidbits, imported cheeses and rich desserts.

"This is the life, huh?" Sharlene mumbled. "Too bad I didn't bring a bigger purse. I'd love to take some of this food home. There's always leftovers, you know."

"No problemo. I've got the space," Zack drawled, slipping a *petit four* into his jacket pocket.

Tickled by his antics, Sharlene almost choked on a bit of quiche. "Wow, I hate to see your cleaning bill."

"Don't worry. I'll let Keith lick out the crumbs first."

"Great idea. You know, I've never had this much fun at any of these highfalutin' affairs before. I used to think something was wrong with me since I found them all so deadly boring. Now I see why. It wasn't me—it was the company I kept. Here," she said, handing him a crème-filled swan pastry, "save this bird for me, too."

Zack took a sip of his wine and burped loudly. "Aye, aye, captain."

Sharlene covered her mouth with her hands and screamed with laughter, giggling herself right out of her chair and onto the stone tiles.

"Are you all right?" Zack rushed to her side and grasped her under the arms as she attempted to regain her footing.

Sharlene grinned up at her date, a drunken fool sort of grin, and it was then that she noted something

more than polite concern in Zack's soulful, brown eyes. The lights from the paper lanterns hanging above the pool reflected something more than mere friendship, more than camaraderie.

"I'm fine," she managed at last, searching for the meaning behind the look in his eyes. "I forget how easily I can overbalance with this built-in basketball sticking out in front." She slowly licked her lips. It was difficult for her to phrase her next question.

"Zack, I need to ask you something import—"

"Isn't it a little early in the evening to be tipsy? Especially for a pregnant woman?" Jeffrey's gruff, nasal tone interrupted the magic of the moment.

Sharlene dusted herself off and took a step back. "I'm not drunk. Just a little woozy from eating so many sweets." Pausing, she took in the woman wearing a mini-skirt of shocking flamingo pink standing next to her ex-husband. "So, this is your bimbo, er, date, I mean."

"Bunny Byrd," the leggy, brunette replied in a chipmunk voice, extending a thin, long hand to shake.

How cute—a woman named after two small animals. Sharlene took the woman's hand politely and fought the impulse to roll her eyes. Bunny displayed the most insipid expression Sharlene had ever seen on a human being. The slinky-dressed woman definitely had exactly what it took to attract any thick-headed male—a gorgeous body with no traces of gray matter whatsoever.

Zack cleared his throat and stepped forward. "It's very nice to meet you, Bunny. I'm Zack—"

"And I'm his date," Sharlene interjected, possessively placing her hand on Zack's arm and pulling him closer. "I'm sure Jeffrey's told you a million things about me."

"No, he hasn't," the chipmunk woman squeaked. "Why, was he supposed to?"

"Was he supposed to?" Sharlene mouthed, her jaw practically scraping the pavement in disgust.

"Bunny's a model and travels a lot," Jeffrey explained. "I guess I forgot to tell her about us being married."

"It probably wouldn't make a bit of difference," Sharlene mumbled. The poor woman looked about as intelligent as a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, a perfect companion for a man who enjoyed mindless acquiescence in his partner.

"You're married? You never said you were married," Bunny whined at her companion. "My mama warned me never to date married men."

"We're not married anymore." Jeffrey raised his hands in self-defense. "We're divorced—or soon will be."

Zack pulled away slightly from Sharlene's touch. "You two are *still* married?"

Sharlene gave Jeffrey an ugly glare and lowered her voice. "Technically we are up until the judge puts his signature on the final documents, but it's probably already been done and it's just sitting on his desk waiting to be mailed. Right?"

Jeffrey shook his head mechanically. "Right. The lawyers said we'll be getting the paperwork any day

now.”

“Great. So, there’s no problem with us still being married, is there?” Sharlene emphasized.

“None at all. See?” Jeffrey murmured, turning to kiss his date on the nose. “I wasn’t lying about not being married, Sweetie Pie.”

“That’s nice,” Bunny cooed, returning his kiss. “Can we go get some of those bubbly drinks in the skinny glasses, Teddy Bear?”

“Anything for you, Sugar.” Jeffrey quickly escorted his date away.

Sharlene gritted her teeth. “I won’t have to worry about my diet. Those two are enough to suppress my appetite for the rest of the evening,”

“Yeah, they are.”

Zack absentmindedly pulled out Sharlene’s chair for her. The flutter in his stomach grew into a twisting, writhing knot. Strange, but Bimbo Bunny and he had something in common. When his mother had informed him about the evils of the opposite sex, she had warned him about the unforgivable sin of dating married people, too.

Sharlene sat down and noted Zack’s faraway look immediately.

“Please, don’t feel guilty about escorting me here tonight. Jeffrey and I have been separated for three months now, and it’s just a matter of the paperwork being finalized. I apologize for not telling you more than I did when I moved in.”

Zack shifted uneasily in the small wrought iron chair and played with his butter knife. “There’s no

need to apologize. You pay your rent. Your personal affairs are really none of my business."

She reached across the small table and squeezed his hand. "But I want it to be your business." Averting her eyes, Sharlene summoned her strength to continue. "I mean, you're a wonderful person and you deserve the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?"

Zack slowly put down the butter knife and shrugged. "Sure. I'm not a court of law. You've been honest enough with me, so I guess it's my turn to be honest with you, too. I've been using you."

She frowned. "Using me?"

"Yes, I've been eating your food all this time, gaining invites to fancy parties like this, and, most importantly, I've been using you as an excuse for not finishing a... a project for class."

Sharlene arched an eyebrow, slowly sipping from her crystal punch cup. "A project? What kind of project? Maybe I can help you with it."

"You already have. You see, I told Dr. Markham that I was too busy to do the project since I've been visiting with a sick friend these past few weeks."

"You mean me? Hey, pregnancy isn't an illness. It's a condition."

"I know that, but she didn't know that. And then I sort of let out that your *condition* wasn't fatal and that it would be cured in nine months time... Well, now she thinks I'm your baby's father."

Sharlene almost choked on her sip of punch. "Excuse me?"

Zack handed her a napkin. "Dr. Markham thinks we are, uh, a couple, I guess."

"Thanks." She blotted the dribble off her chin. "I'm so glad I could be of help on your *project*."

"You were—I mean, you are. Sharlene, I—"

"This Dr. Markham," she interrupted, frowning. "Her first name wouldn't happen to be Diana, would it?"

A familiar chill washed over him. "Yes, it is. Do you know her?"

"I know of her. I recall Aunt Edwina talking about a tennis partner of hers from the club called Diana Markham. She was a college professor of sorts—not that she taught for the money since her late husband was way beyond average wealthy from what I understand."

He swallowed hard. "That's her."

"What a happy coincidence. Maybe I can talk Aunt Edwina into pulling some strings to get you a good grade on your project. It can't hurt to try."

"No, I guess not."

A hideous thought occurred just then to Zack. He slumped down in his chair. "You don't think your aunt invited Diana here tonight, do you?"

Sharlene scrunched up her eyes in thought. "Hmm, possibly. After all, this is a fund-raiser, and I'm sure Dr. Markham could afford the ticket. It would be sheer foolishness on Aunt Edwina's part not to invite everyone she knew."

Zack slumped further in his seat, his head dropping into his hands.

"Zack? You okay? You look like your cold could be making a comeback."

He coughed. "Yep, it feels like it."

Sharlene retrieved a tissue from her purse and dabbed at the sweat on his brow. "Would you rather not run into Dr. Markham tonight?"

"That's an understatement. I'd rather run into a crazed psychopath with a pick ax than Diana Markham."

Sharlene quickly scanned the crowd. "We could move a little further out into the yard and hide behind the shrubbery over near the swimming pool if you think it'll help."

"Yes, let's do that."

They were spotted as soon as they stood.

"Sharlene, come over here, would you please," Bartholomew Q. Pincher ordered. "We need your help."

* * * * *

It didn't take long for Sharlene to discover why Uncle Bart had wanted her to come to the gala in the first place. Who could resist bidding on a white elephant item to raise money for a children's hospital while the object was being held aloft by an expectant mom? Quite ingenious Sharlene conceded. Uncle Bart was sure to make a lot of brownie points with the hospital people.

"That's two thousand, once, two thousand twice, sold for two thousand dollars," the auctioneer

announced, gaveling the close of the sale. "Now for our next item—"

Sharlene sighed. Would she have to "model" another gaudy costume jewelry piece that would fetch only a couple hundred bucks? Aunt Edwina seemed to get all the decent jewels, but, then again, she was co-chair for the event.

"Here you go," the auctioneer said, smiling broadly, handing her a small statuette from the table. "This should sell for a nice price—particularly with you displaying it."

Sharlene gazed longingly at the ivory-colored porcelain Madonna and Child accented with pastel pinks and blues. Too bad she couldn't afford to buy it herself. She sighed. "It's simply lovely."

He winked. "Maybe someone will buy it for you?"

"Don't I wish..." Sharlene surveyed the crowd for any signs of Zack. He had mysteriously disappeared into the shadows as far away from the crowd gathered on the long stone verandah as he could manage. It was obvious that he wanted to avoid running into Dr. Markham at all costs.

"The next item up for bid is item number twenty-four, a hand-painted, ten-inch tall china statuette of the Madonna and Child. What do I hear for an opening bid? How about twenty-five dollars?"

Sharlene lifted the *objet d'art* over her head and turned to the left and then the right. No one seemed very interested.

"Twenty-five," came a bored sounding reply from an elderly gentleman in the back.

"Twenty-five it is. Do I hear thirty?" the auctioneer pleaded.

"Thirty," came another unenthusiastic response from a heavyset woman.

Sharlene's hopes soared. If the bidding was going to be that low, perhaps she could purchase it after all.

"Can I bid?" she whispered to the auctioneer.

"Be my guest," he said, winking. "It's a charity event after all."

"Forty dollars!" Sharlene sang out.

A murmur buzzed through the crowd followed by the sounds of laughter. It seemed no one wanted to challenge her bid.

"Forty dollars once, forty twice—"

"Fifty!" a familiar voice cried from the crowd. "I bid fifty dollars."

Sharlene squinted. *Zack? Why would he want to buy a statuette? Doesn't he consider movie posters and old wine bottles the epitome in home decor?*

"Fifty dollars it is. Do I hear sixty?"

"Sixty," another familiar male voice sang out.

Sharlene spun on her heels, almost losing her balance. Jeffrey? He was an even less likely candidate to buy a delicate piece of artwork. Maybe he was bidding on it for Bunny?

"Sixty-five," Zack countered.

"Seventy-five," Jeffrey returned.

Oh, so that was it... Sharlene could barely make out their respective faces in the dim touchier lighting but she could imagine the dirty looks they were casting at each other. They were trying to outdo each other—

and Zack was doing his best to be her champion.

"Eighty," Zack replied.

"Ninety," Jeffrey said, a thin sneer forming at the corners of his mouth.

"Uh, ninety-five," Zack came back. Sharlene knew he was bidding much more than he could afford. She had to stop this craziness now.

"One hundred," she announced to the auctioneer, giving him a big nod. He immediately took her hint.

"I have one hundred once, twice—sold to our beautiful helper here this evening." The gavel effectively silenced the two men. Sharlene walked from the stage area towards the back of the house, happily clutching her prize to her chest.

"Don't tell me I didn't try to buy you something as a thank you gift," Zack said, hurrying up beside her.

She stopped and turned to smile at him. "So that's why you wanted to buy it. How did you know I liked it?"

"You started bidding on it, remember? And, for some reason, she reminded me of you."

"The Madonna?"

"Yes. Why does that surprise you?"

Sharlene gazed down at her round belly and then started up the verandah steps toward the sunroom through the open French doors. "Mary's beautiful, tall and thin. I don't think I resemble her in the least."

Zack took hold of Sharlene's arm as they crossed the threshold. He took a step closer and tilted his face to hers. His breath tickling her cheek, he whispered, "Remember, beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

Sharlene looked up into Zack's eyes and caught sight of the same emotion she had seen there earlier in the evening. Could it be desire? Her gaze instantly fell to his full lips, moist and inviting... She felt the air between them sizzle with their combined energy, but instead of the heat pushing them apart it drew to them together like beads of glass melting in a furnace, their bodies yearning to fuse in a passionate kiss.

"Oh, Zack," she whispered.

She threw her arms about his neck and he pulled her tight against him, their lips meeting in an explosion of long-denied desire. His hands caressed her curls and slowly traveled down the length of her spine, cupping her round buttocks tight against his growing excitement. She pressed her aching breasts against his firm chest and parted her mouth to allow his tongue to flicker against her own, deepening the soulful connection between them.

Their kiss lasted an eternity... Sharlene wasn't sure where she ended and Zack began. It was as if their separate hearts were melting together, reforming into a new and better creation...

"Zack Richmond!" a familiar woman's voice cried from the doorway, rending the silence in two. "I thought that was you bidding earlier. What a pleasant surprise. Whatever are you doing here?"

Chapter Ten

Diana Markham's husky voice effectively doused Zack and Sharlene's newfound ardor faster than a bucket of cold water could smother a flame. The lovers flew apart.

"My statue!" Sharlene cried. Too late. It fell to the floor with a sickening *clink*.

Diana approached with the air of one who knew how to take charge. She bent low and helped Sharlene pick up the pieces, simultaneously revealing ample décolletage in a daringly low-cut, black silk pantsuit.

"I'm sorry to have scared you two. Do accept my apologies. You're lucky this area is covered with jute floor coverings. They kept this little thing from being too badly broken. You could easily glue her upraised hand back on like so."

Sharlene sighed as the small bit of porcelain toppled into her hand from between blood-red nails. "Yes, I guess I could fix her."

Zack nervously cleared his throat. "Well, you'll have to excuse us now, Diana. We were just about to leave—"

"Oh, don't go so soon," Diana purred, taking a step closer to her prey. "After the auction, the band begins to play. You do dance, don't you, Miss—?"

Sharlene's eyes narrowed at the older woman's

obvious scorn. "Sharlene Pincher. And I'm not much in the mood for dancing at the moment."

"That's too bad." Diana focused her attention on Zack. "I bet you can really burn up the dance floor whenever you want to, can't you?"

The muscles in Zack's jaw line tensed. "Not when I have better things to do." He took Sharlene by the arm and headed toward the front door. "Good night, Diana."

"Good night, Zack... Miss Pincher."

Sharlene held her breath all the way down the long marble-tiled hallway and out into the driveway. Neither of them uttered a word until after the parking valet had returned Zack's keys and both were safely ensconced in his car.

"I understand exactly why you were hiding in the shadows this evening to avoid her." Sharlene rolled her eyes. "The woman's an absolute vampire. I wish I had a wooden stake on me."

Zack grinned broadly and put his Tercel into gear. "Me too. And you're right. You've got to watch out for people like Diana Markham. They'll suck your spirit dry and spit your dried corpse out whole. I don't want to become their idea of lunch."

Sharlene shivered. "Ooo, I don't blame you a bit. But the more I think about it, the more I can't blame her, either."

Zack abruptly hit the brakes at the end of the private drive. "What?"

"I said I don't blame Diana Markham for wanting you like I do," Sharlene whispered, pulling his lips

close to her own, demonstrating her meaning with a lingering kiss. "You were the sexiest, most handsome man in the entire crowd tonight."

"Bowling shoes and all?" he teased.

"Yep, bowling shoes and all."

Zack pulled her tightly against himself, pressing his lips hard against hers, his tongue probing the sweetness of her, his hand stroking her softness at the nape of her neck. Sharlene responded with equal enthusiasm, matching him kiss for kiss, caress for caress, as her hands playfully crept up his chest and loosened his tie. In their eagerness to know each other better, the piercing plea of a car horn directly behind them went unnoticed for several moments.

With effort, Zack tore himself away from Sharlene's grasp and hit his blinker. "I guess we'd better get off the road before they tell us to get a room or something."

Sharlene smiled and readjusted her seat belt. "Or something."

The drive home seemed an eternity. Zack whistled along with the music on the radio, trying hard to keep his attention on the road. Sharlene occupied her hands by smoothing and re-smoothing her dress, checking the bobby pins in her hair—anything not to look at or touch her handsome driver. She knew that with the way her hormones were raging, there was no telling what she might do if she let herself go... The police had probably witnessed worse, but she couldn't imagine herself standing straight-faced in some public courtroom confessing before a judge how

her uncontrollable libido had caused a multiple car collision.

At last they pulled into the parking lot behind the building. Zack cut the motor and gazed up at his living room window. Two silhouettes dancing against the drawn shades in his apartment told another happy couple's story.

"Looks like Keith's home already, and he's got company of his own."

"You want to... um, come up to my place?" Sharlene said breathlessly.

Zack grinned. "The other day when I was sick I promised you I'd sleep in my own bed, remember?"

"Who said anything about sleeping?"

Sharlene squealed with laughter as Zack leaned over to kiss her soundly. She had never witnessed a man remove his seatbelt and narrow the distance between the driver's side and passenger's seat in less than a nanosecond before.

* * * * *

"It's okay, Zack. It used to happen to Jeffrey sometimes."

Why does she have to mention my name in the same breath as that slime ball? Zack fumed to himself. *It's bad enough that somehow I couldn't, we didn't... And she wanted to. Boy, did she ever want to.*

"Come back to bed so you don't get cold."

Zack heaved a long sigh, exited the bathroom and paused at the foot of the bed. Sharlene flipped back

the quilt and patted the pillow beside her on the day bed.

Damn! he cursed silently. The glow of the candles cast a sexy golden glow against her silky, alabaster skin. She was a fertility goddess, all curvy in the right places with round firm breasts and tasty rosebud nipples and hips just perfect for holding onto for dear life and plunging deep into the tight softness between...and she was horny as all get-out to boot. It was her hormones she said, and please excuse her if she acted a little frantic, but it had been so long since and she just couldn't hold back any longer –

But for some reason, he could. God and Mother Nature were playing a cruel trick on him. On them both, really.

"Zack?"

He crawled into the covers, almost afraid to touch her again in fear of disappointing her.

She snuggled closer to him, laying her hand on his chest. "I should have put my Madonna and Child in the other room."

"What?"

"It's a turn off, isn't it? To look over at my nightstand and see the Virgin Mary and then look over at me and see... Well, see the beached whale with child that I am."

"No, not at all." He stroked a curl lying against her cheek which had tumbled so freely from her upswept hair as he had pulled the bobby pins out one by one, gently kissing her eyes, neck and forehead as he went along. "I find a woman with more than her fair share

of curves most attractive.”

“What is it then?”

Zack knew it would sound stupid, but it seemed the only plausible explanation. He turned to his side and met her gaze head on. “I promised my father right before he died last year that I’d finish school, keep the shop open and our customers happy, and that I wouldn’t rush into any serious relationships.”

“You’ve done the first two things well,” she said, stroking the firm line of his chin with a finger. “It’s the last item on the agenda that’s a stickler. I’m too *serious* a relationship, huh?”

“No, it’s me who’s so damn serious. I just can’t relax and enjoy myself lately.” Zack sighed loud and long, then kissed her palm. “I don’t mean to bring you down just because I’m a prude raised by a mother who once seriously considered becoming a nun, and a father who worshiped the ground she walked on as if she were the Queen of Heaven herself.”

Sharlene chuckled. “Hmm, then maybe it is the statue. Who wants their mom looking at them while they’re doing naughty things in bed?”

“Yeah, maybe.” It was amazing how quickly she could bring a smile to his face and a lightness to his heavy heart. “Still, I apologize for not being able to...uh, you know, enjoy the moment with you.”

She pulled herself up on an elbow and gently kissed his forehead. “I understand completely. You have a lot of important things on your mind, and you want to live in a way that your family would be

proud of. So don't worry. I respect you all the better for it."

Zack laughed and gently caressed her face. "You're a very wise woman, Sharlene Pincher."

"I wouldn't say that, or else why did I marry the first schmuck who popped the question to me at the ripe old age of twenty? That's definitely not wise."

"Don't sell yourself short. You're very intelligent. And beautiful and sexy."

"Thank you." She smiled wryly. "Flattery will get you everywhere with me, as you can see."

"Then let me flatter you some more." His hands tickled down her side. "How about intelligent, gorgeous, curvy..."

Sharlene rolled away at that moment, sadness clearly evident in her manner. "'Easy' is probably the next word you were going to use to describe some of my more noble qualities."

Zack's eyes widened. He reached out to caress her shoulder. "Don't say that. I'd never say such a thing about you."

"But you'd think it. And why wouldn't you? I'm really sorry how I forced myself on you this way." She turned her face away from him and sighed. "You've been the best landlord and neighbor a girl ever had, and it must seem like I'm trying to snag you into a relationship you aren't ready for. Heck, Jeffrey and I were married four years, and if he wasn't ready to be a father to someone else's child, I can't blame you for having similar reservations."

There was that horrid name again—*Jeffrey*. Zack

wanted to be sick whenever he thought of that clown touching the enchantress lying next to him. He tilted her chin toward his face and looked deep into her eyes. They sparkled like liquid sapphires in the candlelight.

"Jeffrey's a first class prick. Selfish, egotistical, money-hungry. Why, he wouldn't really care about a child even if it was biologically his. He doesn't come across as a person who truly loves anybody but himself."

"You're right. He thinks he's just too important not to love. Why waste the emotion on anybody else?"

"But me—" Zack kissed her gently and cradled her in his arms. "I'm different. I could love a child of yours, Sharlene, with no reservations whatsoever."

Her brow furrowed. "You could?"

"Yes. After all, you're the mother. If I love the mother, then I love the child. It's that simple."

Sharlene burst into tears.

"What did I do wrong now?" he wondered, heartbroken.

"Nothing." Her sobbing continued unabated.

Zack tightened his arms around her, kissing the top of her head. *No wonder I haven't dated in over a year... All I do is bring misery to females.*

He looked around the room for inspiration to cheer her up. His eyes focused on the statuette perched on the nightstand to the right of him.

"What I meant before was if Joseph didn't have any trouble with who was the father of Mary's baby, then I don't see why I should be any different."

Sharlene sniffed loudly and stopped crying. "Yes, but her baby was the Son of God. And you actually used the word *love*."

Zack swallowed hard. "Yeah, I guess I did. I did, didn't I? Is that why you're crying? Not because I'm such a lousy lay?"

She giggled, wiping her moist eyes on the back on her hand. "Hey, when has sex ever had anything to do with love? What has sex even got to do with even making babies these days, for God's sake? My baby's daddy name is Number 342. Love is something completely separate from sex – something much more important than sex..."

Number 342? The number buzzed around in Zack's head... Why did that number ring a bell?

"I mean if sex was the end all of love, then Jeffrey and I would still be married," Sharlene continued, sniffing loudly. "But it's so much more than that. It's caring for each other and being committed to making things work..."

Zack's attention wandered as the numbers played over and over in his mind's eye. *Three, four, two. Wasn't that the code number on the card I filled out when I gave the clinic staff a sample? My very own special code number they told me that was only for my very own –*

Holy shit!

And it was at that precise moment Zack knew who the father of Sharlene's child was.

Chapter Eleven

Stars danced in front of Zack's eyes. A sickening feeling washed over him but quickly passed. The knowledge that he—that Sharlene was impregnated with... It was all too much.

But it all made sense now, in a weird sort of way. The way they had run into each other near the clinic, the dream he had had of a baby crying... How he had fallen in love with Sharlene from the moment he laid eyes on her. Sharlene was the mother of his child. *His* child! And she didn't even know it!

Should he tell her? He had to tell her. She'd told him how not knowing who her child's real father was driving her insane. But how could he come straight out and tell her it was him? Him who had been the other vital ingredient in the Petri dish?

"Zack? You okay?" Sharlene was peering oddly at him, her forehead wrinkling in confusion. "You look spaced out for some reason. You don't think what I'm saying is a load of horse manure, do you?"

Zack shook his head, concentrating his attention on the present. Sharlene was looking at him with admiration, happy that he said he could love her in spite of her child's unusual conception. Now really wasn't the time to tell her. It would totally spoil the moment.

"I'm just spaced out thinking about how much I love you. I really love you, Sharlene."

Tears glistened in her eyes. "I love you, too," she whispered.

Her arms encircled him. She pressed her seductive, round form tight against his lean, muscular frame. Entwined like two vines longing to merge into one, they sank down into the pillows. Zack's hands tenderly caressed the enticing roundness of her form. Sharlene arched her back in response, gasping in pleasure as he sensually kneaded her most sensitive spot with a steady caress. His lips wildly roved across the silken flesh of her neck and shoulders, repeatedly sampling the sweetness of her full breasts, his tongue teasing the rosy buttons until she gasped and groaned with desire.

"No, wait a moment." She pushed his hand away from the growing wetness between her thighs. "There's something I want to do for you."

Rolling him over onto his back, she launched a barrage of kisses starting at the top of his head, down his nose, chin, neck, chest, stomach and below...

"You don't have to do that," Zack moaned as her tongue flickered along his sensitive shaft. "But please don't stop on my account," he whispered moments later, willingly surrendering himself to her sensual expertise.

