



*Finding Julia*

*Desiree Holt*

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

*As always to my beloved David, who really was Luke, and to the real Courtney,  
who grew up to be a wonderful daughter.*

## *Chapter One*

Julia Patterson put her suitcases in a precise alignment in the front hall and, through the narrow window, eyed the trickles of rain dripping down the pane of glass.

*Damn.*

She hated flying to begin with. Now she worried that the flight would be delayed taking off, or worse, that they'd run into bad weather en route. Well, nothing to be done for it. She had to make the trip. The anticipated contract was too lucrative to pass up, and Claire Westbrook, her partner, was tied up on another project.

For the tenth time, she checked herself in the powder room mirror. Not much she could do about her height. Short was short. Period. She wore heels to stretch to five foot four. But everything else received methodical attention, just like all the areas of her life.

Brown hair blunt cut to dust her shoulders hung perfectly, the golden highlights reflected in the vanity lights. Navy slacks sharply creased, tweed jacket hitting the hips at the perfect spot, white silk turtleneck accenting her olive complexion. Even the gold hoops at her ears hung in symmetry. Julia kept everything properly aligned—her house, her clothes, her life. If there was one thing she'd learned from Charles, it was to be precise and exact.

Charles. His name sent a tiny shiver the length of her spine. One more stroke of a pen and she'd be rid of him altogether. All these weeks of torturous haggling, draining telephone calls and his methodical presence in her life would finally be at an end. Andy and Beth, their seven-year-old twins, still struggled with the reality of the divorce, an emotional situation filled with complications too enormous to comprehend at their age. Luckily, though sadly, Charles had never made himself an integral part of their lives. Once the final papers were filed, their lives could move into the next phase, one Julia had carefully arranged.

There was just today to get through and Thanksgiving, three days from now. The reminder made her stomach cramp. In a moment of total insanity, she'd agreed to have everyone for Thanksgiving dinner at the house. Her house, now. Or almost. Everyone included Howard and Eloise Patterson, Charles's parents who made ice cubes look hot, and his sister Evelyn, her husband Mark and their ten-year-old daughter.

"It's the very least you can do," Charles argued. "You're the one who insisted on this ridiculous divorce. Don't you think you owe something to me? To my family?"

*How about a hit man?*

His voice gave her the same feeling of discomfort as a hangnail. Too bad she couldn't just clip him away. The fairy tale courtship and wedding now seemed as if they'd belonged to someone else. She was left with the villain of the piece.

Shaking off the anger that always lurked beneath the surface, she turned into the kitchen. Miranda Black was standing at the counter, making notes on a pad of paper. When the twins were born, Charles had insisted—no, demanded—she get a housekeeper. He had no intention of letting the arrival of two infants upset the routine of the house in any way. Miranda had arrived a week later, agency reference in one hand, suitcase in the other, and had been there ever since. For Julia, she was more family than employee, and that kept her existence from sliding off center.

"I'd like to check the lists again," she said now, reaching for the pad of paper.

Miranda grinned. "Mrs. Patterson, you've checked them five times today already. I have everything on there for tomorrow's grocery shopping and everything to prepare on Wednesday. Let your mind rest, okay?"

But they both knew Julia's mind seldom rested.

She was irritated to have this damn dinner hanging over her. Another of Charles's punitive quirks. Part of the divorce agreement was that she would have all holiday dinners at the house they'd shared, and include his parents. If Charles was bad, his parents were worse.

She inhaled slowly to center herself. By tonight, she'd be in Boston. Tomorrow she'd be making a key marketing presentation to Hot Ticket, a major sports apparel company, on the proposed plan for their new line. This was the largest bid yet by Bright Ideas, the agency she and her friend, Claire Westbrook, had established three years ago. It was the venture that had caused major upheavals with Charles and precipitated the final break in their marriage. She and Claire had worked hard for opportunities like this. As important as this meeting was, she didn't want to leave anything behind because she'd been careless.

"Have you seen my briefcase and computer?" she asked Miranda, mentally running down her last minute checklist.

"Right by the back door with your luggage. I wanted to make sure you had all your things together."

"Oh, thank God." Julia exhaled in relief. "The car service will be here any minute. It's starting to rain, so I want to get to the airport before the weather closes in."

"Not to worry." Miranda smiled at her. "You're all set."

"We have to be civilized about this, Julia," Charles had said in his clipped voice when discussing the holiday. "Until you come to your senses."

"I have come to my senses," she'd insisted, forcing herself to be calm. She couldn't let him bait her the way he always did. "Dinner. Fine. Nothing more."

"Done and done." Miranda smiled at her now. "This won't be the first holiday dinner I've helped you put together."

Julia gave her an impulsive hug. "Whatever would I do without you?" She stepped back, grinning. "And don't let me find out. The twins are in the family room?" Miranda nodded. "I'll just say goodbye one more time."

Andy and Beth were planted in front of the television, staring with rapt attention at a cartoon.

"Hey, kiddos." Julia scooped down to their level. "You guys be good for Miranda, okay?"

"Will you be home tomorrow?" Beth asked, sliding her eyes away from the set.

"Not tomorrow, but the day after, and then we'll have fun making Thanksgiving dinner. Okay?"

"Me, too?" Andy wasn't going to be left out, but his eyes remained glued to his program.

"You, too, sweetie. Now both of you give me a big hug and a kiss."

Julia heard the tap of a horn outside and hurried to the door.

"Damn," she muttered, and felt the familiar knot settle into place in her stomach. "How the hell did this happen?"

Rather than the dark sedan the car service used, she saw Charles's grey Lincoln sitting impatiently in the driveway. In a moment, he got out of the car, slammed the door, and stamped up to the front porch.

Julia pulled the door open. "What are you doing here? I'm leaving in a few minutes. The car service is due any time."

"I cancelled them. It's raining. I came to talk you out of this ridiculous trip with bad weather closing in, and discuss ending this sham of a divorce."

*Not today. Please not today. Don't let him get to you. Don't fall apart.*

"I can't believe you took this on yourself to do," she told him. "It's too late to call them back. I'll have to make other arrangements. Damn."

"I forbid you to go."

Flat, cold words, as if what he said was law.

"Charles." She curled her hands into fists. "I'm going. You no longer have the right to tell me what I can and can't do. And there is nothing to discuss about the divorce except when you're finally going to sign those papers." She turned to go into the kitchen. "Never mind. I'll see if Claire can take me."

"Julia." He used that tone of controlled patience that she'd grown to hate so desperately. "You are the most irritating woman. Fine. If you insist on going despite everything, I'll take you. But I think it's ridiculous to take chances when we have dinner coming up on Thursday."

*Yes, of course. Dinner is the most important thing.*

At that moment, the twins tumbled into the foyer from the family room.

"Daddy!" Andy screeched.

"Daddy's here!" Beth cried.

They threw themselves at him, each one hugging a leg.

Charles hated the blast of energy they always assaulted him with.

"Julia." Charles stood in his perfectly tailored black suit and midnight blue topcoat, not a crease in sight, not a wrinkle, not a smudge. Everything was as perfect as the day it came from the tailor. His mouth was set in a thin line as he tried to untangle the children. "Must they attack me like thugs when I come in the door?"

"They're your children, Charles. They want to let you know how glad they are to see you."

He closed his eyes, rocking back on his heels.

Charles's cold attitude where the twins were concerned bothered the hell out of her, but now was not the time to begin an argument, one she had no chance of winning.

In the Patterson family, expressions of emotion were strictly forbidden.

*No wonder he grew up to be the way he is.*

Miranda, eyeing the situation, gathered the twins and ushered them into the kitchen, soothing and distracting them