When at last Zack felt able to demonstrate the true depth of his affection, he took Sharlene by the hands and pulled her up to face him and covered her lips with his own, hungry to taste the honey sweetness of

her mouth again. Gently guiding her hips to embrace his throbbing desire, he entered her slowly, savoring the wondrous expression of her face as she joyously accepted the proof of his love deep within her.

"It feels so right," Sharlene murmured breathlessly. "So right with you."

Zack shuddered with emotion, experiencing the bliss of joining two souls that truly longed to be one. He quickened the strong beat of his thrusts to match the rhythm of her slowly circling hips. Soon he felt her velvety tightness quiver with an almost frightening intensity. Stars burst into a heavenly shower of light and color before his eyes as Sharlene collapsed with a loud cry against his chest.

* * * * *

"Girlfriend, I'm so happy for you!" Liza put an arm around Sharlene and squeezed tight as they strolled down Forsyth Avenue. "Didn't I tell you to stop pining after 'Mystery Dad' and look for the real thing? Zack and you make the world's cutest couple."

Sharlene blushed as she hugged her friend back. "I thought you said once you and Joel were 'cuter than June bugs on a rose' or did I hear wrong?"

Liza shrugged. "No, I probably did say it, once upon a time. Somehow two years of living together and buying a townhouse has sort of taken all the 'Junebugness' out of our relationship."

Sharlene beamed an encouraging smile to her friend. It was difficult to hide her own excitement and

thrill at her deepening bond with Zack while witnessing her Liza and Joel's relationship deteriorate into something less than inspiring.

"Hey, let's not dull our appetites with all this bug talk." Liza winked. "Grab us a sidewalk table, girlfriend, and I'll grab us some of those monster-sized burritos. Is that okay with you?"

"Sure, but be sure to tell them to hold the salsa."

Sharlene sat down at the first open table she spotted under the restaurant's canopy. She had been having a craving for burritos from Green Tomato's all week. Luckily it was still somewhat early so the lunch crowd from the courthouse and the bank building opposite hadn't taken all the best tables. She contently stretched her limbs, basking in the late spring sunshine. A few minutes later, Liza returned with their lunches. After satisfying her hunger with several big bites, Sharlene came up for air and noticed Liza merely toying with her food.

"Don't worry," she said kindly, trying hard to comfort her worried-looking friend. "The closeness between you and Joel is still there under the surface. You've just got to work on it."

Liza sighed and put down her burrito. "Yeah, maybe. If you say so."

"You two have just got to get on the same timetable," Sharlene thought out loud. "You'd think Joel being so high up the ladder in pharmaceutical sales his bosses would allow him a bit more flexible schedule. You can't help it when a baby is born at two o'clock in the morning."

Liza stifled a yawn with her hand. "Yeah, but you wanna know what he said the other day? 'You'd think those damn kids would get their acts together and be born during normal business hours, wouldn't you?' I swear that man's got everything down to a fine art—when and how long to brush his teeth, polish his shoes, have sex, drink his coffee..."

Sharlene furrowed her brow in thought. "You mean he does the same things for the same length of time at the same time each day? Isn't there a fancy name for that?"

Liza raised a pencil-thin eyebrow and nodded slowly. "You know, you're quite astute for a layperson. He's obsessive-compulsive. They call it OCD for short. It can be helped with Prozac."

"Ah, I see. The wonder drug of our time."

An evil gleam sparkled in Liza's eyes as she took a long sip of her bottled water. "I think I'll put some in his coffee tomorrow and see what happens. What'd ya think?"

Sharlene almost choked on her bite. "Hey, you're the doctor. Just don't get caught."

"Don't look so scared." Liza laughed. "You know I wouldn't do anything like that."

Sharlene nodded slowly. "Sure, I believe you. Just remember this conversation never happened if any police come knocking on my door."

"What faith you have in me!" Liza cried, lightly tapping her patient on the upper arm.

"Ow! "Sharlene smiled and rubbed her shoulder. "I promise I won't say a word unless the cops turn

out to be Agent Mulder with the *X-Files* and he insists I cooperate or else. Then I'll be forced to tell all – and take it all off as well."

The two exchanged knowing looks and starting laughing.

"I'm sure you would take it all off, too," Liza managed between guffaws. "Nothing like a sex-crazed pregnant woman for picking up men. Just save some of those studs for the rest of us lonely hearts, y'hear?"

"Don't worry. I'll be sure to save you a few – dozen."

After a few minutes of uncontrollable giggling, Liza's appetite returned with a vengeance. Sharlene happily sank her teeth deep into her rolled Mexican barbecue delight. *Hmmm...* It was the cilantro in the rice filling that did it for her.

"Funny *you* should say 'don't get caught' after you asked me to practically break in and steal the sperm donor files from next door," Liza mumbled between bites. "You don't know how relieved I am that you don't want me to find out more about the baby's father."

Sharlene was suddenly flooded with guilty feelings. "I never said I *didn't* want to know more about my baby's biological father... exactly."

"Really?" Liza narrowed her eyes, seriously scanning her friend's face. "You still want me to find out all about him?"

Sharlene averted her eyes and nodded mutely.

"And, if we happen to find out who the baby's

father is *exactly*, what are you going to tell Zack then? 'Sorry, I must be moving on now so I can start a relationship with the *real* man in my life?'"

"No, that's not it at all. Zack and I are an item now."

"You're not lusting after Daddy Number 342?"

"No, I'm not," Sharlene insisted just a little too strongly.

Liza arched an eyebrow and bit her lip. "Uh-huh."

"I said you don't have to worry about me prowling the streets looking for endless supply of nameless sex partners." Sharlene rapped her knuckle on the table three times. "Knock wood, I think we're more than compatible in that department."

"Oh?" Liza's voice rose a notch. "Zack's that terrific in the sack? Mind if I borrow him sometime? Joel would never know, considering how little time he spends at home."

Sharlene slapped a cool palm to her burning face. "Keep your voice down, please. I don't want the whole world to know."

"What? That you have sex life?" Liza snorted. "Look at your belly, girlfriend. People are going to assume you have fun in the bedroom all the time, unless your name is Mary and you hail from Nazareth."

Suddenly a queasy feeling came over Sharlene. They must have put salsa on her burrito after all.

"Shar?" Liza flashed her a concerned look. "You went a bit pale all of a sudden, pale even for a fair-skinned, white chick. I thought you told me you

didn't suffer from morning sickness."

"Not usually." The planets made another revolution around Sharlene's head and then plummeted to the depths of her stomach.

"You think it's something you ate?"

"I think it was what you said about me being the Virgin Mary," Sharlene said slowly, breathing deeply and regularly. After a few breaths, the crashing planets feeling abated. "You know this baby may have been a 'immaculate conception', but I'm certainly not a virgin by any means. I'm not perfect."

Liza smiled. "And I for one am not going to cast the first stone at you either."

"Thanks." Sharlene felt something odd in the pit of her belly. A fluttering, a squeeze, a kick?

"Now, don't go weirding out on me now, girlfriend," Liza warned, pointing a long dark purple fingernail at her. "You're one of the most together persons I've ever met. Except for your entanglement with Jeffrey, that is. I didn't know you back then so I can't say what made you marry that man, but I'm sure you had your reasons."

"Reasons? I guess I did. I wanted to have a family of my own to make up for being an orphan. I was stupid enough to think Jeffrey wanted a child for the same reasons, too. He lost both his parents in a yachting accident when he was twelve."

"Well, I feel sorry for him about losing his folks, but you're lucky the bum is out of the picture for good. You and Zack should make your situation honest."

Sharlene grimaced. There it was again, the stitch in her side. The baby was letting his or her presence be known, but why did it hurt so much?

"Hmm, what did you say?" Sharlene grunted. "Honest?"

Liza observed her patient like hawk. "Yeah, honest as in getting properly hitched. You two don't strike me as the 'live-in-sin types'."

A sharp, knifelike pain cut across Sharlene's middle at that moment. She bent over and grabbed her middle. "Ouch!"

"Is the baby kicking?" Liza reached across the table and felt along the top of Sharlene's abdomen. "Where do you feel the pain? Up front or near the sides here?"

A bead of sweat broke out on Sharlene's forehead. "All around. It's like a big rubber band tightened around me. Ooo, make it stop, please."

Liza stood, grim-faced. "Okay, the party's over. We're calling a taxi and going to the hospital right now."

Sharlene winced. "What do you mean *now*? I've got another four months to go, don't I?"

"You will if I have anything to say about it. It could just be false labor, but there's no way to tell for sure unless we put the monitors on you. No more walking for you today. Stay put and I'll be right back."

Sharlene's head dropped like a dead weight into her hands. Biting her lip, she rocked back and forth in her seat as another pain seized her.

Oh, dear Lord, she prayed, don't let my baby be born too soon!

Chapter Twelve

“What have I done?” Zack groaned. “What have I done?”

He zigzagged across the hallways outside the maternity wing, anxiously watching the door for signs of Liza Allen. An hour after he arrived, the young doctor finally materialized. He descended upon her faster than a storm cloud gathered over the Missouri River.

“Is Sharlene all right?”

“Yes, yes, she’ll be fine. The baby is fine,” Liza muttered, taking a step back from the fear-crazed face mere inches from her own. “It was a false labor, but we can never take these kinds of things too seriously. Her blood pressure isn’t up, so I don’t think there’s any real threat to her or the baby at this time.”

Zack slumped against the wall, exhausted. “Thank God she’s all right.”

Liza smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “Shar’s lucky she’s got a friend in you. I do hope you’re planning to attend Lamaze classes with her.”

He wrinkled his forehead. “Lamaze?”

“You know, the breathing exercises to help the mother give birth in a more relaxed way. Sharlene could use your strength beside her in the delivery room.”

Suddenly the whole world became one giant merry-go-round. Zack's legs turned to Jell-O. Twittering yellow canaries circled his head. "Me? You want me in the delivery room? With the baby? And the blood and the needles and all that... stuff."

Liza grabbed the senseless man by the elbow and guided him to the corner of the lounge, promptly depositing him on a couch. She forced him to drop his head between his legs.

"Oh, so we're afraid of a little blood and needles, are we?" Liza teased.

Zack's head sprang up. He promptly slumped back against the sofa back. "No! Yes. Well, uh, maybe."

"Keep your head down. I think your brain could use the extra blood." Liza sat down beside him and chuckled. "Having a relationship with a pregnant woman is a bit more than you expected. Am I right?"

"Yes, it is. Uh, Doctor—"

"Please, call me Liza," she interrupted. "My mother calls me Doctor. I only allow her to do so since she's family."

He straightened slowly. "Okay. Doctor, I mean, Liza—did I... did I cause what happened today to Sharlene because we had... had..." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Because we had you know?"

She arched an eyebrow. "Because you had sex?"

Crimson flashed across his cheeks and all the way to his earlobes. He cleared his throat. "Uh, yeah."

Liza shook her head, taking pity on him. "No, I don't think you caused Sharlene to experience false labor pains because you two got it on this weekend."

She patted his hand. "But we want to be careful. You two lay off the heavy duty dancing between the sheets for a week or two, and we'll do a couple of more tests to make absolutely sure everything's coming along okay then. Do you think you can cope?"

He slumped in relief. "Cope?"

"Yes, cope without rocking Shar's world for about a week. You're going to have to abstain from sex for at least six weeks after the birth anyway, you know."

"Six weeks?"

Such a babe in the woods. Liza sighed. "Yes, that's standard protocol. You'll learn a bit more about the details in Lamaze class."

She stood and stretched her arms over her head, yawning loudly.

"Sorry. It's just another long day for Liza Allen, MD. I'll go back to the ward now and tell Sharlene to take you on down to the education office on the first floor to get you two signed up after she's dressed. I think it's best you get enrolled with the next group just in case the baby's early."

"Early? But you said she'd be fine, the baby was fine—"

Liza shushed him. "They both are. But we aren't taking any chances. There's to be no more lifting or lots of standing or walking for Ms. Sharlene Pincher, either. If she stays calm and relatively sedentary for the next few months, she and the baby will be just fine. I can count on you to help, right?"

"Right. You can count on me."

"Good. I'll see you later."

Liza disappeared back behind the doors that separated the mysterious maternity wing from the general public. Zack sighed. He wished he *could* count on himself, but he knew he wasn't the world's most responsible, dependable person at times. Both his parents had informed him of his faults in that department on numerous occasions.

He shook his head to discard the discouraging thoughts from his memory. Why bellyache about it? He stood tall and held his chin high. Starting today, he was going to be a more dependable person. He'd transform himself into Mr. Responsible for Sharlene's and the baby's sake. Very responsible. And very, very dependable.

* * * * *

"Zack, for heaven's sake, put me down!"

Sharlene flailed her fists against his chest and kicked her feet. Zack finally caught on after her hand had connected a little too firmly with his ribs. He put her down just inside her doorway.

"I can walk, you know. I'm not on complete bed rest, Liza says. You don't have to carry me over the threshold."

Over the threshold? Zack blinked. *Now there's an idea.* He could take care of her and the baby. It was the right thing to do. His parents and Sister Mary Agnes would be proud of him acting responsibly. "I'm just trying to help," he said, shutting the door behind them. He followed her to the sofa and flopped down

beside her. "Listen, Sharlene, I have an idea. What would you think about us getting—"

"Rats, I got a call on my answering machine." Sharlene reached across him and hit the playback button. "I bet it's the temp agency. I was supposed to be here this afternoon to take it. I hope they didn't give that job to someone else."

Zack's eyebrows rose quizzically. "Job?"

"Yes, there's one in the business office over at St. Genevieve's starting in a few days. It's six full weeks filling in for a secretary going on maternity leave. How appropriate—one lady with a baby on board filling in for another having a baby."

Zack listened with growing agitation as the answering machine confirmed her suspicions. Sharlene grinned and rubbed her hands together.

"Great. I can still have the job if I call them back first thing in the morning. Perfect."

"What about taking it easy like Liza told you to?" Zack demanded, frowning.

"What could be easier than sitting down at a desk all day? Piece of cake."

Zack leaned back and crossed his arms slowly. His body language said it all.

"What?" she groaned.

He shrugged. "I don't know. It's your life, I guess."

She quirked an eyebrow "You don't think I should take this job?"

"Well, I take it from your actions at the auction the other night that you don't exactly need the money," he reminded her.

A hint of color blossomed on her cheeks. "Meaning?"

"I mean you haven't been working full-time, Jeffrey isn't the sort to pay alimony and yet you can still afford to buy the occasional artwork. Uncle Bart gave you a little nest egg, didn't he?"

She stared at him, her frown deepening.

"Am I right?" he asked.

"For the baby," she explained in low, measured tones. "The money was a gift for the baby's future. I planned on going back to work eventually—sooner if the *nest egg* hatches prematurely and we need the funds."

"But you don't need to work for money at the moment, do you?"

Crinkling her nose, her eyebrows knitted together. "Well, no, not really. I have enough to live on, but I want to work a little now so I can make some friends and gain some leads on possible employment situations after I have the baby. You understand, don't you?"

"I understand perfectly. You want a job that doesn't involve me," Zack muttered, slapping a hand over his mouth the moment the words escaped his lips.

Her eyes narrowed. "Pardon me? Why would *my* job involve *you*?"

A cold sweat broke out across Zack's forehead. Should he come right out with it? Should he tell her that he wanted them to marry so he could give the baby a real father with a real name? His baby, his

name.

Looking into Sharlene's determined stare, Zack thought otherwise. *No, I can't just propose like that. She's way too stubborn, too much her own person to want to hop into another marriage so abruptly.* He had to think of an intermediate step, something she could agree readily to without giving up her independence.

"How about working for me? For Richmond's Electronics and Repair Service?"

Her eyes widened. "Me work for you?"

"Yes, for me."

She bit her lip. "Hmmm, it certainly would cut down commuting time. But what about Keith? You're not giving him the boot, are you?"

Zack snorted. "I've tried firing Keith several times, but it doesn't work. He just doesn't take the hint."

Sharlene leaned away, eyeing him cautiously. "I won't work for you if it means kicking Keith out on the street. After all, he is your foster brother."

"I'm touched that you're looking out for someone as disagreeable and obnoxious as Keith." Zack put an arm around Sharlene shoulders, drew her close and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. "But then again, you're a special person."

"Thanks. But I'm not being nice about Keith for no reason. He's always acted the perfect gentleman to me – and an almost perfect gentleman to Liza."

"Liza?"

"Yeah, he keeps giving her that hungry wolf look whenever she walks into the shop to come by to visit me she says, but other than that, he's a good guy."

"Really?" Zack found that bit of news extremely intriguing.

"I think Keith has the hots for Liza. Don't you?"

Zack shrugged. "I'll have to ask him about that. And I promise I won't fire him. Keith's a lazy bum, but he at least knows how to load the paper roll in the cash register."

"Good." She leaned closer to him and patted his knee. "So, boss man, what would I do?"

"Do?" Idyllic images of strollers and baby-booties danced in Zack's head.

"For the job?" she broke in.

"Oh, for the job." He cleared his throat and straightened up. "What I really need for you to do is act as a bookkeeper. Between Keith and me, we've made a right muddle of the paperwork. Dad used to hire a lady a couple a times a year to come in and help get things in order, but lately the money's been a bit tight and —"

"You can't afford to pay me?"

"No, I'll pay you." With what, he didn't know, but he'd think of something. "It may not be as much as you could make at the college, but you won't have to wear out your tires and pay to park your car. And I can promise you this job will last a lot longer than six weeks."

Her eyes brightened. "Great. How much longer would it last?"

Yes! She was hooked. Just as Zack was about to congratulate himself on his great persuasive abilities, he heard himself blurt out, "Eighteen years or so."

"That long? Why, Junior here would be almost ready to start college himself by then..." Sharlene's face clouded over, her voice rumbling like thunder low on the horizon. "You don't want me to really work for you—you want me to stay put and be your sex slave. Is that it?"

The vision of pastel crocheted baby-booties began to unravel in Zack's mind. "No, that's not it. I don't want you to feel trapped. I want you to be my—"

Sharlene regained her feet and placed her hands defiantly on her hips. "Well, thanks for the job offer, Mr. Richmond, but no thanks."

"What?" He blinked hard. "You're turning me down?"

"I'll stick with the temp agency if you don't mind. They don't have any hidden agendas, just jobs."

She stomped toward the bedroom door then turned. "If you'll excuse me, I have to go to bathroom and then I'm heading straight to bed—alone."

Dumbfounded, Zack watched mutely as she slammed the bedroom door behind her for effect.

"Sharlene?" He slowly opened the door and tiptoed into the bedroom, standing vigil outside the bathroom door. "Sharlene, I'm sorry for implying I wanted to keep you here forever as my sex slave. You deserve much more than that from me. What I really meant to say is that I want to keep you here forever as my wife. What do you say?" He knocked on the door. "Sharlene?"

Slowly the door creaked open. Sharlene's tear streaked face peeked through a crack.

"Are you asking me to marry you?" she sniffed.

"Yes." He got down on one knee. "Sharlene, will you marry me?"

She hiccupped, coughed and cleared her throat. "Isn't this...a bit sudden?"

She was right. It was. But it felt right Zack had to admit the more he thought about it. He had to convince her. It was the right thing to do.

"I know this all seems a bit sudden," he began slowly, leaning against the doorframe as he rose to his feet. "But I've been thinking about it since the other night when I saw you in your uncle-in-law's garden — how the moonlight sparkled like liquid gold in your hair, how your blue eyes glowed brighter than the stars and how gracefully you moved across the stage like a ballerina... I can't think of anyone more beautiful to share my life with. What do you say? Will you marry me?"

The door slammed shut again and sounds of sobbing echoed from within. Zack rested his head against the door as a jagged lump formed in his throat.

"What did I say wrong this time?" he croaked. "I'm always saying something to make you cry. What is it?"

The door creaked wide open, a radiant smile where once a tear-stained cheek had been. She reached out and took his hand in hers.

"Zack, you didn't say anything *wrong*. You said everything *right*. That was the most eloquent proposal I've ever heard."

His heart felt light as he lifted her fingers to his lips. "You've heard a lot of marriage proposals before I take it?"

She laughed. "No, I guess not. Just Jeffrey's, and his was along the lines of, 'Let's make this legal so no one can call our kids bastards behind their backs.'"

"How romantic can you get?" Zack laughed. "I guess my proposal through a bathroom door ranks above his, huh?"

"Yeah, it does."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. Breathless, she clung to him for support.

"I can tell you something else of yours that ranks well above Jeffrey's, too," she purred.

"Can you now?" He traced the outlines of her fine features with a finger, followed with his lips. "I can't think why you ever said yes to that bum anyway."

"Well, at the time I thought Jeffrey was rather sweet and old-fashioned, wanting to get married and all, but after I found out about Uncle Bart's will..." She shrugged. "I figured out it wasn't romance he was after, but money."

Zack paused in his affectionate assault and stepped back. "Yes, what's with Bart and Edwina? Why didn't they have their own kids and stick them with all that miserable money instead of trying to force it on Jeffrey's offspring?"

"It's a rather complicated tale."

"We've got all night." He nodded toward the bed. "We can't do anything else but tell bedtime stories according to Liza, so you might as well tell me."

"All right, little boy," she said, chuckling as she lead him to the bed and sat down on the edge. "Once upon a time Bart and Edwina had two children. Their firstborn, Bartholomew Junior, died of crib death at age six months. About twenty-four years later, their daughter, Elaine, decided money wasn't the answer to everything in life. After she received her MBA, she had what Edwina terms a 'spiritual experience' and joined a very strict religious order. It about broke their hearts."

"Because their daughter became a nun?"

"No, because she wouldn't do as she was told and get married and produce an heir. They even had the groom all picked out for her—some nice boy from a rich family back East all ready to join Uncle Bart in the family business. But no matter what they said or did it was no good."

Zack shook his head in disbelief. "The poor little rich girl ran away from home to join a convent."

"Exactly. She does come home to visit occasionally, for family funerals and the like."

"I still can't imagine Jeffrey's cousin being a nun."

"It was a shock to me when I found out, too, but a pleasant one." Sharlene winked. "The Pinchers aren't all bad, you know. They have their moments."

Zack pulled her into the circle of his arms, gently kissing the top of her head. "I know. Giving out marriage proposals doesn't seem to be their strongest suit, either."

She laughed. "You're absolutely right."

"So, what's the answer to my eloquent proposal of

marriage, my dear Ms. Pincher."

Sighing, Sharlene pulled away. "I'm not quite a free woman yet. I will be as soon as I get the final decree. Can you wait for my answer? I'd like this to be as proper and above board as possible. Do you understand?"

He tilted her chin until her gaze met his. "I do." He kissed her softly on the brow. "And 'I do' is exactly what I'll be hoping you'll say to me someday soon."

Chapter Thirteen

“Thanks for the inside scoop on the job,” Connie Michaels said, filing her nails at the break table at the temp agency. “You sure you don’t want to work it for the full six weeks?”

Sharlene slowly sat down on the uncomfortable metal chair. “No, I think about three weeks will work out fine—the agency won’t think I’m flighty if I quit then because of my health, and hopefully I’ll make a good impression in the business office at the college. I have a full-time job lined up anyway.”

“A full-time position?” Connie’s dyed-copper eyebrows rose a notch. She put down her file. “Lucky you! Where is this job and who did you have to sleep with to land it?”

“Sleep with?” Sharlene thought a moment on how to phrase her reply delicately, but finally gave up. “The boss, of course.”

Connie scooted closer and lowered her voice. “You’re kidding... Or did some handsome suit-and-tie sweep you off your tiny, little pregnancy-swollen feet?”

Sharlene blushed thinking how Zack had literally swept her off her feet. “He’s handsome, but he’s a lowly shop owner and not an executive type. I’ve had enough of upwardly mobile executives after being

married to Jeffrey."

Connie chuckled. "From what you've told me of your ex, who needs to repeat past mistakes?"

Sharlene rolled her eyes dramatically. "Really." They both laughed.

"This new boss doesn't happen to be your gorgeous hunk of a landlord? The guy you invited over for dinner more than just a few times?"

Sharlene grinned. "You guessed it. He runs Richmond Electronics and Repair Service over on Hanley."

"I know the place. I've been there before when I couldn't get my cell phone to work. Silly me—I didn't know I was sticking it in the charger upside down. Thank goodness I know how to recharge my vibrator!"

Sharlene shook her head at the flame-haired comedienne across from her and chuckled. "Imagine that."

Connie leaned back in her chair and took up her nail file again. "I'm sure gonna miss you on the temp circuit, honey-child, but it sounds like you've got yourself lined up with a fine man with a steady job aching to be a daddy to that baby of yours. He's okay with the baby, right?"

"Yes, he doesn't even care who the father of my child is he says. He loves me—he loves my child. No problems."

"Hallelujah. You'd better hold onto him tight and don't let him get away." She winked. "This one's definitely a keeper."

"Don't I know it," Sharlene agreed wholeheartedly. "And I don't plan on ever letting him out of my sight."

* * * * *

Sharlene hummed a happy tune the next day as she drove to her new temp position in the business office of St. Genevieve's College. She felt so good she even continued humming after being caught in a minor traffic jam caused by the pothole patrol that forced her to circle the parking lot twice before finding an open parking spot close to the building. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was going to spoil her day.

At the top of the steps she stopped and caught her breath. "I need to get handicapped plates," she panted. "These steps will put me in a wheelchair soon enough."

"Here, let me help you with the door," a familiar female voice drawled behind her.

"Thank you. I appreciate—" Sharlene caught herself in mid sentence. "You again?"

"Why, hello. Ms. Pincher, is it?" Diana Markham asked, pulling the portal open. "We seem to have a tendency to meet near glass doors."

"Yes, we do." Sharlene frowned and stepped inside. "Thanks. If you'll excuse me now, I'm—"

"Off to work?" Diana arched an eyebrow and sauntered across the threshold beside her. "Someone told me you'd been filling in for various people."

"Yes, I'm a temp. But I have other, more important

full-time plans in the near future."

"Obviously. You look ready to burst."

Sharlene protectively caressed her belly, quickening her pace. "I'm not *that* far along. I meant that Zack and I are getting married."

"Married?" The older woman face paled. She appeared genuinely shocked.

"Yes, married. It's going to be a small affair so it probably won't make the society page."

"What a shame." Diana stood taller, composing her feline-like features into a bored expression. "I guess congratulations are in order. I'm just surprised Zack didn't mention it in class."

"Zack likes to keep his private life just that—*private*." Sharlene emphasized her last point with a sharp look.

Diana smirked. "Yes, he most certainly does."

"Have a good day, Professor," Sharlene said, ducking into the business office before she could hear what most certainly would have been a witty and urbane reply.

"Hi, Sharlene." Keith waved her over to where he leaned along the wall as she crossed through the waiting area. "You working here today?"

"Yes, for the next three weeks. What are you doing in here? I thought you were taking classes at UMSL."

"I am, but believe it or not St. Genevieve's has a couple of classes I want to check out in the fall."

She whistled low and long. "Good luck paying for them. This place isn't cheap. Did you apply for financial aid?"

"Yep, that's why I'm here. I hope by this time next year I won't be needing to take out any more loans to support my 'eternal student addiction'. I'm planning to be independently wealthy by that time, you know."

"You got a well-paying job lined up somewhere?" Sharlene tried hard not to sound incredulous. Keith the computer nerd didn't exactly strike her as *Fortune 500* material.

"Nah, I gotta little sideline that makes me a neat pile o' money. Zack didn't have the stomach for it, so he quit." Keith tilted his head and laughed. "Too bad. It was the easiest money we've ever made."

Sharlene frowned. "Easy money?"

He rolled his eyes heavenwards. "Yep, Zack's an idiot for giving it up. It was a lot of fun, too. We were truly providing a great service to womankind."

"Service to womankind?" Sharlene suddenly felt a cold shiver of dread race down her spine.

"Mr. Marshall?" a matronly woman called out. "Come this way, please."

Keith pointed both index fingers at her and winked before following the office worker to her cubicle. "My number's up. I'll see ya later."

"Right. Later."

Sharlene frowned again, stumped by what kind of moonlighting job Zack could have done in the past that Keith felt he was stupid to have given up. What kind of job could possibly be described as 'easy money' and 'fun' while simultaneously 'providing a service to womankind'? Keith's idea of fun tended to involve a lot of beer and loud music and women like

his friend Roxie from the strip club—

Strip club? Sharlene's hand flew to her heart. She gulped hard. Zack couldn't possibly have been involved in something like *that*, could he? No, it was impossible, unthinkable...

The rest of Sharlene's day flew by in blur. Her mind wandered farther and farther from her computer terminal and the typing she was supposed to be working on as she contemplated Keith's statement. And no matter how hard she tried she could not get past the thought of Zack strutting his stuff in a G-string in front of a large crowd of ogling women. The image was just plain...disturbing.

After all, didn't he say he loved her? Didn't he propose marriage to her? It hurt just thinking of all the women who could have propositioned Zack in the course of his *employment*.

The image of Zack gyrating his hips fixated in her mind at that moment, his cute rear end rising and falling in large, circular motions, around and around and back and forth and back and forth and back and —

"Ms. Pincher? Are you all right?"

Sharlene jumped. "I'm fine," she covered, smiling up at her supervisor, Mrs. Lowry. "It's just a little warm in here. Hormones, you know."

"Oh," the conservatively dressed, older woman acknowledged with a lift of a silver-white eyebrow. "Be careful you don't fall out of your chair." She returned her attention to the printout in her hand and walked back to her desk.

Sharlene hadn't realized she'd been swaying back and forth so noticeably. Burying herself in her work, she did her best to ignore the curious looks of her fellow officemates. They could chalk up her odd behavior to her being preoccupied with her baby.

Sharlene's heart plummeted. The baby. Could a former striptease artist make a good father to her baby?

What was she thinking? Of course he could! Why, her past occupations hadn't been particularly stellar by any stretch of the word. Waitress. Hotel maid. Cashier. Bank teller. Secretary. None of them particularly outstanding. The best you could say about them was that they all were honest, straightforward types of jobs that didn't involve the shaking of your scantily clothed body parts in front of a bunch of morally depraved people's noses —

She crumpled a sheet of scrap paper in her hand into a tight wad. Why, the nerve of him! To think Zack had been passing himself off all this time as a good Catholic boy who did whatever his parents told him to do, while unbeknown to the polite world at large he was a closet exhibitionist, a man of questionable morals.

A man who had just proposed marriage to her!

Suddenly she remembered reading somewhere how the majority of exotic dancers were also prostitutes on the side. Male dancers wouldn't do that sort of thing as well for an extra buck or two, would they? Keith did mention something about becoming independently wealthy and providing *service* to

womankind —

Oh, no... She needed to call Liza right away and have herself tested for who-knows-what sorts of diseases. Who knows how many women Zack had slept with? He could have slept with the entire female population of St. Louis, and she'd been none the wiser. What had she told Doctor Markham earlier about how Zack liked to keep his private life private? And how did the good doctor respond?

He certainly does.

Sharlene's eyes bulged. Her stomach twisted, rolled over, then did a complete somersault. She was going to be sick all over the keyboard.

Diana Markham knows! She's known all along. No wonder she's been after Zack like a bear with its hand in a beehive. She's tasted his honey and now she wants more, more, more...

Sharlene slammed down the computer mouse. She damn well wasn't going to give up her man to that overdressed bitch without a fight!

"Your mouse—it's broken," an obscenely thin woman at the desk opposite her said quietly, raising a curious eyebrow. "You want me to go to the storeroom and get you another one?"

"What?"

Sharlene looked down at the cracked piece of plastic dangling by a lone wire to its cord and blushed. She cleared her throat and straightened herself up in her chair with as much dignity as she could muster. "Yes, thank you very much."

She watched as the woman hurried towards the

back of the office, stopping to whisper something to the supervisor before heading to the storeroom. Now she was in trouble. Would the "hormone defense" work this time?

"Ms. Pincher, can I see you in my office?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Sharlene stood, walking towards her supervisor with all the enthusiasm of a prisoner on her way to the gallows.

* * * * *

"Hello there, good-looking." Zack grinned, looking up from the GPS device case where he was straightening out the display models. "It's only four-thirty. I thought you said you were working until five."

"I was—but my day was unexpectedly cut short." Sharlene sat down on the stool in front of the case and slumped across the glass counter. "That bookkeeping job still open? You don't discriminate against hormonal pregnant women, do you?"

"Only in their favor." Zack slid around the counter and put an arm around her, tenderly kissing her on the cheek. "What happened at the business office today?"

Sharlene bit her lip. Her sad puppy-dog eyes said it all. "I broke a computer mouse. They told me to go on home and don't bother to come back tomorrow if I can't behave myself. I told them I wasn't too sure I could, so I let Connie have the job."

He patted her head and pulled her close. "I'm glad you gave the job to your friend. You don't need the added stress of commuting every day."

"Tell me about it. Nope, it's time this baby machine stayed put and took it easy." She looked up into his adoring eyes and smiled. "Guess what. I also ran into your good friend and mine, Diana Markham."

A shiver of revulsion tingled down Zack's spine. "Don't remind me about her. I have just three more classes until I'm done with her course for good."

"I have a feeling she'll leave you alone from now on," Sharlene lightly trailed a fingertip across his chest. "I told her we're engaged. That should pour some cold water over her libido."

Zack sighed. Diana would take it as a challenge.

"I bet you're glad I broke that darn computer mouse, aren't you?" Sharlene pulled his arms around her tighter. "You'd rather have me stay put where you can keep your eye on me."

"I have to admit it, but I do like the idea of you working near me."

She grinned. "So you can reach out and grab a little lovin' whenever you need a pick-me-up?"

His pulse quickened. "Only after Liza gives you the 'all clear'. Until then, I'll just have to settle for your sweet kisses."

"And me for yours," she teased, nibbling his fingers.

It was too tempting... Zack took a big step backwards, drawing in a deep breath. "Uh, tell me more about your day. What's so bad about a broken

mouse?"

"Nothing, if it's the mousetrap variety. If it belongs to the business department of St. Genevieve's College, though, it's a capital offense."

He shook his head, dumbfounded. "The idiot things were meant to self-destruct after a certain amount of time. Planned obsolescence at its finest. How could they get so bent out of shape over one little broken computer mouse?"

Sharlene slowly rested an arm on the counter. "You don't understand. It didn't just break—I *intentionally* broke it. I felt like throwing the darn thing at somebody."

Zack frowned. "You wanted to throw a computer mouse at somebody?"

"Yes, you." She exhaled loudly and let her shoulders drooped. "I was so mad at you, I got a bit carried away."

"So you broke a mouse—a mouse that belonged to the college?"

"Yes."

It just didn't make any sense. He scratched his head in confusion. "Why are you so mad at me?"

She sighed. "Don't worry. I'm not mad anymore. I calmed down on the drive home. I've come to grips with your former profession."

Now she really wasn't make any sense. "My former profession?"

"It is a free country, after all, and freedom of speech can be expressed in a multitude of ways..." She shrugged her shoulders matter-of-factly. "Of

course, we'll have to use condoms from now on."

Zack's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"You do have some stashed around here somewhere, don't you?"

What would Sister Mary Agnes think? Zack thought. How on earth had they gotten from breaking computer equipment to birth control methods? "No, I don't, actually."

"Don't worry. I'll buy some. I don't care about people in the drugstore staring at me. I've gotten my fair share of them lately."

Zack gulped. "Condoms?"

"No, stares." Sharlene sat straighter, observing him closely out of the corner of her eye. "Beats me how you ever did it, Zack. You act like such a shy guy."

And dense, too. What the hell is she going on about?

"I just can't imagine you ever sharing your body so...so freely like that. And for money, too."

Zack felt his heart plummeting through his chest and splatter on the floor. *Oh, Lord! She knows! What can I say? What can I do?* Sharlene knew all about him and his donations to the sperm bank.

But did she know that it was *his* baby she was carrying? He'd been meaning to tell her, he was going to tell her, but it just never seemed to be the right moment...

"It must have been quite a spectacle, you shaking your booty to and fro on a catwalk. I mean, how come you never did a lap dance for me?"

Lap dance? Zack took a step backward. She didn't even mention the sperm bank. "Lap dancing?" he

cried. "What are you talking about?"

"Yours and Keith's moonlighting opportunity to make a 'pile o' money', of course." Sharlene shifted her weight uneasily under his stare. "Isn't that how Keith met Roxie?"

Zack shook his head. "He met Roxie at the Laundromat. Where did you think he met her?"

"At a strip joint. I figured you three had a lot in common. You guys did 'Ladies' Night' and she handled the rest of the week."

A wave of relief washed over him. Sharlene didn't know about the sperm—the other thing. Somehow she had come up with the crazy notion that he was some kind of exotic dancer. Who the hell could have misled her so?

"Where did you get the idea Keith and I were dancers?" he asked, replacing his arm around her shoulders.

She scrunched up her nose in thought. "Well, I ran into Keith at the business office earlier today, and he told about that you had chickened out on the biggest money-making opportunity of a lifetime. From some of the hints he dropped, I figured you two had done a little *dancing* at one time."

Some hints! Keith was a complete imbecile.

"What did Keith say to you?"

"I don't recall exactly. Something about you guys having a lot of fun and being of service to womankind. He didn't make a whole lot of sense, the more I think about it. I don't know how I came up with the idea you two were dancers. Blame it on my

hormones.”

Zack smiled. “No, your hormones are fine. And I should thank you for the vote of confidence. I never thought I was good-looking enough to parade my flesh in front of a bunch of drunken, drooling women, but obviously you do.”

“Of course, I do,” Sharlene murmured, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. “Now tell me. What kind of job *did* you turn down?”

Zack took a deep breath. The store was empty. Now was as good as any to confess what lay heavy on his heart.

“You see, Sharlene, it’s like this. I needed some money for books and things last semester, and Keith read this ad about how to make money by—”

Reality rudely interrupted Zack’s declaration of guilt in the guise of a navy three-piece suit standing at the door.

“Excuse me,” the businessman with a large briefcase bellowed upon entering the store, “but there seems to be something seriously wrong with my laptop which you worked on only last week. Can you take another look at it?”

Zack sighed. “Sure, no problem.” He reluctantly disengaged his arm from Sharlene’s shoulders and took his place of authority behind the cash register. “Bring your laptop over here, sir, and let’s see what the trouble is.”

Sharlene gave Zack a quiet wave, tiptoeing silently toward the elevator. He returned her smile with a clenched-jaw grin, deftly ignoring the ranting of the

irate customer standing before him.

Tonight he'd tell her. Tonight over dinner at his place. After all, he had promised her a meal to make up for all the ones she had shared with him.

It was time to come clean with the woman he loved. She had been honest with him about her divorce and the baby's paternity. He could do the same. Zack vowed there would be no more secrets between them.

Chapter Fourteen

Sharlene flopped down on the sofa and massaged her aching feet. How odd. Uncle Bart had personally left a message on her answering machine. He had left a message telling her to call him at home 'ASAP'. Would kind of scheme could the old geezer be up to now? There was only one way to find out.

"Pincher residence," the housekeeper answered.

"Hi, Gloria. This is Sharlene. I got a message from Uncle Bart saying—"

"One moment, please."

"Hello, Sharlene?" Edwina's formal tone was unmistakable. "Your uncle is on the other line at the moment, but he wanted me to inform you that he requests your presence at dinner tonight, say, around sevenish."

A surprise dinner party? That wasn't completely out of character for the old coot, particularly when he had something on his mind. Sharlene realized that Bartholomew Q. Pincher had been raised in an era where telephone conversations were not considered the proper channel for conducting important business negotiations.

"That's fine with me," she replied. "Is it okay if I bring along a companion?"

A hesitation, then, "No, dear. I don't think so. He very much wants to talk to the two of you alone."

The two of you? Sharlene's eyebrows shot up in astonishment. That could mean only one thing—Uncle Bart had called Jeffrey as well. Edwina did sound unusually nervous just now, the more Sharlene thought about it... Something big was going on, something very important. She had to find out what it was.

"All right. I'll see you all at seven tonight."

"Good. 'Bye, dear."

Sharlene hung up the phone in shock. Her aunt-in-law had called her *dear* twice in one conversation. In one year! She hurried into the bathroom to make herself ready.

At six-fifteen, Zack's usual *ratta-tat-tat* at the front door broke the silence.

"Sharlene?" Zack called out from the living room. "Where are you?"

"In the bedroom. Listen, I—"

Peeking around the slightly ajar door, Zack admired how sexy Sharlene looked standing there in a ivory-colored slip edged in delicate lace, damp tendrils from her hairdo clinging like vines to the lines of her long, luscious neck.

"You look fantastic." He sat down on the edge of the bed, grinning broadly like a kid about to receive free candy. "Here let me help you out of that—"

She playfully slapped his hands away. "I appreciate the thought, but I'm getting *dressed*, not undressed."

"For me? All I was going to do was order us a pizza from Imo's and —"

"No, silly," she said, giggling. "I've received a royal summons from King Bart himself. I've got to drive on over to the castle in this crazy rush hour traffic and find out what's up over free eats." She pulled a somber-looking, navy tent dress off its hanger and scrunched it up, sticking it over her head. "I'm sorry, but you weren't invited. I did ask."

Zack slumped. There went his chance to explain everything over dinner. "Family emergency?"

Sharlene bit a nail and flashed him an uneasy glance. "Could be. Aunt Edwina didn't say so exactly, but she did call me *dear*. Twice."

He winced. "I'm sorry. From what I gather from meeting your aunt at the fund-raiser, if she even gives you the time of day you need to stand up and take notice. Do you think it's something serious?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I think." She slid her feet into a pair of navy flats and began to hurriedly apply powder to her nose. "Don't worry. I should be back in a couple of hours. Bart and Edwina aren't known for their animated dinner conversations, particularly around Jeffrey and me, so it shouldn't take long."

"Jeffrey?"

Sharlene furrowed her brow. "Uh, yeah, he's been invited as well." She put down her compact and picked up her brush, furiously brushing her hair. "Maybe Elaine is in town? That's the last time I remember receiving such a personal invite to the palace."

"Elaine the nun?"

"That's the one. Of course she rarely makes a visit, unless it's..."

Sharlene dropped her brush. Her hand covered her open mouth. Zack bent down to retrieve the brush and continued brushing her silky blonde hair with gentle, even strokes.

"There's probably nothing wrong," he said in his most comforting voice. "Just go and have a good time and eat someone else's cooking for a change. Edwina doesn't do the cooking, does she?"

Sharlene chuckled softly, leaning back into his strong arms. "Mercifully, no. I suppose you're right. No use jumping to false conclusions from what the few clues I've obtain in a phone conversation. Just look at what kind of outlandish conclusions I came up with today after Keith shared that interesting bit of information about your moonlighting activities with me."

Zack could felt beads of tense sweat forming on the back of his neck. He realized how lucky he was that Keith hadn't totally spilled the beans.

"Yeah, me a Chippendales dancer!" Zack joked. "No one in their right mind would hire a guy like me to strip in front of a bunch of horny, middle-aged women."

"I wouldn't say that," Sharlene purred, stroking his thigh with the back of her hand. "I'd gladly pay for your *services*, sir."

"And I'd gladly give you a discount, Madame." He lightly nibbled at her earlobes. "Call it a rush hour

special."

"A special, huh? What all is on the special?"

Zack turned her around to face him and lowered his mouth against hers, reveling in her charms while his hands happily roved over her curves. After a moment, Sharlene gently pushed him away.

"I have to be leaving now if I'm going to make it there in time." She slowly backed away.

He reluctantly let her go. "Yeah, I know. Drive safely, please."

Sharlene quickly smoothed her skirt and grabbed her purse from the changing table. "I *always* drive safely. It's the other nuts out there who don't use their turn signals who don't know how to drive."

He followed her to the front door. "I agree. That's why I worry about you."

She kissed him on the cheek and smiled. "You know, you didn't get around to telling me what this get-rich-quick scheme of yours and Keith's was. What was it?"

Zack cleared his throat, his pulse racing. "Um, how about I'll tell you later tonight? Say around ten?"

"Fine. It's a date. I'll see you then, Mr. Chippendales." Sharlene winked as she slipped out the door. "Costume is optional."

* * * * *

Sharlene tapped her fingers against the steering wheel, waiting for the red light to change. At the rate she was going, it would be next Tuesday before she

arrived at Bart and Edwina's. To deafen the silence and her worrisome thoughts, she turned on the radio to a classic rock station and cranked up the volume.

"Nothing like a little noise to make you forget your worries, eh, Junior?" she said, patting the top of her belly. Junior rewarded her with a swift kick in the side. She laughed. "Oh, so you *are* in there! I wasn't too sure the other day. You could have been indigestion or gas, but you're definitely playing soccer in there, aren't you?"

The light turned green at last. Sharlene smiled. Whatever Uncle Bart wanted to talk to her and Jeffrey about couldn't dampen her upbeat mood one tiny bit. At this moment, she considered herself to be the happiest pregnant woman ever to waddle across the face of the earth.

Jeffrey's blue BMW sat parked next to Edwina's golden Jag in the semi-circle in front of the house. Sharlene proudly parked her red Escort behind Bart's black Mercedes and headed toward the side door just off the kitchen.

"Hello? Are you here, Gloria?" Sharlene quietly entered the unusually still house. It must be a catered affair. Exiting the kitchen, she headed toward the living room where Uncle Bart and the others were most likely drinking cocktails. No one there, either.

"That's odd." She scratched her head. "Uncle Bart? Aunt Edwina? Jeffrey?"

Not a sound—not even a TV playing. The grandfather clock in the hallway ticked ominously as she walked into the conservatory and then toward the

back veranda. From the corner of the French doors, she finally spotted her hosts.

"Taking in some fresh air?" she asked politely, stepping into the garden.

"You're here," Edwina said flatly, signaling to Gloria to begin serving. "Sit down, please."

"Yes, I'm starving," Jeffrey replied, a nervous tic playing at the corner of his fleshy lips. "Nothing like dining *al fresco* to increase the appetite, eh, Uncle Bart?"

The old gentleman chose to ignore the comment and stood slowly to offer Sharlene a seat at the glass and wrought iron table. "You sit beside me, Sharlene. This is much more intimate than setting at the 'board room' table inside, don't you think?"

Sharlene carefully watched her uncle-in-law out of the corner of her eye as she took her seat. Something was definitely up. She beamed a winsome smile at him and played along with the charade. "Yes, it's a lovely evening to dine outside. And who really likes having to play shuffle board in order to pass food dishes around the table?"

Jeffrey chuckled. "Exactly." He licked his lips and cleared his throat. "Now, Uncle Bart, what you said earlier about —"

"Fish?" Edwina interrupted.

Jeffrey acted sufficiently rebuffed. "Uh, no thanks. I'll take the prime rib. I'm a meat and potatoes man myself."

"Fish?" Edwina asked Sharlene.

"Yes, please." Salmon with lemon pepper sauce

was one of Gloria's better entrees.

They ate in relative silence for several minutes. As if on cue, Edwina suddenly remembered her hostess duties and struck up a conversation concerning the humble decor of Sharlene's apartment.

"The baby can't possibly sleep in your room—it's just not *civilized*," Edwina said in an unusually sympathetic tone. "You need to have a room for the baby to sleep in and a play room and a nice place for him or her to study when he or she starts school."

Sharlene shook her head. "I agree with you. Another room would be wonderful, but I'm afraid there isn't enough space in the apartment to subdivide it any further than the three living areas it has now."

"And you need appropriate furniture, too," Edwina continued. "Not that cheaply made stuff you get in the discount department stores."

Sharlene sighed. Did anyone in this family ever listen to what she was saying? "There's no need for me to buy any more furniture since I don't have any more space."

"Who said anything about buying? We have more than enough stuff in storage up in the attic. Don't we, Bart?"

"Yes, yes, we do."

The financier's expression was distant, but not the ordinary distant look that spoke volumes about how important a business man he was and how unimportant your interruption was to him. No, this distant look had a more regretful shade about it

Sharlene thought. It was hard for her to imagine Uncle Bart feeling regretful about anything.

"It's sweet of you two to offer," she said kindly, "but I have a very nice nursery set already. Like I told you before there's no room in my apartment for anything more."

Bart leaned forward in his seat and lowered his voice. "Sharlene, what would you say to living here?"

Her jaw practically hit the table surface. It was several moments before she could speak. "Live here? With you and Aunt Edwina?"

"Yes, with Edwina and me — and Jeffrey."

Jeffrey dropped his fork in mid-bite. "What?"

"Well, Jeffrey, since you've gotten yourself into such a financial pickle living with that adult movie actress, it only makes sense," Edwina said, patting his hand.

"Porn star?" Sharlene looked daggers at her former husband. "I thought you said your bimbo modeled for a living."

"She does. She models lingerie when she isn't shooting movies. She's won several awards for her work."

"But not the kind you can display on your mantelpiece and discuss in polite society," Sharlene muttered.

Edwina raised a perfectly-plucked eyebrow. "You mean she didn't win an Oscar, Jeffrey? I thought you told me adult movie stars won prestigious film awards."

Jeffrey blushed. "Uh, that's not quite what I said,

Aunt Edwina. I said they have their own version of the Oscars."

Sharlene shook her head in disgust. "Amazing. Your taste in women goes from Pollyanna to Traci Lords practically overnight."

Jeffrey hunkered down in his seat. A full-blown pout bloomed on his face. "I wanted something different. I was tired of playing the 'baby machine' to please you all. Aren't I entitled to a little fun now and then?"

"But not at the expense of your family and its reputation," Bart lectured. "It's time you and Sharlene made up and got back together so this child can have a real home."

Tiny prickles of electricity danced along Sharlene's spine. Junior kicked her hard, right under her salmon dinner. "So, that's what this little get-together was all about," she began slowly, the light dawning in her brain. "You want Jeffrey and me not to go through with the divorce. You want us to call it off."

Edwina smiled, not a deadly, eat-you-alive smile, but a smile so unlike her it actually appeared to reflect genuine concern. "Yes, dear, that's it exactly. From what Jeffrey has told us, the paperwork is still with the judge and hasn't been finalized. It's easy enough to stop at this point."

"But why? We haven't lived together in over four months. We've both been seeing other people. We both have—"

Bart raised his hand and cut her off mid-sentence. "Because it is what is best for the baby and our family

as a whole. Father Porzenski advised me so just this past week and so did your cousin Elaine."

"You've gotten awfully religious in your later years, Uncle Bart," Jeffrey snorted. "I was raised a devout nothing by my parents, and I'm sticking to it. And Shar — what were you before we met?"

She shrugged, chagrined. "A backsliding Methodist. But that's immaterial at this point. You actually talked to Elaine? You two seldom speak to her unless she's coming to town for a... for a..."

"A death in the family?" Edwina volunteered. "Yes, that's true. But we're also allowed to contact her during a family emergency like this."

Jeffrey's dark eyebrows knitted together in thought. "Emergency? Our impending divorce is an emergency?"

"Yes, it is along with your uncle's recent diagnosis —"

"Edwina!" Bart roared, abruptly cutting off his wife. That's enough said on the matter."

The cool, distant exterior Sharlene knew so well immediately descended over the white-haired gentleman like a theatre curtain at the end of an act. Bart stood up and threw down his linen napkin. "If you all will excuse me, I have a few things I need to take care of in my study."

Sharlene watched with curiosity as Bart shuffled slowly towards the French doors and into the house. His posture seemed stooped, his characteristic energy and determination drained from him, bled away by some unknown force.

"Aunt Edwina, do tell us what's really going on here. What did the doctors say was wrong with Uncle Bart?" She took the older woman's hand in hers and gently squeezed. "Please?"

The dragon lady aged instantly before their eyes. "He's got stomach cancer," she whispered, her voice hoarse with emotion. "It's fairly well advanced, and at his age the cure can be worse than the cause. He doesn't want anyone to know, to pity him. *Nobody* else is to know. You understand?"

Tears welled in Sharlene's eyes. "Yes, I understand."

"This can't be true," Jeffrey wailed. He rose from his seat and came over to cradle his aunt in his arms. "You and Bart were there for me after my parents' accident, taking me in and helping me finish school and sending me off to college. You've been like parents to me. If there's anything I can do to help..."

Edwina patted his shoulder and gestured towards the house. "There is."

Jeffrey turned and looked imploringly into Sharlene's eyes. "Shar?"

Sharlene froze. She was trapped. Trapped by her sense of loyalty and by her need to belong to a family. Edwina and Bart had always treated her fairly, and, she had to admit it to herself, even kindly at times. They weren't overly demonstrative in the affection department, but they meant well. Look at how generous Uncle Bart had been to her baby—the child isn't even his blood kin. Could she live with herself if she deserted Bart when he really needed her?

When at last Sharlene spoke, her voice was not her own. "Give me a little time to go collect my things."

Chapter Fifteen

Sharlene trudged from her car to the back door to the elevator to her apartment without once looking up, her heart sinking like a lead balloon in her chest. She was completely unprepared for what she discovered upon entering her living room.

"What on earth are you *doing*?"

Zack jumped three feet into the air, boxers first, from where he had been bending over to adjust the balance on her small stereo. He grabbed his jeans from the couch to cover his lower anatomy, his shirt falling open, exposing the well-defined muscles of his bare chest.

"I-I was practicing a 'dance number' for you—to prove I could have never been a male stripper." He stood taller and flashed her a sexy grin. "You wanna see it?"

"Not tonight, but thanks." She headed toward the bathroom to gather what she'd needed for staying at Bart and Edwina's place. She had promised them she wouldn't be long in returning.

Zack hopped into his pants and followed her into the bedroom, a dark cloud of fear obscuring his view. She was taking clothes from her dresser.

"What are you doing?"

Sharlene's hand froze on the closet door. She had

thought it all through on the drive home, how she was going to break the news to him without unduly injuring his delicate male feelings, without seeming to be a complete and utter hypocrite, a liar, a con-artist... There was only one way – a clean break.

“I’m going to go live at my aunt and uncle’s place. Jeffrey and I are back together.”

Zack plopped down hard on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes. He could barely breathe. His stomach felt like he had left it at the bottom of the first hill on a roller coaster. His heart was going to burst from the sheer agony of beating.

“What? I mean, why?” he managed at last. You two have been living apart all this time, and I thought what we had was...special.”

It is – it is! she wanted to shout. She wanted to rush into his arms and never let go, but she stood fast and bit her lip instead.

“I—I can’t explain it,” Sharlene stammered. “I—I have to do what’s best. Jeffrey and I—”

Zack stood, looking her square in the face. “*I’m* what’s best for the baby! And I can prove it, too. Remember how you told me how not knowing who was the father was driving you crazy? I can tell you now that I’m—”

“No, please, stop,” she whispered, putting a finger to his mouth. “Don’t say any more. My mind’s made up. I’ll come for the rest of my things later. If you like, you can keep the rest of the rent I gave you and find another tenant as soon as my furniture is moved out. I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

"*Inconvenience me?*" Zack clenched his jaw tightly, his face turning as red as his favorite Cardinal's baseball cap. He began to wildly pace the small room. "Hell, what a nice way of putting it. One day you say you'll gladly be my wife, and the next you say you're worrying about *inconveniencing* me?"

"I don't know what else to call it—"

"I'd call it murder."

"M—murder?" Her eyes widened in fear.

Zack dropped to his knees, pulling her hand close to his heart. "You're killing me. Killing me inside. Tell me this is a dream—a nightmare—and we'll both wake up and laugh about it in the morning. Please?"

Sharlene forced herself turn away from his begging eyes, his soulful brown eyes glistening with tears. How could she live with herself for dumping the man she loved for the family she felt obligated to? But she had made a promise.

"I-I've got to go." She took a deep breath and bravely carried on. "It's necessary I go now. But it won't be for long. I'll be back."

He swallowed hard. "Promise?"

"Promise."

Zack stood and slowly backed away. "I'll let you pack then."

Sharlene stumbled to the closet to fish out her suitcase. She found it difficult to pack with her eyes clouded by a river of unshed tears.

* * * * *

"Beats me what's going on over there." Liza leaned over the counter, lowering her voice so only Zack could hear.

"You're her best friend and she won't even confide in you?" His shoulders sagged. "I don't stand a chance of knowing what's happening then."

Liza maternally patted his hand. "There, there. Now, don't get all moody on me. I've called several times, but so far Shar hasn't returned any of my messages. Something big is up—I can sense it—but I don't know what. Anyway, she has an appointment scheduled for later this week with me, so I should be able to trap her in my office and get the scoop. Can you hold out a little while longer?"

"I'll try." Zack sighed and flashed her a weak smile. "Thanks for everything, Liza."

"Don't go thanking me yet. She may be a 'no-show' for her appointment. And the Dragon Lady's staff may keep screening her calls, but don't you worry. I'll keep trying."

"You've got a bad feeling about this, too, don't you?"

She swallowed hard. "Yeah, I do."

Zack felt his pulse throbbing at his temples. He slowly rubbed his forehead. "Sharlene said it was 'necessary' for her to live with her in-laws and Jeffrey and that it wouldn't be for long. What do you make of it?"

Liza shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe they've all joined some kind of weird cult or something?"

"Good Lord, no!" Zack dashed to the phone.

"We've got to call the FBI or at least the police —"

"Hold it right there, cowboy," Liza cautioned, following him behind the counter. "We don't want the cops pulling a Waco siege on the Pincher estate. That's your girlfriend in there. Let's don't give ourselves a heart attack. Let's keep our cool."

He slowly put down the receiver and took several deep breaths. "All right. I'm chilling." He forced his lips into a frozen smile. "See?"

"Good boy." She grinned, crossing her arms tightly around her middle. "I'm not in the mood to do CPR on you, even if you do have the sexiest bod this side of the Mississippi."

"Say what?"

She blushed, turning away from his stare. "Nuthin'."

Zack narrowed his eyes. "You know something else about Sharlene, something you're not telling me. Spill it."

Liza slowly raised her hands. "No, I swear I don't know anything else. Nothing definite, that is."

"What do you mean? You have a hunch?"

"You could say that." Liza swiftly scanned the store for eavesdroppers. "I'm of the opinion," she said in low, measured tones, "that Sharlene's absence probably has something to do with some business dealings of her uncle's, something that has to be kept quiet or else the deal falls through."

"A deal?"

"Bartholomew Pincher didn't get to the top of the business world without using people and situations

to his advantage in the past. Eventually, we might figure out what's going on, but for now —"

"He'll make sure no one knows, right?" Zack slumped against the wall and hung his head in defeat.

She pointed both her index fingers at him. "Bingo." She turned toward the front door. "I hate to leave you like this, but I've gotta go now. Don't worry so much. We'll work this out. Shar will be home before you know it."

Zack let out a long held sigh. "Yeah, but no thanks to me."

"Stop dissin' on yourself," Liza commanded in her firmest physician's voice. "You're a clever guy, Zack Richmond. I bet you get all A's this term."

He frowned. There was still that unfinished *project* in Diana Markham's class. "Don't I wish."

Liza winked. "Think positive. I always do. See you later."

Zack saluted her good-bye, then crumpled onto a stool beside the counter. A few moments later, a whistling Keith sauntered into the store.

"Liza Allen is one mighty fine-looking chick. Don't you think, bro?"

Zack ground his teeth. How Keith could think of picking up women at time like this?

"Yeah, Liza's not bad looking, but it's not what you think. She was helping me find out what's happening with Sharlene."

"I know she is. I just wish she'd help me out sometime." He leaned against the counter top and sighed. "I'd love to play doctors and nurses with her."

Of course, I'd have to play the nurse, wouldn't I? I bet she could kiss my boo-boos and make them *all* better."

Zack was too worried to listen to anymore of Keith's nonsense. He hopped off the stool and headed to the office in order to start in on the towering paperwork pile on his desk. "Frizzhead, your gutter mind never ceases to amaze me."

Keith sauntered behind him. "Still, you gotta admit it's an intriguing fantasy. But she's never even looked twice at me. Who am I to think someone as smart and attractive as Liza Allen, MD, would ever pay the least bit of attention to me, a poor homeboy from the wrong side of the tracks."

Keith's moony-eyed expression jerked Zack out of his own misery. Keith had completely ignored the Frizzhead comment, too. The boy had it bad. It might actually be love this time and not lust. Zack suddenly felt an overwhelming obligation to bring the lovesick fool back down to earth.

"Liza's not your type," he said gently. "She's a little too old for you, isn't she?"

"She's only thirty-two. She likes messing around on her computer at home, Sharlene told me. She enjoys nightclubbing. And she's beautiful."

Keith's lovelorn look was growing more ingrained by the second. Zack hated saying what he had to next, but it had to be said. "Keith, Liza has a boyfriend already. A live-in boyfriend. She wears an engagement ring."

"Yeah, I know." He leaned heavily against the door

jam. "The asshole wears a three-piece suit and is in pharmaceutical sales. Maybe I should switch majors?"

Zack shook his head and sat down at the desk. "Be real. That won't help and you'd be miserable taking business courses. Liza has got to like you for yourself or else it won't work. Live in the real world, bro."

Keith shrugged. "I know. It's hopeless. She find out anything about Sharlene?"

"No, not yet."

"You worried about the baby?"

"Yeah, I am. Ever since I realized I was —"

Zack stopped himself. No use spreading rumor about what was only speculation on his part. He had convinced himself that it wasn't certain that Donor 342 was the real daddy, not that it really mattered. He loved Sharlene no matter who the father of her child was.

"Realized what?" Keith sat down in the chair opposite and put his feet up on the front of the desk. "Realized you're a complete and utter loser?"

Loser? Zack fumed silently. He didn't think of himself as any more of a loser than the idiot sitting across from him.

"What makes you say I'm a loser?" he growled.

"You haven't exactly gotten dressed in your caped crime-fighter outfit and raced on over there to kidnap Sharlene out of the evil clutches of her rich uncle, now have you?"

Zack's eyes widened. He sat up taller. "Yes, why didn't I think of it. We could kidnap her..."

"No, that's not what I meant." Keith looked

decidedly uncomfortable. "All right, it was. But no chloroforming her or the help. We keep this a clean operation."

"Of course." Zack's gaze transfixed on his foster brother's face, the machinations of how to reunite himself and Sharlene tumbling through his mind.

"Earth to Zack," Keith said, waving a hand in front of his face a few seconds later. "Snap out of it, man. You're scaring me."

Zack blinked and returned to the present. "Do we still have some of those infrared binoculars for hunting that we couldn't sell at Christmas?"

"Now you're talking." Keith grinned. "We still got them. I have a pair in my room. They're great for tracking Bambis of the two-legged variety, I've discovered, too."

"Perfect." Zack leaned back in his chair and sighed. "You know, I feel much better now I've decided to take action to resolve the situation."

Keith raised an eyebrow. "You got a plan already? You wanna let me in on the action?"

"It might be dangerous. If we get caught they could call the cops on us."

"Good. Then I can use my one phone call to call the sexy Doctor Allen to come bail me out."

Zack chuckled. "That's certainly one way of grabbing her attention. But I don't think you'd be able to keep her enthralled for long. You simply can't afford her."

Keith shook his head. "You mean with big bank accounts and foreign cars? No problem. Sharlene told

me Liza isn't in medicine for the money—she genuinely enjoys caring for people. And who needs more looking after than I do?"

Zack made note of Keith's untied shoelaces, his rumpled, food-splattered shirt and his unkempt hair. Keith definitely needed looking after if anyone ever did. He was the unabashed stray puppy of the singles' world.

"You'll get no argument about that from me, Frizzy." Zack stood. "Let's close the store early so we can get ready for 'Operation Rescue'."

* * * * *

Liza hung up the phone and swallowed hard. Something was not right, not right at all. Sharlene hadn't returned her calls all week, and now Joel was missing. He always came home by six or called or paged her to let her know he wasn't going to be home by then and his office hadn't seen him all day. Joel couldn't still be out of town on a sales call with his new assistant, could he? Why did he ever hire that woman? Couldn't the stupid bitch handle business better than that?

Liza shuddered as she sat down on the edge of her soft white leather couch. She pulled the soft knit throw around her shoulders and gingerly sipped at her herbal tea. Sharlene's neighbor Keith Marshall was starting to look better at every turn. Not as a long-term serious relationship, mind you, but maybe as a way to exact a bit of revenge against Joel's

inattention as of late... Two could play this game— wheedling out of a commitment.

The phone's incessant ringing startled her out of her reverie.

"Liza?" came a familiar voice softly. "It's me, Sharlene."

"Girlfriend, where have you been?" Liza exclaimed. She put her cup down and grabbed a notepad and pencil. "Zack and I have been out of our minds with worry."

"I just wanted to let you know that I did get your messages, and I'm okay." Sharlene's voice was an even monotone, betraying little emotion.

"Thank God. What's your number there? Give me a number where we can reach you directly so I don't have to go through all the 'proper channels' and risk you not getting our communications."

"I don't know the phone number of this cell phone I'm using. Edwina only let me use it since I told her I had to cancel my appointment with you for later this week. I'm not sure of the phone number at the beach house. I don't know any Spanish, so I can't make out anything in the phone book, either."

"Spanish?" Liza squealed. "*Where* are you?"

"Some place south of the border. We took a private jet to get here for Uncle Bart's... treatments."

Now it was beginning to make some sense. "I take it they're not beauty treatments we're talking about. He's chosen the alternative medicine route to treat cancer, hasn't he?"

"Bingo. You don't know how right you are,"

Sharlene replied in a falsely cheerful manner. "My Aunt Edwina just sat down here beside me and wants to use the phone. I have to go."

"All right, but let us know when you're going to be back in the country. I don't want you missing any more appointments. Flying sometimes causes pregnant women to go into early labor. Your aunt and uncle have to consider your health as well."

"They have. I've seen a doctor—if you can call him that—since I've been here. But don't worry—I declined the acupuncture needles and the voodoo beads." A muffled sound, then, "I've gotta go now, Liza. Tell everyone there I'm okay. 'Bye."

Click.

"Shar? You still there?" Liza sighed and put down the phone. It was a relief to know her friend was well and able to get in touch with her. She immediately dialed Zack's number. No answer. She left a quick answering machine message and then decided it was time she took a closer look at Joel's desk calendar. If he wasn't on a sales call tonight, he was going to have hell to pay.

* * * * *

Zack bent low behind the bush, scanning the windows of the Pincher mansion for the tenth time. Not a single light to be seen. Fortunate for them there were no wandering packs of killer guard dogs, either.

"I don't think they're home," Keith whispered loudly beside him.

"Brilliant deduction, Watson," Zack quipped, lowering his binoculars. "Keep it down. They could return at any minute, so let's just stay quiet here and wait for them."

"We've been waiting for quite a while. I think they are *gone* gone, if you know what I mean."

Zack frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"No cars."

Zack raised the lenses to his face once more. "Yes, but they have a garage in the back. Rich people don't park on the street much, you know."

"I know that, but did you take a good look at the other drives in this area? Almost all of them have some kind of expensive sports car out on the drive—sort of a 'bragging' car, you could say. They keep one splashy set of wheels out front in order to show off to their money. Now look at the Pincher's driveway. Empty, completely empty."

"I see your point." Zack put down the binoculars and slowly stood to stretch his cramped legs. "I actually think you're right. It does seem they've been gone for quite some time now, the more I think about it. The dog run to the side is empty, too, which makes me think the pooch is at the kennels. Let's call Liza and see if she's heard any—"

"What the hell are you two doing here?" a deep, authoritative voice interrupted from behind a blinding streak of brilliant light.

Zack gulped and put his hands up, dropping the binoculars with a thud. "Nothing, officer. Just bird watching."

The officer motioned them with his flashlight towards his cruiser. "In the dark?"

"Owls?" Zack suggested.

Sighing, Keith straightened up and faced the policeman. "At least I have a legit excuse to call Liza now."

Chapter Sixteen

"You two are damn lucky that cop is the friendly sort with a good sense of humor. Trespassing doesn't carry a much lighter sentence than breaking and entering," Liza said through gritted teeth, escorting the two from the police station to her car an hour later.

Keith smiled broadly. "Thanks for bailing us out, Liza. You're a life saver."

"You're welcome." Liza returned Keith's toothy grin with one of her own, shaking her head when her gaze rested upon at Zack. "And here all along I thought you were the intelligent one. I wish you two would have called me before going out on your little night patrol. You could have been shot if the cop who caught you had an itchy trigger finger."

"We did attempt to reach you. Your line was busy," Zack complained.

Liza turned to open the driver's side door. "I guess you must have called while I was talking to Shar—"

Zack gripped her by the shoulders and spun her around to face him. "Where is she? Is she all right? Is the baby okay?"

"Calm down, calm down," Liza soothed. "Shar says she's fine, the baby's fine and she's somewhere in Mexico. She didn't know exactly where she was

and she had to sneak her aunt's phone away from her under the pretense of canceling her appointment with me later this week."

Zack continued to stare, uncomprehending. His hands tensed around Liza's small shoulders.

"You can let go of me now, Zack."

"Oh, sorry." He dropped his hands and allowed Liza to step back. The veins on the side of his neck stood out as his jaw clenched tight. "But you said they're keeping her in the dark about her whereabouts—and you think what *we* did was illegal?"

"Sounds like a job for a caped crusader if there ever was one," Keith agreed.

"No, I don't think it's illegal," Liza said thoughtfully. "Impolite maybe, but not illegal. She went along willingly."

"Say what?" both men cried simultaneously.

Liza took pity on their little boy lost expressions. "She agreed to go with them. Shar's uncle-in-law has terminal cancer."

Zack snorted. "So they all decided to take one last trip to the tropics together?"

Liza shrugged. "Sort of. It seems good ol' Bart decided to check out some of the 'alternative medicines' you can't find in the US. I guarantee that once they discover how ineffective those witch doctors are they'll be back."

Sharlene did say she wouldn't be gone long... that she had to go... Zack grimaced, realizing only now what she had been hinting at the night she left. She wasn't

going back to Jeffrey—she was playing the dutiful niece.

Keith frowned. “Why didn’t she just come out and tell Lover Boy here that her uncle was sick, and she wanted to spend some time with him? No one would have told her not to go. I know I wouldn’t have.”

Liza smiled, admiring Keith’s sense of loyalty. “You have to remember that her uncle is Bartholomew Q. Pincher. B.Q. Pincher just doesn’t broadcast to the world that he’s terminally ill without his entire financial empire crumbling around him. He’s playing it safe by keeping a low profile and telling everyone he’s on a family vacation to reunite his estranged nephew and niece-in-law.”

“Damn.” Zack shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and walked to the curb, kicking it for good measure. “Sharlene’s out of the country with her rich, dying uncle-in-law and her ex-husband while I’m here all alone missing her and our baby.”

Liza’s eyebrows shot up. “Did you say *our* baby?”

Zack sighed. “I might as well tell you two. I’m pretty sure I was the donor of the sperm which accidentally got mixed up with Sharlene’s egg cells.”

Keith slapped him hard on the back, laughing. “Good one, Richmond! You really had me going there for a second. We donated anonymously, remember? There’s no way for you to know whose baby is yours or not.”

“Except by number,” Liza said, regarding him with open curiosity. “What donor number did they give you?”

"342."

"Bingo," she whispered. "You match the physical description, too. Won't Sharlene be pleasantly surprised. I can hardly wait to tell her —"

"No, don't!" Zack cried. "Please, I'm the one who needs to tell her. I've been meaning to since I figured it out last week, but Uncle Bart's 'kidnapping' sort of got in the way. I want to tell her. I should be the one to tell her."

"I agree wholeheartedly." Liza climbed into her Lexus and started the engine. "Hop in, boys. I've got an idea. I'll see if can't get a friend of mine to find out exactly where Sharlene's staying."

"No kidding?" Zack asked, crawling into the back. Keith's eyes widened as he swung his long legs into the front seat. "You know a private detective?"

"Better than that," she said with a wink. "I know a pharmaceutical salesman who does international sales calls on occasion...and he owes me a big favor in lieu of one big explanation."

* * * * *

Sharlene paced along the dark tiled terrace encircling the beach house, her footsteps keeping rhythm with the crashing of the waves on the nearby shore. She concentrated her energies on thinking of a means of escape that didn't involve strangling someone—particularly Jeffrey.

What the devil had gotten into her ex? He had been openly flirting with her these past few days, the

woman whom he gladly walked away from in order to avoid being a father, to take up with an adult film star, no less. And to make matters worse Aunt Edwina was encouraging him. It was enough to cause the dreaded nausea she had never experienced before in her pregnancy.

"You look beautiful in the moonlight, Shar."

Startled, she practically jumped out of her skin, her hand flying to cover her heart. "Heavens, you about scared me to death, Jeffrey. What are you doing up? I thought you hit the sack over an hour ago."

He raced over to her side and took her hand in his, enjoying the breathtaking view of her cleavage in the V-shaped neckline of her thin cotton gown. "How can I sleep when I know you're nearby? And why would I want to sleep alone?"

"Because I snore?" Sharlene tugged her hand from his and walked to the balcony's far edge.

"You what?"

"All right, wheeze, then. I used to wheeze at night, remember?"

Jeffrey straightened himself and smoothed out the wrinkles in his satin robe. "I always found your habit to be very endearing."

"Hardly," she snorted. "It kept you awake. And I hogged the covers a lot, too, if you'll recall."

"Who needs blankets in Acapulco?" He slinked over the cool stone tiles to stand close beside her, pretending to admire the starry darkness. "Besides, we both know other ways to keep warm, don't we? Remember that time when the electricity went out

during that snowstorm and we had to huddle together for hours to keep from freezing?"

Sharlene smiled at the memory. They had made a tent with quilts under the dining room table and played a game of "The Lonely Lost Camper and the Handsome Park Ranger." It had been one of Jeffrey's more romantic moments.

"Yeah, that was a lot of fun. But it's in the past now. All but forgotten."

He slowly inched his hips closer until they were almost touching hers. "I haven't forgotten it. You were sensational, as I recall..."

The husky tone in his voice was a dead giveaway he was going to make a move on her at any moment. Sharlene froze on the spot, panicked. She needed to think, to come up with an escape plan, but her feet remained glued to the spot.

The sex *had* been sensational at one time with Jeffrey — she had to admit it — but that's all it had ever been. Just sex. Their relationship had exhibited none of the closeness she and Zack had shared.

She took a deep breath and stepped away from the railing. "Thanks for the compliment. If you had been a little more lavish with them when we were still together, we might not be divorced. Then again, there's our big difference of opinion about what children are for, so we would have probably broken up anyway, so that's that."

Sharlene calmly strolled toward her balcony door. "Good night."

"Good night?" Disbelief danced across in his

furrowed brow. "Is that all you can say about us? Weren't we good together? Didn't I do anything for you?"

She paused as her hand touched the knob. She bit her lip in thought. "Well, yes. Yes you did."

Jeffrey crossed his arms in satisfaction. "Ah-ha."

"You really did do something for me. You helped me discover that there's more to a relationship than both parties wanting the same *things*. Both parties have to both want *each other*."

"What are you babbling on about?"

Sharlene sighed and shook her head. "Get real, Jeffrey. You never wanted *me*. You wanted someone to play surrogate mother to the Pincher heir so you could get your inheritance."

"That's not true. Not all of it, anyway," he muttered, flashing a disgusted scowl at her. "So now you're telling me you're content to play the single mother and live on the welfare rolls?"

"Yes. My baby and I may share a somewhat poorer lifestyle than you will, but we'll still have a very rich life. Don't you understand? A baby is not a *thing* to be used for material gain. A baby is a human being and needs to be treated as such. And so am I."

Raising his hands, Jeffrey leveled a defeated gaze at her. "All right. You win. But do you honestly think you're going to stick it out and live in an attic and be a secretary for the rest of your life—and be happy?"

"Yes, I plan on being happy—*very* happy." Sharlene smiled. His desolate look caused her to soften her tone. "I hope you and Bambi will find the

same kind of happiness that Zack and I share someday, too."

"Her name isn't Bambi. It's Bunny. Bunny Byrd."

"Bambi, Bunny, Birdie. I knew it had to be one of those small furry creatures from a Disney movie." Yawning, Sharlene reentered her room. "Good night, Jeffrey. Sweet dreams."

"Shar?"

She paused. "Yeah."

He took a step toward her. "Can we still be friends?"

She arched an eyebrow. "Friends?"

"Yes. I mean at least for this week can we not fight? Uncle Bart deserves a bit of happiness here in his final days."

She nodded. "Of course. Friends—just friends. Okay?"

He returned her grin. "Great."

Friends, Sharlene thought, crawling into the sheets alone. *We can do that*. But, just to be on the safe side, from now on she'd lock both her inside and outside doors at night.

* * * * *

"Remember, don't drink the water whatever you do," Keith lectured.

Zack threw a pair of faded cut-offs into his duffle bag on the bed and zipped it closed. "Why do people always say that? Do they want to get dehydrated or something? Besides, I don't plan on being in Mexico

for long. I'm going to land in Acapulco, sweep Sharlene off her feet and be back in time for dinner. No problemo."

"You'd better hope it's that easy—and that the information Liza obtained is reliable. After all, it came from her asshole of a boyfriend."

Zack shoved his wallet in his jeans pocket and rechecked his airline ticket. "Her very *knowledgeable* asshole of a boyfriend, you forgot to say. I was impressed how he was on a first name basis with the owner of the clinic ol' Pincher is receiving treatments from. You'd think people into alternative medicine wouldn't buy drugs from legit sources, but I guess they do."

Keith leaned against the door jam and crossed his arms defiantly. "Who says this asshole Joel is legit? Maybe he's just your common, everyday drug pusher in disguise?"

"Sure he is," Zack said, patting his jealous foster brother on the back. "I'm on your side, bro. I don't see what Liza sees in that pompous jerk, either. He didn't even bother to explain the lipstick stain on his collar when he waltzed in the door last night. Guess he figured the doctor was going to be fast asleep instead of staying up late to bail us deadbeats out of jail."

"We rattled his cage but good, didn't we?" Keith chuckled, a hopeful gleam sparkling in his eyes. "And when Liza gave me that big, long kiss good-bye to drive him crazy... Hell, it nearly drove *me* crazy."

Zack grinned at him then picked up his bag and lugged it down the steps. "If you play your cards

right, maybe there's a future for you two after all. Now, don't forget what I told you about the store."

"Yeah, yeah," Keith muttered, following behind him. "Keep the store open regular hours, tell people to wait until next week to drop off their repairs since you're out of town, drop off the deposit bag nightly at the bank, and try not to go bankrupt. I got it down stone cold."

"Remember that last one—it's important. I've got a wife and kid to support and a college loan to pay off." He paused at the bottom step. "Thanks for watching after things while I'm gone. Wish me luck."

"Good luck—especially if you're catching Metrolink to the airport." Keith beamed a toothy grin and pushed Zack out the back door. "Hasta la nachos and all that crap. Now go!"

Keith waved good-bye and sighed, watching Zack jog down the street before he re-entered the building. Fifteen minutes later, he started the process of opening the store by switching off the shop's alarm system and unlatching the front door deadbolts, only to be surprised by the first customer of the day.

"Where's Zack?" A worried looking Diana Markham boldly marched inside and quickly scoped out the store. "He's not here, is he?"

Keith flipped over the open for business sign and slowly closed the door behind her, squashing an urge to flip something else at the meddlesome woman. "No, Zack's not here. What's it to you?"

"I heard about the little 'trespassing' incident at the Pincher's estate from a friend of mine. I thought he

might need some help—of the legal variety, that is.”

Keith bit the inside of his lip. He didn’t trust the woman no matter how much she batted her eyelashes and made goo-goo eyes. She was up to no good. “Thanks for the offer, but Zack’s not in any real trouble that money can’t fix.”

She opened her purse and reached for her wallet. “Then maybe I *can* help. Here’s—”

“Keep your filthy money,” Keith cut in. “Zack can handle his own life just fine without your interfering.”

He nonchalantly strolled to the register. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

“So do I,” Diana said briskly, an undisguised look of indignation marring her otherwise composed features. The glass rattled as she slammed the door shut behind her.

“Bitch,” Keith muttered, opening the register drawer. The phone on the wall behind him rang, a welcomed interruption in his otherwise grumbling thoughts.

“Keith?” Liza said. “Did Zack get off to the airport this morning okay?”

“Why, hello there, pretty lady,” Keith drawled. “Yep, I had to practically pack him myself and kick him out the door, but he’ll make it with time to spare.” He paused and took a deep breath. “How are you doing? I was worried last night after we left. Did you and what’s his name...?”

“Yes, we had a big fight. But we cleared a few things up.”

Keith rested his head against the wall and slumped in resignation. "Oh. I'm glad for you two."

"Thanks. I was up most of the night, but we did manage to clear all of Joel's papers out of the desk and all his clothes out of the closet."

"Say what?"

"Joel is moving in with his new sales assistant. We both thought it was for the best."

"Great!" Keith cleared his throat quickly. "I mean, it's great you two parted on good terms."

"It was the decent thing to do." Liza's sigh rang out loud and long. "Only thing is, now I have no one to help me reach things off the top shelves in the pantry. I do hate being so short at times."

"I'm six foot four," Keith said casually, his smile wider than the Ram's end zone in the Dome. "When should I come over?"

Chapter Seventeen

*R*escue me – please. Somebody? Anybody?

Sharlene rocked endlessly in the heat of the tropical afternoon. Jeffrey and his roving hands were a mere ten feet away baking to a lobster red in the sun while Edwina fussed over the patient on the far end of the porch worse than any mother would over a child. It was all too much, all this togetherness for Uncle Bart's sake. It was driving her insane.

She gently stroked her growing abdomen. *Who are you, little one? Who's your real daddy? Where is he? Doesn't he care that he brought a life into the world? Is he like Jeffrey? Did he do it only for the money?*

Sharlene closed her eyes and cleared her troubling thoughts. Zack. She would concentrate on Zack. If she thought hard and long enough he would pick up her mental vibrations and locate her and help her escape from this vacation from hell.

Zack is real, she told herself. The mystery man who fathered her child was not. Sharlene had come to grips with her fantasy at last. Her wishful thinking about finding out who the baby's real daddy was did nothing but confuse and upset her. It was time to give all of that up. Besides, no amount of wishing would ever produce a caped superhero to rescue her. She had to save herself.

"Shar, do my back for me, will ya?" Jeffrey whined.

Sharlene gritted her teeth and picked up the suntan lotion. After all, she had promised to be friendly for Uncle Bart's sake. "Sure. Roll over."

"I got a crick in my neck. Can you give me one of those great massages the way you used to?"

"Only if you don't mind two tons of baby weight resting on your hips." She walked over to the blanket and plopped herself beside her sweaty pink tormentor. "Don't you think you've been out in the sun enough today?"

"Probably, but think how healthy I'll look." Jeffrey rolled over to his side, flashing an unmistakable leer at her in the process. "You've got a nice glow about you too despite the big hat and the shades and the mile long dress."

She squirted the lotion into her hands and began to roughly knead her ex-husband's shoulders. "It's called a caftan, and it's very comfortable. No waistband binding against the baby. Very cool. And the glow on my cheeks is probably due to possessing too many hormones on a hot day."

His lifted eyebrows offered an invitation. "Hormones, you say?"

Sharlene sighed and pushed him flat onto the blanket. "Pregnancy hormones. It has nothing to do with you baring your physique, so just forget about it."

"Forget it? Why?" Jeffrey turned and reached out to caress her, lightly trailing his finger along her cheek, neck and shoulders. "We're still legally

married until we get the final decree from the judge, you know."

"But it's just a matter of paperwork—"

"Remember," he interrupted, "I know all kinds of special ways to make you feel real good. *Real good*, Shar. So, how about it?"

She played dumb. "How about what?"

"You know very well what I'm talking about." He lowered his voice to a seductive whisper. "How about a little afternoon delight? I promise I won't tell if you won't tell."

Sharlene blinked hard. The heat must be getting to her. For a moment she actually found Jeffrey downright attractive. She shook her head violently to rid herself of the notion and scrambled to her feet. "Zack and I are engaged, so I don't think I'll be fooling around with you. Remember? We're just friends now. But thanks for the offer anyway."

Jeffrey sat up and spat over his shoulder. "Engaged? You actually told that wimp you'd *marry* him? You must be more desperate than I thought."

"Like I was when I married you?" she flung back at him.

The pulse points at his temple throbbed with resentment. "You weren't all that desperate. Lots of guys in the office thought you had the hottest bod in the secretarial pool, even if you didn't always act like you were playing with a full deck."

Sharlene rolled her eyes. "It's so nice to know that after all this time. Hot bod, lame brain. You really saw potential in me, huh?"

"You're not that stupid, Shar. Didn't ol' Bart fix you up good for a few years?"

Her breathing caught and her face reddened. It wasn't the sun causing the warmth to creep up her cheeks.

"What do you know about it? Uncle Bart didn't say anything to you, did he?"

"No, I sort of figured it out on my own. Edwina gave me the rest of the details." He leaned back on his elbows and winked. "Smart girl—milking the situation for all you can get."

"I'm not 'milking' anyone for anything!" Sharlene cried. She awkwardly turned on her heels and stormed back to the cabana.

Grinning, Jeffrey sprang to his feet and followed her.

Unfortunately Aunt Edwina thwarted his pursuit, grabbing her nephew by the arm as he passed her on the steps, scowling at their unseemly outburst. "Jeffrey, whatever did you say to cause Sharlene to shout like that?"

Jeffrey shrugged, brushing the sand off his shoulders before stepping onto the porch. "Don't worry. Shar always gets loud when she's excited."

"What's she excited about?"

He flashed a cocky grin. "Why me, of course."

* * * * *

The gum wasn't working, and drinking booze had been a big mistake—he had already filled two barf

bags. Zack realized now why his parents always took the bus or a train whenever they went back east to visit with relatives. Motion sickness must be hereditary.

"We'll be landing shortly. Hang in there just a little while longer," a kindly stewardess encouraged him as she removed his latest contribution, gingerly placing it into a larger plastic bag.

"I will," Zack mumbled. He slapped his hand over his mouth, closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat.

By the time Zack was able to claim his luggage, there wasn't a taxi in sight. He found out about the local bus routes from a map on the wall near the information booth and hopped on one hopefully heading close to the clinic Joel had said was the one Bart had entered. He absentmindedly flipped through the Spanish phrase book Liza had lent him and looked for the phrase for, "Have you seen a beautiful, pregnant American lady anywhere?"

Americana embarazada? That couldn't be it. It sounded like she was embarrassed, not expecting a baby. He wished he had taken a foreign language instead of another computer class now.

"I am apologizing, sir, but we cannot say if a patient is here," the receptionist stated in somewhat broken English. "It is not the rules. You understand?"

"Yes, I understand, but it's not Mr. Pincher I'm trying to find. It's his niece."

"Niece?"

Zack whipped the phrase book out of his pocket. "Uh, niece. *Sobrina. Americana embarazada.*"

The receptionist's dark eyebrows arched. "Ah, the baby lady was here, I can say it to you."

"Great! Can you tell me where she's staying?"

"She lives with the patient in a private house. I cannot say where."

"Can you tell me the general direction?"

"Que?"

"*Direcciones a la casa?*" he ventured.

She averted her eyes and shook her head. "*Lo siento, señor.*"

A long sigh escaped his lips. "*Gracias.*"

Zack exited the clinic. His next plan included checking out every hotel and cabana on the beach. Surely someone had seen Sharlene and would be free to tell him. If that didn't provide him with any leads, he wasn't sure what he'd do after that. Maybe Mexican TV had the equivalent of *America's Most Wanted*?

He walked several blocks toward the sound of the surf before resting on a park bench beneath the shade of a welcoming palm tree. *The things that love will drive a man to do.* He shook his head. No doubt about it. He really did love Sharlene. He wasn't here out of feelings of guilt about bringing about the baby into the world in the first place. He honestly and truly loved her.

He had to find her.

"I'm not milking anyone for anything!"

"Sharlene?"

Zack ran toward the familiar woman's voice and the sound of a slamming door. From the crest of a

sand dune he spied an over-bundled Bartholomew Q. Pincher being attended to by an anxious-looking Edwina on the seaside porch of a well-appointed beach home. This had to be the place.

Zack immediately dropped onto his stomach, his duffle bag kicking up a cloud of sand as it plopped beside him. The main door appeared to be to the side, facing away from the beach. All he had to do was sneak around the house and ring the bell. Soon he and Sharlene would be reunited.

As he started to edge toward the door, a dark shadow fell across his path.

"And just *where* do you think you're going?"

"Oh, it's you." Zack stood, trying hard not to stare at Jeffrey's seriously sunburned nose. Somehow freckles didn't quite suit him. "I'm going to that beach house behind you if it's any concern of yours. I've come to bring Sharlene home."

Jeffrey snorted. "On a burro, right? You couldn't possibly afford the plane fare."

"Don't worry, she'll get home in comfort, I guarantee it." Zack patted his back pocket with the wallet with Liza's extra credit card in it.

It wasn't there.

He immediately dropped to his knees and began to dig in the sand. Could he have lost it at the airport or been pick-pocketed along the way? A bead of sweat broke out across his brow and he frantically scanned the track of his footprints. He was up a creek without a paddle to whack Jeffrey over the head with in order to make his point.

"Lost something other than your marbles, Richmond?"

A slight movement of Jeffrey's right foot caught Zack's attention. The mock Charles Atlas acted like he was covering up something. Zack slowly stood.

"All right, move the number twelves over and let me get at my wallet."

The lobster-colored man crossed his arms across his chest, sticking out his lower lip in a childlike pout. "I'll let you have your wallet, but only on one condition."

Zack raised his hands in defeat. "Okay, name it."

"That you take it and turn around and go home the way you came. Alone."

Zack stared hard into Jeffrey's cold, dark eyes. "And if I refuse to leave without Sharlene?"

"Then you'll be spending a lot of time camping on the beach, I guess." Jeffrey laughed, flipping the wallet up into the air with his toes and catching it before Zack could make a grab for it. "I'm not about to let you ruin my family's vacation."

Zack stood his ground. "Some vacation. You and your uncle concocted some kind of story in order to lure kind-hearted Sharlene into your trap for God knows what purposes."

Jeffrey's forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "You make it sound as if we're criminals, and that's not true. Sharlene knows the truth of the situation and came of her own free will. We've even discussed abandoning our divorce proceedings."

Zack gulped, his throat dry and gritty as the sand

he stood upon. No, it couldn't be true. Jeffrey had to be lying. He wouldn't believe it until he heard it from Sharlene's lips.

"I don't believe you."

Jeffrey shrugged and turned toward the house. "I figured you wouldn't. Come on and let's continue this discussion under the shade. I could use a drink."

Zack squeezed his fists into tight balls, following silently behind tall, well built Jeffrey. What chance did he have at winning Sharlene back from a man who was obviously his superior in the looks and strength department, and most importantly, the financial department. After all, Sharlene did have to look out for the future welfare of her baby...

Correction — *their* baby.

That was it. He had to tell Sharlene now about the baby. He had to tell her even if it meant spilling the beans in front of her Uncle Bart, causing the ailing tycoon to keel over dead from the shock.

"Mr. Richmond?"

Zack blinked, approaching the terrace steps. Edwina appeared to have shrunk since last they met. On second glance, he realized she hadn't shrunk so much as she wasn't wearing her usual ten layers of makeup and high heels. The look of concern she held in her eyes as she held watch over her husband touched Zack to the core.

"Yes, ma'am. I've come to check on Sharlene."

"How in the hell did you find us?" Bart demanded gruffly. The exertion caused him to cough uncontrollably. Edwina quickly handed him a glass of

amber-colored liquid.

"Don't be getting yourself upset about our unexpected visitor, Bartholomew. I'm sure he's not broadcasted our whereabouts to Wall Street." She raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Have you, Mr. Richmond?"

"No, I haven't. In fact no one really knows where I am, exactly," he assured them. "We put our heads together and made some deductions from the clues in Sharlene's phone call. After I landed here I started asking around... and somehow I wound up on the beach and heard Sharlene's voice."

Jeffrey brow furrowed. "Who is this 'we'?"

"My foster brother Keith and Sharlene's friend Liza and her boyfriend. He's in international pharmaceutical sales and had a good hunch Mr. Pincher might be headed here."

Bart snorted. "So much for privacy and discretion. After I sue the quacks here for their so-called *miracle* cure, I'll sue your acquaintance's pharmaceutical company for doing business with them."

Edwina smiled. "Why, Bart! You sound so assertive—so much more like yourself today. Feeling better?"

He pursed his lips and took a sip of tonic. "A little."

"Hold off on the lawsuit until you've finished the treatment, Uncle," Jeffrey advised, plopping down on the chair opposite before placing his feet on the glass topped table. "First we've got to convince our unexpected guest here that Sharlene isn't a captive

princess who's in need of a knight in shining armor to liberate her."

Edwina put a hand to her heart. "Good heavens! Whatever made you think we're a bunch of kidnappers, Mr. Richmond?"

Zack pulled a bandana out of his jeans pocket and wiped his damp forehead as he slowly sat down. "I hadn't heard from Sharlene in days and I was concerned about her safety. She and I are..."

Edwina's eyes narrowed. "You two are...?"

Zack took a deep breath. They had to know. "We're engaged."

"Engaged?" Bart cried.

At the shock, the elderly man paled and resumed coughing. Edwina hurriedly poured him another tonic. Her pencil-thin brows formed a sharp point as she leveled a hard stare at her nephew. "Jeffrey, you told me that you and Sharlene had made up the other night. What's the truth?"

"We did make up, Aunt Edwina. This *engagement* must have happened a while back. Sharlene simply hasn't informed Mr. Richmond here that she's changed her mind."

Bart's coughing subsided. "Sharlene wants to cancel the divorce?" he asked, hope coloring his bland expression. "That's wonderful. About time you two worked it out."

A set of French doors to Zack's right suddenly swung open. Sharlene stepped outside in a flurry of flowing fabric. "It's so quiet all day long and then all of a sudden I hear a lot of chatter. What's going on

out here?"

She froze, her eyes lighting upon her fiancé. "Zack? Zack! It is you!"

Sharlene nearly toppled her lover over as she jumped into his waiting arms. Her trail of kisses across his face sent joyous shivers coursing through his soul. "Oh, Zack. I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you, too," he whispered against her hair, cradling her close. "Don't ever leave me again."

"I won't. I promise."

Jeffrey grabbed a glass from the drinks cart and poured himself a margarita from the half-empty pitcher. "So much for the 'working it out' now."

"I'd say so," Zack mumbled, returning Sharlene's loving attentions with equal enthusiasm.

After a short eternity, Sharlene pulled back and smoothed down her caftan and hair. "Ahem. Aunt Edwina, Uncle Bart, you've met Zack before at the children's hospital fundraiser, remember? We're thinking about getting married."

"Why not today? We could have a beach wedding," Zack murmured in her ear.

"Not now," she whispered back.

Bart slumped slightly in his chair. "So, you've been stretching the truth again for us, eh, Jeffrey?"

Jeffrey shrugged, taking another long sip of his drink. "No, I was telling the truth. I've been working on her all this week, Uncle B. She just wouldn't cooperate."

Edwina cast a somber look at her nephew and shook her head. "It's not surprising when she has an

admirer who would fly halfway across the continent to rescue her. Quite romantic."

Sharlene squeezed Zack's hand. "It is, isn't it?"

Edwina raised her chin, observing them closely. "I take it that you are both serious about getting married?"

"Yes, we are." Zack looked deeply into Sharlene's sparkling violet-blue eyes. "The sooner the better."

"You could wait to have the ceremony until after the baby was born," Edwina continued, sighing, "but I guess they are making maternity wedding gowns these days."

Sharlene gasped. "Aunt Edwina! What a pleasant surprise. You're not against us getting married?"

"No, I suppose not." She glanced out of the corner of her eye at her husband, acknowledging his nod. "If it's what makes you truly happy, dear, then who are we to stand in your way? I guess it's time you packed your bags and called a taxi for the airport."

"You really mean it?" Overjoyed, Sharlene bear-hugged her aunt, tenderly squeezed her uncle and shook hands with her ex before returning to Zack's side. "Thank you all for everything. I'll be praying that the remainder of the treatment is successful, Uncle Bart."

The aging financier tilted his chin defiantly, adopting his usual brusque manner once more. "That's all I can ask for—that and your silence about the whereabouts of our little vacation."

Sharlene smiled. "Don't worry. No one in the financial world cares I exist, save a couple of credit

card companies. And you *do* sound much stronger today. Maybe this alternative cure works after all?"

"Hogwash," Bart grumbled, a hint of a grin lurking at the corners of his gray lips. "Go pack and get your sorry selves out of my sight."

Jeffrey cleared his throat, holding Zack's billfold aloft. "Wait. You'll be needing this."

"Thanks. Now, if you'll excuse us. I'll help Sharlene pack." Zack pocketed his wallet and took Sharlene's hand, leading her through the French doors and into the house. He could hardly wait until they were alone.

"Hmm... Zack?" Sharlene murmured, returning each of his soul-stirring kisses with one of her own, her contours molding tightly against the bulge of his growing desire. "I'm not sure this is proper, making love while my ex-husband and my former in-laws sit just a few yards away on the back porch."

Zack replied with an assault of butterfly kisses around her neck, plunging toward the sensitive V at the top of her caftan. "We've got the doors and windows closed," he whispered. "The AC is blowing full blast and the shades are drawn. They'll never know."

Groaning with pleasure, she instinctively arched her back, greeting his soft lips, silky flesh. "But what will they think? It doesn't take that long for me to pack a suitcase."

His fingertips trailed down the length of her spine, spawning tremors of anticipation in their wake. "We'll tell them we both had to take a shower before

changing clothes. Of course, we figured that we could save time if we showered together..."

Her eyes cloudy with desire, Sharlene pulled Zack into her private bathroom. "Yeah, it saves on hot water, too."

Chapter Eighteen

The trip back is going to be a breeze, Zack thought as the taxi pulled up to the curb outside the terminal. Love was a much better intoxicant than alcohol—and much better on a body, too. Sharlene looked radiant in an ivory-colored sundress speckled with tiny violets with a matching straw hat and jute sandals. He felt like asking the pilot to perform a quick wedding ceremony for them mid-flight.

A half hour into the trip, Zack realized everything was running smoothly—a little too smoothly—and it gave him pause. Was it a bad sign? No, he wasn't superstitious. Being bumped up into first class, enjoying first class service and first class privacy was just a lucky break. Maybe it was a sign that their life together would proceed smoothly from now on? Glancing over at Sharlene watching wispy clouds float by the window, his heart overflowed with happiness. Why couldn't he allow himself just this once to feel optimistic?

"Sharlene, there's something important I've been meaning to tell you. I can't wait any longer."

Giggling in her twangy sort of way, Sharlene turned her attention from her window gazing. "I know what you want to tell me."

He gulped. "You do?"

"Yeah, you can't wait to rip my clothes off and

become a member of the 'Mile High Club' in that dinky little toilet back there. Am I right?"

Zack eyes widened in astonishment. "You—you really want to?"

She playfully kissed him on the cheek. "Only if you promise to take a barf bag along. I noticed how queasy you looked when they passed out the peanuts."

"Sorry." He blushed and patted his mouth again with his cocktail napkin. "I may not be much of an air traveler, but I'm a very sincere lover."

"I agree," she purred. "Too bad I'm too wide to fit into the water closet with you or else I'm sure you could demonstrate how sincere you are."

Now it was his turn to laugh. "Hormones kicking in again, huh?"

"You could say that." She winked. "But don't worry. I'll behave myself the rest of the flight."

"I'll try to behave myself, too."

"Now, what was it really you wanted to tell me?" Sharlene asked, repositioning the pillow behind her back. "Go on. You've got a captive audience."

Zack took her right hand in his and gently kissed it. "Sharlene, I've been wanting to tell this for what seems ages now. I'm pretty certain I know who your baby's 'mystery father' is."

She shook her head. "Please, don't kid about a thing like that. I've already made up my mind just to forget all about him. He isn't all that important in the scheme of things. The baby's father is just an idle fantasy I've concocted to deal with being a single

mom, completely unnecessary —”

“Unnecessary?”

“Yes, he’s unnecessary since I can take care of myself and the baby just fine. I’ve proved it to myself these last few months. I don’t need to imagine a ‘mystery dad’ for Junior anymore.”

“You don’t?” Zack’s pulse raced; his hands grew cold. “But you don’t understand. *I’m* your baby’s father.”

Sharlene squeezed his hand and smiled. “It’s so sweet of you to say so. The baby will always consider you his or her daddy in the all the important ways. It’s no big deal like you said—you love the mother, you love the child. I love you and the baby will adore his or her daddy. Case closed.”

He took a deep breath and continued. “That’s all well and good, but I’m not lying to you when I say I’m your baby’s father. I am.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What do you mean?”

Zack sat up straighter and cleared his throat. “I mean I was sperm donor number 342. It’s the number on the card they gave me when I came in the office to make a donation and —”

“You were a sperm donor?” she gasped, the rosy color draining from her sun-kissed face. She withdrew her hand from his. “You made a donation to the sperm bank next door to Doctor Fazoli’s infertility clinic?”

Zack flinched under her piercing stare. “That’s right. Remember that ‘get-rich-quick’ scheme Keith

was telling you about? How the two of us performed a 'service to womankind'? That's what he was going on about. We were sperm donors."

"How did you find out about it?" she said flatly.

"It was Keith. He found out about how the sperm bank paid a nice amount for donations from healthy, intelligent young guys like us. Then he sort of talked me into it since I needed to pay some bills, and —"

The color poured back into Sharlene's cheeks. "You mean you got *money* for making babies you never ever intended to help raise?" Her hushed voice soared two octaves, sending chills of dread up his spine. Her warm violet-blue eyes clouded over in anger, turning a dark, lifeless gray.

Zack took a quick swig of ginger ale, hoping to stop the assault of kamikaze butterflies attacking his stomach lining. This conversation wasn't going at all like he planned. She didn't act overjoyed like he had felt when he'd discovered how he was the true biological parent to her child. She appeared shocked, disgusted.

"Money? Well, yes we were paid to donate. But I only did it the two times, you see, since —"

Sharlene frowned and crossed her arms. "And here all along I thought you had done something a little more on the up-and-up like exotic dancing. Anything else I should know about you? Ever sell drugs on a street corner or run numbers for the mob?"

"No, that's about it." Zack's heart plummeted as she turned her face to the window. "It's not that I intentionally lied about what I did. I didn't know

your baby's donor number until recently, and it just never came up in our conversations."

"I guess not. But after I told you about how Junior came about, you could have at least volunteered the information."

Zack leaned closer and tenderly cradled her hand in his. "Lying next to you, it just never seemed to be the right moment."

Sharlene pulled her hand away a second time and continued staring out the window. "I know I shouldn't be mad at you. You can't help it I'm the type of woman who attracts men who aren't always totally truthful."

"Huh?"

"You're not set to inherit a few million if you have a baby, are you?"

Jeffrey. She was comparing him to that creep again. Zack clenched his jaw, fighting to keep his tone light. "No, of course not. I'll never ever see that kind of cash unless I win the Missouri Lottery."

"Or marry into money," she muttered.

"What did you say?"

Her verse was cold, terse. "I said you'd never come up with a plan of paying off your college loan by marrying into money, would you?"

His stomach somersaulted. "How would I go about doing that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe by marrying an independently wealthy, pregnant divorcee?"

Zack's motion sickness left him only to be replaced by an angry burning sensation in his heart and an

intense pounding at his temples. His head automatically dropped into his hands.

"Sharlene, I swear to you on my mother's grave I am not after you for your money. Please believe me."

Sharlene shifted her round shape further away from Zack in her seat, her forlorn silhouette shadowed by the dying sunlight streaming through the small window. "You certainly were happy to accept a full lease rent payments up front," she pointed out.

"I swear—"

"Pass me another pillow," she snapped. "Suddenly I feel very tired. I need a nap."

"Of course you do." Zack sighed and handed his pillow to her. Leaning back in his seat, he sadly closed his eyes. What went wrong? He had told her the truth—and look what it had done for him. Nothing. Every time Sharlene would look at him from now on, she wouldn't see Zachary Richmond, the father of her child, the man who loved her. All she would see was the man who sold his seed for a couple of bucks. Whenever she looked him in the face, his big brown eyes would be replaced by big fat dollar signs. And the worse thing about was, he realized now he had brought this unhappiness upon himself.

Zack rolled over to face the aisle and exhaled slowly. The emotions of the day and the comfort of the luxurious leather seats soon brought on their desired effects. He fell into a fretful sleep, punctuated by his last waking thought. *Way to go, Richmond. You and your big mouth. You may have never flown first class*

before, but you really know how to screw up a first class relationship.

* * * * *

"She doesn't want to speak with you, Zack," Liza told him for the hundredth time over the phone. "Give her some space. She's suffered a bit of a shock, and she needs some time to get her head together. You could say her mind's a bit scrambled by the sperm and egg situation."

Zack slammed his head against his office wall. The pain brought him back to reality. "Ouch. I feel worse than your pun."

"Sounds like it. You need any medical assistance over there?"

"No." Zack slumped in his chair. "I'm just feeling very, very sorry for myself. I just don't see why Sharlene's cutting me out of her and the baby's life because I was paid to be brought into it in the first place. It—it just doesn't make any sense."

"Since when do feelings have to make sense?" Liza cried. "Look, Shar's a dear, sweet person and all, but she's a bit hormonal lately and she's got some really odd ideas of what it means for a man to be a father."

"Odd ideas? Like a father should be made of flesh and blood instead of a test tube?"

"Cute. What I meant is that her odd ideas have something to do with her growing up without a daddy. She tried to make the 'ideal family' for herself for years with Jeffrey, but then she discovered just

because you have a white picket fence and two cars in the garage, you aren't necessarily guaranteed happiness."

Images from his own white picket-fenced childhood came flooding back to Zack. He *was* a very lucky person to have two such loving parents. Sharlene had said so.

"Give her a little more time," Liza advised. "She'll realize she's jeopardizing her chance to have the real thing, and she'll come running back to you. You'll see."

Zack laid his head on his desk blotter. "I sure hope so. At least she's keeping you company in that huge condo of yours."

"It's not *that* big a place. Keith's exaggerating."

"Keith exaggerates about a lot of things. You probably realize what all he *does* exaggerate about by now. Try not to act disappointed."

Liza coughed. "Ahem. Excuse me? I don't know what you're talking about. Keith and I are friends, just friends. I couldn't reach those bottles on the top shelf after Joel moved out, and Keith's been more than helpful..."

Despite the ache rending his heart in two, Zack couldn't help but smile at the sight of Keith acting genuinely happy for the first time in his life.

"I'm glad you two enjoy *helping* each other. You've inspired him to sign up for summer classes, by the way. He actually wants to graduate now."

"Good. With his skills, I'm sure he can go all the way – to the top of his field, that is."

Zack suppressed a snort. "Sure he can. Thanks for listening, Liza."

"You're welcome. You going to be all right?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I've got to get back to work now, or else I'll be tempted to disappoint another infertile couple somewhere. Let me know the second Sharlene changes her mind and wants to come home."

"I will."

"And be sure to tell her 'Mystery Dad' misses her."

"Mystery wha-? Oh, yeah, will do. 'Bye."

Zack hung up and strolled to the front of the store. Empty at almost six o'clock. Business was off. The piles of bills on his desk were beginning to mount up. The one woman in the whole world whom he cared about more than life itself had dumped him. What else could go wrong?

The door buzzer interrupted his sad reverie.

"Hello, Zack," Diana Markham purred, promenading into the shop like a queen taking her throne. "I'm so glad to see you made it safely home from your little excursion."

Wonderful. Just the person I wanted to see.

"Yeah, I made it back," he said flatly. "Did I miss much in class?"

"Well," she began slowly, leaning across the counter so her cleavage was clearly visible in the neckline of her scoop-necked sweater, "you're several projects behind now. We've simply got to find some way for you to make them up this week, or else I'm afraid I'll have to fail you."

Zack gulped. "Can't I take an 'incomplete' and

make it up in summer school?"

"School policy states that incompletes are left entirely to the discretion of the professor. You know very well I'm not the type of instructor who believes in passing everyone just to be nice."

Her dark eyes burned into his, leaving no doubt as to her meaning. "You have to *earn* your grade in my class."

Zack immediately broke out in a cold sweat. It was all too clear to him now. He watched her in horror as Diana meandered about the store, touching and picking up items as if she meant to drop and break one at any moment.

"Remember what I said at the beginning of the term?" she drawled, bouncing an Ipod between her palms like a rubber ball. "I hold all the cards. You either fold or you play, or else I'm forced to call in your hand."

She dropped the electronic device on the counter with a sickening *thud*, grinning. Her actions had produced the desired effect in him. "So, what's it going to be? Are you still playing?"

Zack swallowed hard. What did he have to lose now? He'd lost Sharlene's trust already and, in all likelihood, he was going to lose the store to his creditors. Any hope of regaining his financial stability and keeping the store rested on his obtaining a better career with his degree.

For twenty-six years, Zack had the strength and reliability of his family's good name. Now all he seemed to have going for him were his stud services...

He took a deep breath and let it out to slowly, steadying his nerves.

"I'm playing." He looked Diana straight in the eye. "What do I have to do?"

"Why, you never finished working on my home computer, if you recall." She twirled around and slithered toward the door. "I'll expect you to come by my place tonight, say sevenish?"

"Seven. I'll be there."

"I can't wait." She grinned like a cat with a mouse in its grasp, flipping the closed sign over. "And Zack?"

The icy touch of dread flooded his veins. "Yes?"

"Leave your toolbox at home. You won't be needing it."

Chapter Nineteen

“Hey, wait up!” Connie yelled across the temp agency parking lot.

Sharlene stopped and smiled wanly at her friend.

“I thought it was you. Whatever happened to your ‘permanent’ bookkeeping job?” Connie asked.

Sharlene slowly shrugged. “I gave it up. Luckily, the agency had another job for me when I got back in town.”

“You went out of town?” A grin blossomed on Connie’s bright mauve-painted lips. “Did you and that handsome landlord of yours happen to go on a little honeymoon?”

Mexico would have made a nice spot for one, Sharlene thought glumly, pushing the idea out of her mind.

“Not really. I was out of town visiting with a sick relative... I’d rather not go into the details.”

“Oh, of course, dear.” Connie nodded in sympathy. “It’s stressful when loved ones are ill. And you’re getting bigger and better with the baby every day. When’s the due date?”

“Mid-September, more or less. I feel like I’m about ready to drop Junior right on his head at this very moment.” She rubbed the permanent ache at the base of her spine. “My legs, feet and back are all killing

me.”

Connie gently patted her on the shoulder. “That’s to be expected, honey-child. Get that gorgeous guy of yours to wait on you hand and foot when you get home. I’m sure he loves doing things for you. Am I right?”

“Oh, of course.” Sharlene waddled toward her car, anxious to escape Connie’s presence before the redhead noticed how she carefully avoided any mention of Zack. “I got to go now. It was nice seeing you. Take care.”

“You too,” Connie said, waving good-bye. “Keep in touch.”

Sharlene sucked in as best she could and squeezed her pregnant self behind the wheel. She didn’t care what the last ultrasound readings said. She was definitely going to give birth to quadruplets.

As she maneuvered her way across town to Liza’s condo, she began to think of names for her two boys and two girls.

“Zachary and Bartholomew Q. Pincher II. Yikes... Whatever am I thinking?” she cried aloud. At least she didn’t come up with *Jeffrey*.

“Now, for the girls.” She bit her lip in concentration. “Hmmm... How about Liza Sharlene and Edwina Elaine?”

Stopped at a light, she made a face at herself in the rearview mirror. “Ugh. I think I should forget names and just number the kids. But whatever became of that baby name encyclopedia I ordered from the *Parents* book club last month?”

It was a mystery. Neither Keith nor Liza had brought her book over with her mail yet. Maybe it had gotten lost in transit?

A chilling thought occurred to her just then—could Zack have intercepted her baby name book? Was he holding it hostage until she returned to her apartment?

A car honked behind her at the intersection. Startling, her heartbeat raced. She hadn't realized she had stopped for a green light.

"Nice horn, buddy," she grumbled, turning right to pull off the busy thoroughfare. Looking up at the street sign, she noticed she was only three blocks from Zack's.

"I know what to do. I'll go back to my apartment and check my mailbox. I can easily dart around the back of the building and take a look in the box and leave with Zack none the wiser."

She grit her teeth with determination and started toward Richmond's Electronics. The closer she got, the more doubts plagued her. Hadn't Keith assured her that he had delivered everything in her box? In fact, if anything, Keith had made doubly sure he had delivered her mail—junk mail and all.

Poor Keith just couldn't get enough of Liza's 'lost without a man around the house' routine and ended up on the doorstep every evening around dinnertime. Liza's anti-feminist behavior was enough to make even Sharlene the old-fashioned homebody sick. Obviously a college degree—or several—didn't guarantee a woman could act intelligent around an

attractive member of the opposite sex.

Would she act any differently in the same situation?

"It's probably for the best if I don't check out my mailbox today," Sharlene decided, turning the opposite direction.

She pulled into the garage beneath Liza's condo minutes later and cut the engine. She'd think about her mail situation after a quick soak in Liza's big garden-style bathtub. It was the only place she really felt herself these days, the only place she didn't feel like a two-ton elephant in maternity clothes.

"Shar? You upstairs?" Liza called to her from the stairs fifteen minutes later.

"Yes, I'm in the tub soaking my cares away," she shouted back. "Is Mr. Handyman here yet?"

Liza bounded up the steps and posed at the bathroom entrance. "Nope, Keith's not here yet. He may or may not come over tonight. You never know."

Sharlene wrung out her washcloth and placed it over her eyes, settling back in the tub. "Yeah, right. And I'm a finalist in the 'Miss Anorexia' pageant. He'll be here."

"Oh, don't be that way. Keith and I are just friends. I can't help it he's got the hots for me. Joel's acting mighty jealous about Keith's helping out, too."

Frowning, Sharlene sat up and tore off her washcloth. "Joel? When did you see him?"

"Today. At the office."

"Really? Tell me more."

Liza sauntered over to the sink and began fidgeting

with her abundant beauty supplies before stopping to take a deep whiff of air. "Hey! That's my expensive jasmine-scented bath oil you're using."

"Of course it is. It's your bathtub, remember. Quit changing the subject," Sharlene reprimanded her. She lay back and placed the warm washcloth over her cleavage. "So, you're only using Keith to make Joel jealous enough to come crawling back to you."

Liza's eyes widened. "No, I would never do that..."

"Poor Keith. He'll be crushed when he finds out he's being used. Shame on you."

Liza spun around and placed her hands squarely on her hips. "Shame on me? Heck, girlfriend, I didn't walk away from the father of my child while he was proposing marriage to me."

"I didn't walk away. He didn't really —"

"Can it, girlfriend. You know you did and you know Zack did. You're the one who should feel ashamed. Joel's never even got close to proposing anything other than separate bank accounts, so don't you go laying a guilt trip on me. You should feel guilty for making poor Zack suffer for his past actions."

Suffer? Sharlene winced as if she'd been slapped across the cheek. No one had used such a strong term before to describe how Zack was taking her absence. Keith had only said Zack had been quiet and had been working hard to finish up his class projects before the end of the term. Had he actually been *suffering* because of her? The thought of how her cruel

behavior could have devastated him instantly gave birth to bitter tears.

Liza perched herself on the toilet seat and cocked her head to the side, quietly observing Sharlene's distress.

"You okay, Shar? You get soap in your eyes?"

"No, I got a bit of pride in them, I think. It stings."

Liza handed a tissue to her. Sharlene dabbed at the rivulets of regret cascading down her cheeks. In between sobs, she observed her friend was doing likewise.

"Go ahead and cry, girlfriend," Liza said, exhaling a long, shaky breath. "It's better to go to them and apologize with dry eyes instead of bloodshot ones. We don't want them to think they can turn us to a mass of quivering jelly over every little misunderstanding."

Sharlene blew her nose hard and smiled weakly. "My, my, aren't we a pair?"

"Yeah, we are," Liza sniffed.

"At least I think we've learned our lessons. You going to kick me out on the street after you and Joel make up?"

Liza furrowed her brow. "Joel? I was talking about Keith."

"Keith?"

"You were absolutely right. Keith doesn't deserve to be used. He's a really nice guy. Much nicer than Joel. I don't know what I ever saw in that money-hungry, skirt-chasing creep."

"Bravo!" Sharlene cheered and clapped her hands. "I'm glad you finally caught onto him."

"Oh, no, I caught onto him a while back. I just didn't want to admit to the world that Liza Allen, MD, couldn't do any better in the boyfriend department than Joel the womanizer. But now I know better—and I feel better about myself now. Thanks to Keith."

"He sort of grows on you, huh?" Sharlene winked.

Liza rolled her eyes heavenwards. "Yeah, sort of like a fungus."

Sharlene nodded and raised her arm. "I think it's past time for me to crawl out of your wonderful water park here and say a few dozen 'I'm sorries' to Zack. Help me out of this thing, would ya?"

Fighting gravity and slippery bath oil, Liza finally managed to help Sharlene out. She quickly rubbed herself dry and grabbed the closest thing she had clean in her suitcase to wear, a pair of denim maternity slacks and a lavender top with a picture of a teddy bear and the words 'Baby on Board' in swirly script. A quick comb through her wet mop and Sharlene hopped in her shoes and out the door.

"Good luck," Liza cheered from the garage door as Sharlene backed her car out. "Send Keith on over if you see him."

Sharlene saluted her back. "Roger. Ms. Cupid will do."

On the short drive over, Sharlene visualized her apology. She'd rush up the back steps and leap into Zack's arms and cover him with kisses. No, on second thought, rushing up stairs and leaping about was rather tiring at this advanced stage of the pregnancy.

She'd better take the elevator. Once she was at his door she'd knock three times, enter, then run into his arms and ply him with kisses. Yes, that plan would work much better.

But then it struck her — what if Zack was still angry with her? What if her harsh words and angry actions had crushed all the feelings he had for her like a wine press crushed the juice out of grapes? How would she react if he spurned her and threw her apology back in her face? Could she force him to take her back? Would she want to?

By the time Sharlene reached her old parking spot in the alley, her hands were trembling with both anticipation and fear.

"He's not here," Keith called out approaching the driver's side window. "I noticed his car gone when I came back from my class and figured something was up. He left a note for both of us."

"A note? For the both of us?"

Keith nodded. Sharlene's smile and shoulders drooped as disappointment crept into her voice.

"Then Zack is not gone for a moment running a simple errand or something?"

"That's right. More than likely he's running away from Diana Markham's claws in her fortress of doom at this very moment."

"Diana Markham?" *The bitch who broke my statuette, and wouldn't blink over breaking Zack's heart as well.*

Sharlene summoned her courage and straightened behind the wheel. "Did the note say what he was doing at Dr. Markham's?"

Keith pulled out a folded letter from his back pocket and read aloud. "Dear Keith: If I'm not back from Diana Markham's chamber of horrors before midnight, please contact Dad's lawyer who will handle the estate. You can have my collection of *X-Men* comics and my collection of video game cheats. Sharlene and the baby can take any mementos they like from my personal junk. Good-bye and God Bless. Always your big bro, Zack."

"Mementos? Lawyer?" Sharlene whispered. "He doesn't think he's going to die, does he?"

Keith bit his lip and crumpled the paper into a tight fist. "There are some things worse than death. Losing you was one of them for Zack. He must have finally decided that he might as well pass Markham's class this term using any method necessary. I guess outside of getting his degree he feels he has nothing else to live for."

Sharlene's heartbeat pounded in her ears like the beat of a determined drummer before battle.

"Where does this vampire live?" she asked calmly.

"Somewhere off of Ladue Road. Wait a sec and I'll get Zack's flip map out of the office. He marked the location of it before when he went out there to help her set up a computer or something. Be right back."

Sharlene tapped her wheel impatiently as Keith went back inside to search for the address. She checked the dashboard clock. It was seven-forty now. Zack couldn't have been gone more than hour if he had closed the store and grabbed a bite to eat before heading out. There was still a chance he hadn't

succumbed to the Diana's advances.

After an eternity, Keith dashed out of the building with the map book in hand.

"Here it is. Her address is marked with a big red X on page 23. Just promise me that when you see Zack you'll be gentle with him. He really loves you and the baby."

"I'll be gentle with him – in front of that woman for sure," Sharlene muttered to herself, before adding, "Thanks, Keith, for all your help. I owe you one."

He winked. "You can pay me back by not returning to Liza's tonight until I give you the 'all clear' sign. Deal?"

"Deal. Now, you'd better move away before I back over your toes when I peel out of here. See ya later."

"Good luck –"

Sharlene hit the gas pedal, speeding out of the alley and onto the street faster than Keith could raise his hand to wave good-bye.

* * * * *

"Isn't this a cozy room?" Diana purred, scooting her hips on the leather sofa closer to her guest's, a predator deftly approaching her prey. "You've hardly touched your drink. Not much for hard liquor, are you?"

"Not really," Zack admitted, throwing his head back to gulp the remainder of the whiskey. The liquid burned a path all the way to the pit of his empty stomach. Almost immediately he felt warmer, more

relaxed. The taste was something else, though. It made his lips pucker.

Diana's dark eyes glimmered with desire. "Cute, really cute. Your expression, that is. When you put those full lips of yours together like that, it makes me want to do the same." She put her drink down on the coffee table and leaned over his lap, her breasts falling forward into the V of her sweater. She puckered her lips like a flapper with bee-stung lips. "Like this."

Zack couldn't help but giggle at the odd sight of Diana making fish lips at him. "Pretty silly looking, isn't it?"

Diana immediately sat up as if she had been doused with cold water. "Pardon me?"

Zack snorted again. "I said we look pretty silly when we drink. What is this brown stuff called? Whiskey flower?"

"Whiskey sour. It was my husband's favorite drink."

"He drank a lot of them?"

"Well, yes, occasionally he did tip back one too many."

Suddenly Diana's dark orbs no longer reflected sensual hunger. There was a sadness there, a sadness tinged with regret. Perhaps she was human after all.

"Tell me about him," Zack asked kindly.

"My husband was good man at heart. He did his best to look after me while he was here and even after he died," Diana said quietly.

Zack felt a strong feeling of sympathy coming over him. He took another sip of the noxious brew. "You

miss him a lot, don't you?"

"Richard?" Her eyebrows rose, giving her painted face a rare, insightful look. "Yes, I do miss him at times. He left me too soon. I wasn't ready to wear black and call it a day. I've got lots more living to do. That's why I teach."

Zack's stomach decided at that moment to do a back flip. He felt queasy, queasier than he had felt on the airplane. Objects in his field of view were growing a bit fuzzy around the edges, too. When he opened his mouth, his words flew out without a second thought. "And that's why you go about chasing after your students?"

Diana visibly flinched. "Yes, I guess so. You're very perceptive, Zack, but you're not very gallant."

"Shorry," he slurred. "I know. I've been too blunt lately with people. No wonder Sharlene hates me so much."

"Sharlene hates you?" Diana moved closer again. "Why on earth would she hate you?"

Zack could swear his head had turned into a boulder—a boulder toppling off a cliff. It had to be the booze. He leaned back against the coolness of the leather couch and blinked hard several times to clear his mental processes.

"She hates me because I was paid to make her pregnant."

Diana took a sip of her drink, regarding him with open curiosity. "Paid? Tell me more about this arrangement. It sounds quite fascinating."

"Me and Keith needed the money, so we became

sperm donors, you see and —”

“And Ms. Pincher used your donation in order to conceive her child,” Diana finished, nodding her head. “I see. A very interesting story. Do go on. How did she discover you were the donor? Aren’t these things usually done anonymously?”

“They are. I found out and I told her.”

Diana’s face revealed no small measure of skepticism. “And that’s when you two started dating?”

“No, we started dating when she moved in with me—uh, into my building. Then I realized I was the baby’s daddy and I told her so. And now she’s mad at me.”

“She’s mad because you’re the father of her child or because you told her you were the father of her child?”

Zack scratched his part in slow motion. “I don’t really know. Maybe it’s because I told her on the plane?”

Diana slowly tasted her whiskey, looking sideways at Zack.

He sat up straighter. For some reason the world felt like it was falling off its axis. “I guess first class is not sush a good place to share intimate information with a person,” he confided. “But Sharlene told me before she left that she loved me. She said she wanted to marry me.”

“She did?”

Zack downed the rest of the brown liquid and tilted his head against the couch. “Yesh.”

Diana removed the empty glass from his hand before carrying it and her own to the wet bar. "Oh, Zack," she said, laughing. "You are such a fool."

His eyes widened. "Am I?"

"Yes, you are." She twirled around to face him. "You're a sweet boy, but you don't understand women at all. No wonder I feel so maternal toward you at times."

Maternal? Diana felt *maternal* towards him? Zack was so drunk he didn't know whether to feel relieved or insulted. He frowned. "What did I do wrong?"

She crossed back over to the sofa and sat down on the far edge. "Nothing. Nothing at all. You were just being honest. But your timing was off. It wasn't exactly the news Sharlene needed to hear in this point in your relationship, but you blurted it out without sugar-coating it, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did." He patted the top of his head. It no longer felt like it existed. "Didn't I?"

"You need to learn to be a bit more subtle," Diana scolded him, patting his knee in a friendly manner. "You should have waited for a nice quiet moment alone at home and then told her. So, have you apologized yet for being so abrupt?"

"Nope."

Diana shook her head and smiled. "That's probably why she's mad at you. She's waiting for you to make the first move. You need to go and find her and tell her you're sorry for speaking so recklessly without giving a care to how she felt."

"Yesh, that's what'll do!" Zack cried, standing up.

Suddenly the floor felt as if the New Madrid fault was located directly beneath it. Earthquake? He immediately sat back down.

Diana sighed. "But I can't allow you to drive home in this condition. Let me call you a taxi."

"I'm a taxi," Zack deadpanned.

"Very funny." The doorbell rang the moment Diana picked up her desk phone. She put down the receiver and briskly exited the library.

"You're in luck," Diana announced, re-entering the room. "You have a ride home."

Chapter Twenty

“Zack?” Sharlene cried as Diana guided her into the library. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of her baby’s father lazing spread-eagled across a large leather sofa. “Are you all right?”

“I’m feelin’ fine,” he sang out, lightly slapping himself in the face. “I can’t even feel my nose.”

Sharlene stared daggers at their hostess. “What did you do to him?”

“He’s a little drunk, that’s all.” Diana crossed over to Zack and shook his ankle. “Zack, get up. Your ride is here.”

“What the—?” He blinked hard. He must be hallucinating. “Not possible, it’s not possible...”

Sharlene rushed to his side and cast another accusing glance at the older woman. “What did you put in those drinks?”

“Just the usual.” Diana sniffed. “I don’t think Zack’s much of a drinker. Here, let me help you get him up and out the door.”

Each woman took an arm and after several awkward attempts they finally stood Zack up, semi-dragging him to the front door.

“Do you think you can manage him out to the car?” Diana asked, struggling to open the heavy door with her free elbow. “I’m not really dressed for

outside."

Sharlene rolled her eyes. "Sure. Just let me prop him up here for a second while I pull my car closer."

"Car? Lemme get my kesh," Zack slurred.

"Hang in there a sec," Sharlene shouted in his ear.

Diana nodded. "Don't worry. I'll keep him upright."

"Tanks for da drinks," Zack drawled, the smell of his breath stronger than the scent of a liquor store after an earthquake. "See you in clash tomorrow?"

Diana leaned his bulk against the door jam, futilely pointing his face away from hers. "Why don't you just forget about it for the rest of the term? You've got enough points to pass. I'll excuse you from any projects you didn't turn in."

"Will you really?"

"Yes, I will."

Zack eyes widened suddenly, a dreadful image coming to mind. "I can't recall but, we didn't happen to shleep together, did we, Diana?"

She shook her head. "No, thankfully we didn't. I think I've learned my lesson finally about becoming overly friendly with my students. I won't let it happen again in the future."

"Great." He blinked hard, caught in the beam of headlights. "Isn't that Sharlene's car out front?"

"Yes, it is. She's taking you home now." Diana nudged him toward the waiting vehicle. "Be a good boy now, and get in without a fuss. There you go."

Somehow Zack managed to swing open the passenger door and climb in. "'Nighty night," he

yelled out the window as Sharlene speed away from the portico.

"Pull your head in and stop yelling," Sharlene ordered. "And put on your seatbelt. I don't want to get pulled over by any cops if we can help it. You smell stronger than a Kentucky bourbon factory."

"I only had a few ships." He laid his head against the back of the seat and closed his eyes for a few minutes. "God, please let the world stop spinning."

Sharlene laughed. "You're cute when you're drunk."

"Good," Zack said, sighing. "It's better than being a mean S.O.B. who beats the hell out of his wife and kid like Keith's dad did whenever he was loaded."

"Is that the reason why your parents took him in?" Tears graced her lashes. "You've been a good big brother to Keith. I think you'd make a good father, too."

Zack opened one eye and gazed longingly at Sharlene's silhouette. "Thank you. You don't know how much hearing you say that means to me."

"You're welcome," she whispered.

After several moments of restful silence, Zack once again felt in control of his senses.

"I want to apologize for being such an ignorant, insensitive slob on the plane," he began slowly. "You have every right to be mad at me."

Sharlene wiped her tears onto the back of her hand. "And I want to say I'm so very sorry for driving you to drink—with Diana Markham, of all people. And I'm sorry if I interrupted anything and ruined your

plan to pass her class.”

“Plan?” He reached out and caressed her cheek. “The only plan I had was to throw myself on my professor’s mercy and beg for a passing grade. I did, and it worked. Diana gave me one.”

Sharlene’s eyes widened. “She did?”

Zack rubbed his temples to stop the slicing pain throbbing just beneath the skin. His stomach made an audible sound of protest as well. “Yeah, amazingly enough, she did.”

Once home, Sharlene helped Zack extricate himself from her small car and assisted him into the building and into the elevator.

“You missed my floor,” he said, observing the second floor go by.

“I’m taking care of you tonight. That is, if you haven’t moved all the furniture out of my apartment.”

Zack was sober enough now that the meaning behind her sexy smile and sultry voice wasn’t entirely lost on him. He quickly pulled her into his arms and pressed the gentle curves of her hips against the hardness of his desire.

“Don’t worry, it’s all there—the crazy couch, the table, the bed...”

“All my favorite places,” Sharlene purred. Suddenly she reached out and hit the emergency stop button. “But I don’t think I can wait that long.”

Her kisses fluttered across his lips, around his neck and chest, his outer clothing melting away as her hands traveled down his very aroused body.

He exhaled a sigh of pure pleasure. "My turn now."

He helped her slide out from under her top and quickly step out of her jeans. It was amazing how enticing a pregnant woman could be in only her lacy bra and matching panties. His tongue lightly danced along the silky material as her nipples hardened in response.

"It's good to be home," she said, struggling to remove his boxers.

"Yes, it is. But Keith sure as hell better not show up anytime soon and call the elevator repair guys."

"He won't. He's at Liza's. And I'm sure she's got her own ideas about unusual places to make love in mind."

Unhooking her bra with one hand, he delved his eager digits into her panties. "Really? Lucky boy."

She moaned, wriggling her sensitive nub against his probing fingers. "You can be lucky, too, if you help me get us out of these things."

"My pleasure."

Taking her hands in his, he slowly pushed his boxer shorts over his rock hard erection before grabbing the sides of her panties and driving them to the floor. Lying on his back, he helped her to kneel and straddle him, positioning his hands on either side of her hips as he gently guided himself into her.

"We've missed you so very much." Sharlene sighed, allowing his fullness to be enveloped within her.

Zack answered with a quick thrust, bringing forth

a gasp of surprise and delight. "We?"

"Me and the baby. He enjoys horsey rides as much as I do."

He chuckled. "Let's don't disappoint him then. We'll make it a long, hard ride, shall we?"

* * * * *

"Come on," Sharlene called from the bathroom. "The class starts in less than a half hour."

"Say what?"

Zack blinked hard and rolled over to stare at the alarm clock beside Sharlene's bed. 8:35 AM on a Saturday. The store didn't even open until ten. He closed his eyes and rolled over onto his stomach, blocking out the sunlight with a pillow. Last night's lovemaking session had been phenomenal—both on and off the elevator. He was totally exhausted. Being a tad hung-over didn't help, either.

Sharlene briskly strode into the bedroom and lightly flicked a towel at his butt sticking up in the air. "Up and at' em, Lazybones!"

"Ow! That hurt... my pride." He sat up and rubbed his injured area. "Keith's opening today. We can sleep in a bit more if you like."

"I'd like it a lot." An attractive blush colored her cheeks. "But you do remember what today is, don't you? We signed up to take birthing classes starting today."

Zack shook his head hard to clear the cobwebs. "Oh, *those* classes. They begin today?"

"Right, Einstein. So hop in the shower and get dressed pronto. I hate to be late for our first one."

Yawning, he stood and stretched his arms over his head, affording Sharlene with a delicious frontal view. "What's for breakfast?"

She slowly licked her lips. "Hmm, I have a sudden craving for link sausage, but I'm out of them. How about scrambled eggs and toast instead?"

"Sure. You make it, I'll eat it."

Zack took a sixty-second shower, toweled off and rushed into the kitchen.

Sharlene grinned and placed his plate on the table in front of him. "Impressive. When you're motivated, you certainly can get your tail in gear."

"When I'm starving, I'm motivated to get any part of my anatomy in gear." He playfully pulled her into his lap, kissing her long and passionately. "You're so sweet I don't even need any jam."

She returned his greeting with equal ardor. "I wouldn't mind 'jamming' a little longer myself, but we've got to get going, so eat up."

"I'm eating, I'm eating." Zack reached around her and forked some of the eggs. Sharlene sighed contentedly and laid her head on his shoulder.

"I wonder if they'll mind if we sit in each other's laps like this during class?" she asked.

"We're suppose to receive instruction on how to deliver a baby, so I think it's only fair we get to demonstrate how they got there in the first place."

Her eyes widened. "In public? I knew doing it in an elevator would give you ideas."

"Doing it anywhere with you gives me ideas," he said, winking. He grabbed a piece of toast and crammed it whole into his mouth. "Lemme call Keif downshairs before we go."

Sharlene stood and put the dishes into the sink. "I sincerely doubt you'll find him there this morning."

Zack took a big swig of juice and swallowed. "Huh? Where is he then?"

"Try Liza's number. I have a very strong feeling since I didn't return to her place last night that Keith didn't return home, either."

"Gotcha."

Zack crossed to the phone beside the couch and punched the speed dial button marked 'Liza's home'. On the fifth ring, the answering machine picked up. He switched the speaker on and turned up the volume so Sharlene could hear its message as well.

"If you happen to be either Zack or Sharlene," a giggly-voiced Liza announced, "this message is to let you know that Keith and I are going on a short trip and we will contact you shortly. If this is the exchange, please forward all my patients' calls to Dr. Fazoli at the clinic. We'll see you guys later. Take care. 'Bye.'"

Zack raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Liza certainly sounds upbeat. And if she's that happy, there's no doubt that Keith is over the moon with joy. I wonder where they've gone to."

"Maybe they've flown up to Chicago for a mini-vacation? Liza is always telling me how much she wanted to do some serious shopping at Marshall-

Fields and visit the Natural History Museum..."

Sharlene slapped her hand over her wide-open mouth. "Oops. I just remembered something."

"What is it?"

"There's no one to cover for you in the store this morning." Her head dropped. "We'll have to skip class, won't we?"

"No, we won't." Taking her hand in his, Zack lightly brushed his lips along her knuckles. "Having a healthy baby is more important than running a business. I'll stick a sign on the window saying we'll open today at eleven instead of ten. No big deal."

Tears of gratitude welled in her eyes as they embraced. "Oh, Zack. I don't know how to thank you."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you."

"For what?" she sniffed.

"For being the mother of my child. For being the love of my life."

She smiled. "And for being the lucky woman who got impregnated with your sample?"

"That, too," Zack said, squeezing her tight, knowing he would never grow tired of holding her, his heart's one desire.

* * * * *

Sharlene reveled in the quiet, slow-paced atmosphere of Richmond Electronics after an informative morning of birthing films and breathing exercises. Zack had been a natural at massaging her back and counting as

she slowly inhaled and exhaled as the instructor commanded. He had displayed amazing dexterity while changing diapers on a baby doll, so much that she could hardly wait until the actual baby was born just to see him in action. Her heart soared as she contemplated how happy they would be sharing this tranquil life together running the family store and raising Junior.

The expression on Zack's face at closing time reflecting anything but contentment, however.

"I'm going to have to dip into the savings again just to keep the lights on." He ran a tired hand through his thick chestnut hair and plopped into the chair beside the desk where she sat entering bookkeeping data. "Here I thought the money Dad left me from selling our old house five years ago would last forever. At this rate it isn't even going to make it to the end of the year."

"I don't think the figures look all that bad."

Sharlene bit the inside of her cheek in order not to say more. The numbers she had inputted all afternoon told a grim story. Richmond Electronics was far from being a financial success by any means. Her rent check had been more than just extra cash flow for the business these past few months—it had been a necessity.

Zack leaned across the desk and caressed her cheek, then kissed her playfully on the nose. "The figure sitting behind the desk looks terrific to me, and that's all that really matters. We'll get by somehow. After I get my degree, I'll get a job with some big

name in the city and work nights on repairs. If I can get Keith to carry his share of the load until we're financially sound, we'll make it. I'm sure."

Sharlene frowned. Zack was fooling himself and both of them knew it. It would take more than a second income for Zack to retire the debts mounting against him. It would take a miracle.

Or perhaps a friendly loan?

"Listen, Zack, you know how Uncle Bart—"

The shrill ring of the phone made them jump. Zack pounced on the receiver, sticking his finger in his other ear as he strained to make out the voice on the end of the line.

"Keith? Is that you?" Zack shouted. "Where the hell are you guys?" Pacing back and forth, he eventually sat down on the corner of the desk. "You went where? Vegas? Then Hawaii? You guys got *what*?"

Sharlene exhaled a long held breath. Las Vegas was known for its wedding chapels and Hawaii for honeymoons. Liza had the money... But was she really that impulsive that she'd rush to the altar with a man she hadn't known for very long?

"Congratulations are in order, I guess." Zack sighed. "A Vegas wedding for Sharlene and me? No, it's out of the question. Mom and Dad both would roll in their graves if we weren't married in the church."

How sweet, Sharlene thought. But here they were sleeping in the same bed, attending Lamaze classes together and they hadn't even planned their own wedding yet. Something needed to be done about the

situation—and soon.

“Yeah, put Liza on for Sharlene. I’m sure they have a lot of girl talk they want to share. I’ve got to go flip the sign over. See you at the end of the week, bro. Take care you don’t get a sunburn—particularly where it counts.”

Laughing, Zack handed the receiver across the desk to Sharlene. “They’ve got a place with a private beach with white sand and everything.”

Sharlene smiled, envisioning making love in the cool, smooth sand on a hot tropical night. She and Zack would be lucky if they could afford one night in the broom closet at the Clayton Ritz-Carlton for their honeymoon.

“I’ll be out front,” Zack added, heading toward the office door. “You two can chat in privacy.”

“Thanks.” Sharlene cleared her throat and slowly put the receiver to her ear. “Hello, Liza?”

“Girlfriend, you’ll never guess what Keith and I did!” Liza cried. The jubilation in her voice brought tears to Sharlene’s eyes.

“You two visited the casinos and then decided to do a little sight-seeing?”

“Yeah, right. We got married. In a little chapel. And the justice of the peace wore this outrageous Elvis-like, rhinestone-studded jumpsuit, too. And then we decided to take a little honeymoon on Maui.”

“Sounds wonderful. But I sure hope you know what you’re doing, Liza.”

“Doing? Of course I do! I’ve never been happier, Shar.”

"I mean, Keith's a bit younger than you, and —"

"Only by a handful of years," Liza cut in, "and it shows. Man, does it ever show — especially where it counts..." The doctor gave a low, throaty chuckle. "I may never be able to sit down ever again."

"Ahem! That's more than I wanted to know, thank you very much," Sharlene muttered, adding out of curiosity, "Are you two really all that compatible?"

"Compatible?" Liza's voice rose a notch. "Heck, he's hardly let me come up for air since we got hitched. Ever been made a member of the 'Mile High Club'? I highly recommend it."

Sharlene sighed. Too bad Zack had been such a poor flyer. Too bad she had been so mad at him for telling her on the plane he was the father of her baby. They could have said the same.

"What I meant to say was this — what have you and Keith got in common? He's a computer geek, an eternal student type of guy and you... well, you're a doctor."

"And?" Liza sounded huffy, defensive. "You're saying the medical and technical fields don't ever meet on common ground? I'd say Keith and I have a lot more in common than you and me, and we're friends."

Sharlene rested her chin in her hands. "Okay. I'll keep my yap shut on the compatibility topic from now on. I'm just worried you haven't known Keith for a long enough time to make such a momentous decision, that's all."

"All I know is that Keith said, 'Marry me' after a

few weeks acquaintance and meant it while Joel after living together for two years never could quite choke the words out. Be happy for us, girlfriend. I'm happy for you and Zack. You two are happy, right?"

"Yes, we are," Sharlene sniffed. A sad, sentimental feeling suddenly overcame her. What was it about weddings that always made her cry? "I'm just sad that I didn't get to be a bridesmaid in your wedding. Maybe you could be one in mine, though?"

"You bet. I'm already looking for just the right dress. Yes, I said a dress, Keith." Liza voice had taken on a sultry tone as she put her hand over the receiver. "No, we don't have to get dressed yet, baby. I was just talking to Shar about a dress."

"I'd better let you two get back to your honeymoon," Sharlene said, chuckling. "See you soon?"

"We'll be back by Friday night. Take care of yourself and Junior and don't forget to go in for your check-up this week. I'll be anxiously awaiting to hear all about your wedding plans when we return. Aloha for now, girlfriend."

"Aloha to you, too."

Sharlene slowly replaced the phone in its cradle. Here she was almost seven months pregnant and single and her closest friend had run off on the spur of the moment and tied the knot. Funny how things turned out in life.

"We should stay open five minutes later ever night." Zack bounced into the office with a big smile on his face. "That last sale was a big one."

He pulled up short in front of her, curiosity glowing in his big brown eyes. "Why so glum? You look like you just lost your best friend."

"I guess you could say I have in a way." Sharlene sighed and. "Liza now has Keith to be her best friend. There goes our girls nights out and our mad shopping sprees."

"Don't worry. Keith won't lock Liza up in the house every night from now until eternity. He'll get enough—I mean, he'll get used to married life sooner or later and let Liza reclaim her social life."

Zack knelt in front of Sharlene and tilted her until her gaze met his. "I promise I'll be your best friend from now on."

She placed her hand over his. "That's nice, but will you be my husband as well?"

He furrowed his brow. "I asked you to marry me, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, but we haven't exactly made any arrangements, have we?"

"No, we haven't. I need to call Father G. and make an appointment for us to speak with him, don't I?"

"I'd say so. Unless you want to do as Aunt Edwina suggested and wait to have the ceremony when I can fit into a regular sized wedding gown."

"No, I want to have you as my wife now, legally, totally and completely," Zack murmured, kissing her soundly.

Sharlene threw her arms around his neck and curled herself happily against his strong chest. His heart beat with a fierce rhythm equal to her own.

“Good. I can’t wait much longer, either,” she purred.

Zack lifted her into his arms in one swift move and headed toward the back hall. “My place, the elevator or yours?”

Chapter Twenty-One

The message light flashing on Sharlene's answering machine went unnoticed until late the next afternoon, long after she and Zack had gone around to the local parish and made an appointment to speak with a very curious Father Guiliani about their upcoming nuptials.

Why this? Why now? She wanted to hit the delete button and pretend she had never heard the entire message, but her conscience wouldn't allow her the luxury.

"Look what I found in my fridge—a decent head of lettuce," Zack called out, bounding up the stairs and into her apartment. "Keith must have bought it on sale or as a target for darts. Is this the kind you need to make salad?"

"Yes, it is." She took the slightly rancid vegetable from him and plopped it unceremoniously into the sink. The answering machine message couldn't be ignored any longer. She took a deep breath and pressed her palms together.

"Zack, sit down, please. I have some bad news to tell you."

He slowly lowered himself into the chair. "What is it? Is the baby all right?"

"The baby's fine. It's not that at all. Zack, my Uncle

Bart is dead."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." He stood and cradled her gently in his arms. "I hope he went peacefully."

"It sounds like he did. He died in sleep. But there's more."

He cocked his head to the side to study her face closely. "More?"

"The message came from Jeffrey... It seems that Jeffrey and I are not quite divorced after all. Jeffrey says he wants us to keep things as they are until after he receives his inheritance."

Zack's face paled. "He wants to *what*?"

"Jeffrey wants us to stay married a while longer, since there's seven million dollars at stake."

The pulse at Zack's temple throbbed, his breathing ragged as he paced the living room like a caged beast. "I thought you said since you came back from Mexico that the paperwork had been cleared. I thought you two were legally divorced."

"I thought so, too, but obviously Jeffrey was holding onto something. Maybe his lawyer used some kind of delay tactic so the judge forgot to date the document or something. It's a technicality, that's all. I'm sure my lawyer can clear it up quickly."

Zack collapsed onto the couch and closed his eyes as he laid his head back. "Your lawyer better or else I don't know what to tell Father G. I know he's not going to be thrilled about you being divorced to begin with, but this little mix-up... I don't know what to think anymore."

Sharlene plopped ungracefully beside him and laid

her head against his rigid shoulder. She pulled away as she felt him flinch involuntarily from her touch.

"Well, he's not going to be thrilled I'm not a card-carrying Catholic, either," she reminded him.

"You can take instruction," he said brusquely.

"I guess so. But Jeffrey and I had a civil ceremony, so it doesn't really count as a wedding at all to the church, now does it? I remember Edwina pointing that fact out to us at the time."

Zack leaned forward and dropped his head between his knees, rubbing his face repeatedly with his hands. "The Pope may not care about your marital status, but I sure the heck do. The state of Missouri does, too. You can't get a new marriage license when you have an old one in effect."

Sharlene exhaled a long, trembling breath. She stood and crossed to the door. "Yeah, you're right. Without a marriage license, we'd be forced to live in sin. Sort of like we've been doing all along."

Zack's head popped up. "Huh?"

"I didn't sleep in my own bed last night, remember?"

A lost expression radiated from his boyish features. "Oh, I see." He placed his hands on his knees and slowly stood. "We'd better sleep in separate bedrooms until this matter is cleared up."

Sharlene leaned wearily against the opened door. "I agree. I don't want to make you feel any more uncomfortable. It's probably for the best we give each other a little space."

"You're right." He kissed her softly on the cheek as

he passed her. "See you later?"

Blinking back bitter tears, she shook her head. "Yeah, later."

The ominous *click* of the door closing behind Zack echoed over and over in Sharlene's mind that night, reminding her how fleeting happiness could be.

* * * * *

Liza couldn't contain her happiness any longer. She started handing out gifts right and left to the taciturn guests seated on her living room sofa.

"This big blue and gold muumuu here is for you and this red and orange teeny-tiny one is for Junior there," she said, pointing to Sharlene's stomach. "That is, if he's a she."

Sharlene and Zack sat motionless like a pair of stuffed birds. It was a bit disconcerting. Liza did her best to ignore her friends' obvious internal distractions.

"I sure hope you like tropical prints, Zack, cause we got you a shirt to match, too." Liza turned toward the kitchen and shouted, "Where'd we pack that loud shirt we got for Zack, Sweet Lips?"

"I'm wearing it," Keith cooed. Entering the living room he handed Zack a beer and Sharlene a bottled water then sat down beside his bride, lassoing her in his arms. "Remember, Sug? I thought Zack would look better in the orange and gold one instead, so I'm keeping the blue one."

"That's right. How silly of me to forget. Don't

worry guys, I got a baby-sized tropical print shirt just in case Junior turns out to be, well, *Junior* after all." Liza paused and exchanged a look with her new husband before turning her attention back to the silent couple beside her. "Is there something seriously wrong with the two of you? You're acting as if somebody died."

"Somebody did," Zack replied flatly. "Sharlene's uncle passed away. It was in all the newspapers and on the financial channels about a hundred times this week already. I guess honeymooners don't watch TV or read much."

Liza gasped and reached for her friend's hand. "We didn't know. Shar, I'm so sorry. Is there anything we can do for you?"

Sharlene smiled wanly and shrugged. "You could find me a better lawyer. That'd be a big help."

Keith arched a curious eyebrow. "A lawyer for a funeral? Don't you mean an undertaker?"

"No, Aunt Edwina's already taken care of those arrangements. Funeral's Tuesday afternoon. I've got to go and pick Sister Elaine up at the airport that morning." She absentmindedly patted her expanding middle. "Boy, won't she be surprised when she sees me."

Liza winked. "I bet. Well, now that Old Man Pincher is gone, Jeffrey will have to give up this notion of you two getting back together in order to inherit some bucks. He'll have to learn to get used to living within his means."

"Why should he?" Zack said quietly. "They're still

legally married."

The bombshell detonated five seconds later.

"*What?* You're still married?" Liza and Keith cried simultaneously.

Sharlene grimaced. "Only by a technicality. It seems our papers weren't filed correctly. Jeffrey won't let them go through until he gets what was promised to him, he says."

"Bastard!" Keith pounded a fist on the coffee table, sloshing some of Liza's piña colada out in the process. "What does that asshole think he's doing wrecking your wedding plans?"

"Inheriting seven million dollars," Liza replied, sticking out her tongue. "Greedy scoundrel."

Keith whistled. "Seven mil? Lord, have mercy! How come nobody told me about this? Shar—you're worth *that* much? Why aren't you living in a mansion or a penthouse?"

Sharlene blushed. "I'm just a poor girl from the hills. I'm not worth all that much by myself. The baby is the heir. Bart left a small portion of his estate for the Pincher heir in his will."

"But it's Zack's kid, not old asshole Jeffrey's," Keith whined. "Didn't ol' Bartholomew Q. know the details of your crazy conception?"

"He did. I told Uncle Bart soon after I found out. I guess Jeffrey's gambling on the fact that Bart never got around to changing the will and that the courts will let him lay claim to being the child's father. That way, he'd have control of the child's inheritance."

"But you're certain you did tell Bart?" Liza asked.

"Of course I'm certain. I told him the same day Bart gave me the nest egg I've been living on for the most part all these months."

"Nest egg?" Keith asked. "You sure Jeffrey isn't after that money as well?"

"No, it's peanuts compared to what he'd have control of if the baby's crowned the Pincher heir," Sharlene admitted. "Besides, the check was made out to me and me alone as the unborn child's guardian. My lawyer could easily fight off any claim against it in court just by letting the case drag on forever—sort of like what Jeffrey's doing now. Time is on my side in this instance."

Zack suddenly stood and shouted, "That's it!"

Sharlene furrowed her brow. "What's it?"

Zack began pacing the length of the room. "Time. It's the solution to all our problems. I don't know why I didn't think of it before."

"Think of what before?" Keith wondered.

Zack shook his head excitedly. "Don't you see? Bart had more than enough time to change his will, and, in all likelihood, he probably did."

Liza nodded. "I agree with your logic. Most people when they receive a terminal diagnosis immediately update their wills and get their affairs in order."

"So Uncle Bart probably did change the will. What's that got to do with time?" Sharlene wondered.

"Everything." Zack stopped his pacing and leaned against the mantel. "All we need to do to solve this mess is to convince Jeffrey that his uncle has changed the will so that you two don't have to remain married

in order for him to inherit anything. If he's convinced about that then he'll demand his lawyers straighten out the divorce decree mess immediately so he can win back this Bunny Bread chick."

Sharlene giggled. "That's 'Bunny Byrd', I believe,"

"Bread, Byrd, whatever." Zack shrugged. "I've completely forgotten what the bimbo even looks like now."

Sharlene rushed into Zack's arms, hugging him tightly and covering his cheeks with kisses. She didn't know if she was more thrilled by his brilliant idea to defeat Jeffrey's scheme, or the fact that the airhead lingerie model hadn't made a lasting impression on him.

"Your plan sounds easy enough, homeboy," Keith snorted. "We just print us up a fake will and fool ol' Jeffrey with it. Yeah, right. That should do the trick."

Every eye in the room immediately rested upon Keith. He shook his head violently. "Oh, no, don't you guys start looking at me that way. I'm just a simple computer geek, not a lawyer."

"You're friendly with a few law students, though, aren't you?" Liza sensually massaged her husband's shoulders and blew in his ear. "I bet one of them could do something to help out if you asked. How about it, Sweet Lips?"

Keith's head lolled to the side, relaxing under his wife's touch. "There is that dude who asked me to catalogue every porn site on the web for him. It just so happens he's studying law."

Liza continued her massage. "Would he do you a

little, bitty favor, you think?"

"I—I don't know. Maybe. The job was a lot more labor intensive than I originally thought, and he didn't really pay me any extra for all my hard work."

Zack grinned. "*Hard* work, huh?" He picked up the phone from the couch table and placed it in Keith's lap. "I'd say it's time to call in the favor, bro."

* * * * *

"Why does it have to be me?" Sharlene grumbled. "I'm not a lawyer or a court official. He'll see through our little deception and kick me right out of the house and then we'll have to wait until Junior's high school graduation to get married."

Zack folded his hands atop his desk. Keith had done his work flawlessly. Now it was up to him to convince Sharlene to act confident or else her performance would ring hollow. They were risking too much to let Jeffrey see through their scam and thwart their wedding plans. "You're assuming Jeffrey's a mind reader—or a sensitive human being—which we both know he's not."

"Tell me about it," Sharlene agreed.

"All you really have to do is show him the fake letter and tell him how disappointed you two won't be gaining any share of the estate. Being the little toad he is, he'll give up on his dreams of riches and want to expedite the divorce so he can get back together with that Bunny Bread woman for a little mutual consolation."

Sharlene smiled. "More than likely she's probably busy on some porn flick somewhere out in Hollyweird right now."

"That's good. She should be able to help support his expensive habits with her income. That'll appeal to him."

"Won't it ever."

In spite of Zack's upbeat expression, a chill of dread suddenly came over her. She ran into his arms, holding on for dear life.

"Zack, hold me tight."

He gasped for air. "You're squeezing me to death."

She pulled back. "Sorry."

"Don't be." He took her small face between his hands, stroking her silky hair with his thumbs as he kissed her tenderly on the forehead. "You can do this."

She nodded. "I know. Give me my prop and I'll be on my way."

"That's my brave angel."

Zack swallowed hard and handed her the envelope. The letter inside was printed on mock letterhead made by duplicating an icon from the law firm's web site. Keith's soon-to-be lawyer acquaintance had been more than eager to help draft the necessary document after Keith had casually mentioned how he had kept all their electronic correspondence in regards to the adult web site cataloging work, and that he possessed the man's live-in girlfriend's e-mail address as well.

Sharlene held the letter by the corner as if it was

covered with anthrax before dropping it into her purse. "Okay, I'm outta here."

Zack pulled her close to himself once more and kissed her soundly for luck. "Just say you'll be my bride someday soon. Promise?"

Sharlene quickly wiped away a tear. "I will be your bride, Zack. Soon...very soon. I promise with all my heart."

* * * * *

Sharlene grimaced, turning her car into the driveway. The front of the condo had gone completely to pot. What had become of their hanging baskets of begonias? Why were there the remnants of at least five copies of the *Post-Dispatch* scattered throughout the bushes? Jeffrey was bucking to get in trouble with the condo association if he didn't at least attempt to maintain some semblance of order. She rang the bell twice and knocked three times. Still no signs of life.

"There's no use standing around here," she thought out loud, returning to her car. The clamor of crashing garbage cans in the garage caught her attention.

"Ooo, I hate when that happens," came a breathy, female voice.

"Bunny, is that you?" Sharlene exclaimed. "Hit the beige button on the wall by the kitchen door."

The electric garage door rose slowly, revealing the disheveled brunette dressed only in one of Jeffrey's dress shirts.

"So that's what that button does," Bunny said in awe before turning to her unexpected visitor. "Hello. What are you doing here?"

Sharlene carefully stepped around a multitude of empty wine bottles and beer cans. "I've come to tell Jeffrey he'd better get a hold of his lawyer and let our divorce go on through according to plan."

"Divorce? I thought you two were already divorced?"

"I thought so, too, but Jeffrey's lawyers say otherwise."

"Why—why that lying piece of shit!" Bunny cried, stomping her tiny, spike-heel sandaled feet. Sharlene could swear she saw steam pouring from the model's ears.

"My sentiments exactly," Sharlene agreed. "Is the lying piece of you-know-what at home by chance?"

Bunny nodded the affirmative and bit her lower lip, blinking back tears. "He—he told me he loved me and wanted to marry me."

Sharlene sighed. Jeffrey would propose to an ax murderer if he thought it would get him anywhere. "Let me talk to him for a couple of minutes, and I promise you, you two can be married before the week's out."

"Really? Bunny sniffed loudly and pointed upstairs. "He's still in bed."

"Thanks."

A sense of foreboding overcame Sharlene. She cautiously entered her former abode and quietly tiptoed up the steps. From the sound of Jeffrey's

snoring, most of the beer cans must have been his. An ugly yellow-green paisley bedspread hung half on, half off the bed, barely hiding his hairy backside.

"Jeffrey? I've got some news for you," Sharlene singsonged. Wakey, wakey."

"You got the coffee made already?" he mumbled, rolling over to his side. He blinked hard as he caught sight of Sharlene standing in the doorway. "Hey, what's up? You don't live here anymore."

She shook her head slowly. "By the looks of the charming decor, obviously not. Sit up and listen to me for a moment, will you please?"

"Why should I?" he whined, pulling the covers up to his chin.

"Because I'm going to try to talk some sense into you," Sharlene replied, exasperated.

"I don't want to listen to you."

"And pray tell, why not?"

"You're just going to try to talk me out of holding off on finalizing our divorce. You never did want me to get my hands on Uncle Bart's money. You wanted it all for yourself."

Sharlene clenched her fists. She felt like slugging him. "I could care less about the money and you know it. Jeffrey, we don't have to stay married any longer. It won't make a bit of difference. Read this."

He accepted the letter from her and blinked several times as he scanned its contents.

"This is from the old geezer's attorneys?"

"Yep. If you want to know the gist of it, both you and I were written out of the will after I told Uncle

Bart about the baby's true parentage."

"Crap." Jeffrey sighed loud and long. "Oh, well, it's to be expected. Bart always was a stickler for the rules in life."

Sharlene smiled. "I'm glad to see you can take this calmly. So there's no more need to let that poor underdressed woman picking up garbage downstairs in the garage suffer any longer. Phone your lawyer and clear this mess up so you can go ahead and marry her."

He scratched his head and then his backside. "I don't want to marry Bunny. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Hmm, nothing... I'll let you two work out the details. Now please call your lawyer and tell them to let the divorce go on through so I can be a free woman."

He snorted in disgust. "Free? You cost *me* quite a bit."

Sharlene looked imploringly into her former husband's eyes. "If you still had any feelings for me, Jeffrey, you'd let me go."

His wiped the sleep from his eyes and shook his head. "I still care about you, Shar. And I won't make you suffer any longer. Hand me the phone. I'll make the call." His business persona had taken him over again. "What time is it, by the way."

"About two-thirty in the afternoon." Sharlene handed him the cordless phone. "You and Bunny keep odd hours, don't you?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "Jerry Ledbetter, please,"

he barked into the phone. "Jerry? Jeffrey Pincher here. You got that little mix up over my divorce papers straightened out?" He held the phone away from his ear. "All right, all right, I hear you fine. Yes, I've changed my mind. Yes, I owe it all to you. It's as good as done, you say? Great. Thanks, Jerry. Yeah, we'll go with Plan B now. Talk to you later. 'Bye."

"Plan B?"

"We contest the will. Say Bart wasn't in his right mind to leave me out of it, that sort of thing."

"It figures." Sharlene sighed.

He raised an eyebrow. "What? You want in on some of the action, too?"

"I'll see you tomorrow morning, Jeffrey," she said backing out of the room. "I hope Bunny has suitable attire for the funeral."

"I'm sure she does. She tells me she has a terrific little number in black."

Yes, but does she mean a dress or a negligee? Sharlene giggled to herself. Pulling out of the driveway, she waved an enthusiastic good-bye to the scantily clad, happily smiling woman picking up garbage. It would be interesting finding out.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“This thing couldn’t fit any better if it was a gunny sack,” Sharlene groaned, balancing precariously on the dressmaker’s step for her gown’s final hemming. “I don’t know why I’m doing this big church wedding and what not, Liza. That Vegas wedding chapel where you and Keith got married doesn’t look all that bad in the photos. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I think I actually like the idea of eloping.”

Liza put her hands on her hips, circling the bride-to-be as she made a brief inspection. “Cool it, girlfriend. You look great. You can’t help it you don’t have a waist, but then again, what woman almost eight and half months gone does?”

Sharlene had to admit it, but the seamstress *had* done wonders with the original design to accommodate her growing form. The sheer lacy overlay of fabric flowed smoothly over the ivory knee-length, sleeveless sheath dress, effectively camouflaging her full hips, belly and breasts.

She had to take that back—the breasts were anything but camouflaged. The scooped neck actually emphasized her newly improved cleavage. In a way, she had never felt so feminine in her life.

“You’re right.” Sharlene smiled. “I look terrific,

don't I? I actually have boobs for once in my life. I should relax and enjoy it, huh?"

Liza winked at the dressmaker, grinning from ear to ear as the woman exited from the room. "Right on, sister. Now, hurry up and get out of that get-up so we can make it to your dress rehearsal on time."

"A dress rehearsal for a five minute ceremony. Whoever heard of anything so ridiculous." Sharlene accepted Liza's helping hand and stepped down. "You suppose Bunny Byrd ever has a dress rehearsal before she shoots a scene in one of those adult films?"

"Rehearsal, maybe, but *dressed*?" Liza laughed. "I sincerely doubt it."

Sharlene giggled. "It's more like an *undressed* rehearsal. That's funny, that's really funny. Ow!"

A sudden stab of pain and Sharlene doubled over. Concern flashed across Liza's otherwise calm features. She led her pregnant friend to a bench beside the dressing room area.

"Is there something you're not telling me, Shar?"

She took a shaky breath. "Not telling you? Isn't it obvious. Junior's kicking me. Really hard this time."

"Are you sure it's not like the pain you felt before when you made that brief visit to the hospital?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," Sharlene lied. "See, he's stopped now. All better. Don't worry. I've waited for this long enough, and I'm sure as heck not going to go into labor on my wedding day."

* * * * *

"I'm getting married in the morning..."

Zack tossed and turned in the sheets. Whoever came up with the dumb custom of the bride and groom not seeing each other the day of the wedding should be shot. If there ever was a time he needed to have Sharlene next to him, her head cradled against his chest, or better yet on top of him, he inside of her, loving her until the sun came up, then it was tonight.

"Damn! Why had Liza demanded Sharlene spend the night at her place? Why had Sharlene agreed? I could have easily sneaked upstairs and —"

Oh. That was probably why Liza and Sharlene had made the arrangements.

Strange, but it seemed nobody held any of his weaknesses against him. Didn't Edwina and Bart both give him their nod of approval? And even Sister Elaine had given them permission to marry at old Bart's wake...

"You've found a good Catholic boy with his head firmly planted on his shoulders," the middle-aged nun had informed Sharlene in his hearing after they had shared a lengthy conversation about the store, his studies, his parents and his problems paying the bills. Elaine had advised them that they should go through the complete marriage counseling course with Father Guiliani before scheduling their nuptials. She also mentioned that Sharlene should sign up for RCIA classes right away so she would be ready to be confirmed when it was time to have the baby baptized. Zack was grateful for Sister Elaine's wise counsel and care. Too bad her cousin Jeffrey and his

choice of a partner didn't fare quite as well —

"St. Francis dearly loved all the little creatures of the forest alike," Sister Elaine had announced in a loud voice as Jeffrey and Bunny were getting ready to leave the party. "Take care of your little rabbit there, cousin. Make sure she doesn't run outside and play in traffic."

Zack smiled to himself. Rabbits were only noted for their ability to breed, not their brains.

Breeding?

Zack sighed. "What I wouldn't do to break into Liza's place and start the honeymoon tonight..." He sighed again. "Time for another cold shower."

Hopping out of bed, he headed straight for the taps. "This is getting embarrassing. I am so glad Keith doesn't live here anymore."

* * * * *

"I now pronounce you man and wife," Father Guiliani announced to the small congregation. "You may kiss the bride."

Keith chuckled softly. "It seems obvious the groom's done more than just kiss the bride before."

Liza elbowed him. "Sh! It sounds like sour grapes on your part. You don't begrudge Zack and Sharlene their happiness, do you?"

"You know I don't." Keith's smile widened as he watched the happy couple deepen their altar embrace into a passionate and lingering kiss which showed no sign of ending until the priest loudly cleared his

throat and pronounced the benediction.

"Of course, what's the use of throwing rice at them? They're fertile enough," Liza teased, tossing a saucy wink at her husband as they rose from the front pew.

"Sounds like sour grapes, Mrs. Marshall."

"Oh, Liza! Keith! I'm so happy!" Sharlene cried, throwing her arms around them at the chapel entrance.

Liza grinned. "It shows, girlfriend, it shows." There was something else, something odd in Sharlene's expression. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just fine," she replied breathlessly. "Just a little tired from all the excitement. I could barely sleep last night."

"Me neither," Zack chimed in. He turned and hugged both his best man and the matron of honor.

"That was the idea," Keith mumbled. "We wouldn't want you two to get a head start on your honeymoon now, would we?"

"You guys are staying at the Ritz-Carlton, right?" Liza asked. "You've got both my home and pager numbers on hand?"

"Of course we do." Sharlene nodded. "But don't worry. We've got a few days to enjoy ourselves before Junior arrives. Don't we, Zack?"

Zack gave his bride a quick peck on the cheek before the remainder of the crowd descended upon them. "That's right. I hear tell Liza Allen, MD, never makes mistakes when it comes to setting due dates."

Liza stepped back to let the other guests greet the

newlyweds, all the while nervously biting her lip. "I hate to say this, but there's always a first time."

* * * * *

"A combined baby-wedding shower. That's life in the dawn of the twenty-first century for you," Edwina drawled, accepting a flute of sparkling cider. She took a long sip and sat down on Liza's couch beside the guests of honor. "I suppose we ought to be grateful the bride made it through the ceremony before going into labor."

Liza smiled at the older lady. Edwina acted tough, but underneath the glitzy exterior she was a softy. "I'm grateful the groom had the presence of mind to remember all the breathing techniques on the honeymoon."

"I'm grateful we were honeymooning all of a mile or two from the hospital," Sharlene said, gazing lovingly at her husband as he held their one-month-old son Zachary F. Richmond II, affectionately known to one and all as 'Junior'.

"I'm grateful Junior was such a tough little guy and didn't mind coming out to play a couple weeks early," Zack said with a happy sigh. Weighing in at almost eight pounds, it would have been an even harder delivery if Junior had lingered in the womb much longer and grown any bigger. His early arrival had been a blessing in disguise.

Sharlene stroked her son's downy fair head and giggled. "What a story we can tell our grandkids—

how our honeymoon was interrupted by a trip to the maternity ward."

Zack winked. "And how I almost delivered him in the back of a cab."

"You did not." Liza sat down beside them. "That was only Shar's water breaking. She was in labor for at least another four hours."

Zack pouted. "It was close enough."

"You're my hero, anyway." Sharlene planted a big kiss on her husband's cheek. "You got us there in one piece, and your phone call woke Liza up in plenty of time. She practically beat us to the maternity floor."

"Well, she wasn't exactly sleeping when you called," Keith mumbled, strolling from the hors d'oeuvres table to sit down and put an arm around his wife. "I should be used to being interrupted in the middle of the night by now, being married to a baby doctor. At least it wasn't our own little bundle of joy keeping us awake. I suppose we've got a few years until that happens."

From the corner of her eye Sharlene caught Liza's embarrassed flush. Her friend *was* looking a little more full-figured than normal, and if she wasn't too off the mark there was a faraway look in Liza's eyes...

"You'll have to get used to it sooner than you think, Keith." Sharlene winked at her friend. "Isn't that right, Liza?"

Liza's eyes widened. "How did you know? I haven't told anyone yet."

Keith frowned. "Told anyone what?"

Zack correctly interpreted the twinkle in his bride's

brilliant eyes. He playfully mussed his foster brother's hair. "Frizzhead, can't you figure it out? Junior's going to have a little playmate soon."

"He's going to have a..."

Keith's mouth dropped to the floor. He faced his beaming wife and grasped her hands. "We—we're going to have a baby?"

Liza mutely nodded. They embraced.

"Congratulations. At least you two got it in the proper order—wedding first, honeymoon second, maternity ward third," Edwina remarked, tilting her chin higher. "I approve."

"You always were a stickler for decorum, Aunt Edwina," Sharlene said, hugging Liza with one arm.

The older lady raised an eyebrow. "Somebody had to be. Your Uncle Bart certainly wasn't at times."

"Really? Give us a for-instance?" Zack asked.

"This nonsense about the Pincher heir and what all in his will. He completely re-wrote the thing a month before he died."

Sharlene lowered her voice and leaned closer. Bunny Byrd was firmly ensconced in a corner of the living room, wistfully eyeing the baby gifts. "He did?"

"Yes, he completely eliminated that paragraph the day after Jeffrey left Acapulco. Bart realized what a mistake it was for him to give Jeffrey a sum of money without making him work for it."

"So Jeffrey's getting nothing?" Zack asked.

"Oh, he's getting something," Edwina replied, a slight curve on her red-tinted lips. "Jeffrey has been

put in charge of a good portion of the business to run. Both he and you and your little one, Sharlene, are to receive dividends from the company's stock. If Jeffrey manages things well then you'll all be well off, but if he doesn't..." She shrugged.

Sharlene met her husband's gaze and sighed as they both looked upon their sleeping child. "I think at this moment we're as well-off as anyone on earth can be."

Zack shook his head. "I agree."

"It certainly was nice of Uncle Bart to remember us this way. What made him change his mind?" Sharlene asked gently.

Edwina blinked back a tear. "I don't know. After you two left he told me one night it was high time for him to stop being the hard-nosed type. He'd made his fortune, enjoyed it, now it was time to stop worrying about the future of Pincher Industries. A direct descendant would inherit it or not, but it really wasn't important in the grand scheme of things. Then he told me what was."

Sharlene tenderly patted Edwina's hand. "What did he tell you?"

"He told me love was all that mattered in the world. You and Zack loved each other—that was obvious—and seeing how happy you two were made him feel like he'd done the right thing by helping you out. He said he realized how throwing money at Jeffrey wasn't the kind of love the boy really needed. He wanted to make sure Jeffrey would always remember him each and every day for the rest of his

life, and what better way than by making him run the company?"

"I always suspected Uncle Bart was a sentimental fool under all that gruff exterior." Sharlene winked.

"What did Jeffrey say about the changes in the will?" Keith wondered.

"Surprisingly not much."

Edwina turned to Sharlene, and lowered her voice. "After he told me about how your divorce hadn't been processed correctly but that he was still going to let you go, I got the feeling Jeffrey had lost interest in the money." She glanced over her shoulder at Bunny, animatedly talking about the virtues of hybrid car seats-baby carriers with Connie Michaels and several of the other guests. "Maybe Jeffrey's found true love, too?"

"I don't know about that." Zack carefully handed a hungry, lip-smacking Junior over to his mother. "But I do think Jeffrey may have found his emotional and intellectual equal in Ms. Bread."

"It's 'Byrd.' And don't be so hard on the woman," Sharlene gently chided, adjusting her shirt for Junior to nurse. "Bunny's got lots of good qualities."

Liza rolled her eyes. "Like what?"

Sharlene bit her lip and thought a moment. "I don't know exactly, but she's probably got a few. It's just difficult to see them clearly because her plunging neckline gets in the way."

"No problem breastfeeding there," Keith muttered, checking out the adult film actress from head to toe.

Liza promptly clobbered her husband with a throw

pillow.

"Hey! I was only kidding," he cried, raising his arms in self-defense.

"You'd better have been... Don't you think it's time for the toasts, Sweet Lips?"

"Yeah, you're right, Sugar."

Keith stood and loudly cleared his throat. "Attention, everyone. I'd like to propose a toast to the bride and groom and new parents alike, Sharlene and Zack Richmond. May their lives be filled with love and happiness, never be lacking in joy—" He quickly glanced over at his wife. "And never be lacking in plunging necklines."

Liza playfully socked him again with the pillow. "Pervert!"

"What do you expect from the man who cataloged the Internet's entire listing of porn sites?" Zack laughed, lifting his drink high.

"I'm never going to live that one down, am I?" Keith raised his glass and sighed. "Cheers everyone. And please, everyone help yourself to the food. It looks like Junior over here already has."

Sharlene flashed a disgusted glance at their host and gently kissed her baby's forehead before switching sides. "Junior, that's your Uncle Keith talking. You'll have to learn to ignore him when he's being rude."

Keith frowned. "Hey, don't go telling Junior things like that. I want the kid to talk to me *sometime* during his life."

Bunny Byrd approached and tentatively tapped

Keith on the arm. "You didn't happen to see any of my photos online, did you?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"The answer had better be no," Liza said through gritted teeth.

"I—I don't recall if I did or not," Keith replied diplomatically.

"That's too bad." Bunny frowned. "I thought I was rather popular."

Zack grinned at Keith as the model strolled toward the food table. "Good answer, bro."

"Good woman," Keith replied, hugging Liza close.

Zack put an arm around Sharlene and Junior and tenderly kissed them both. "Same here. Same here."

CYNTHIANNA

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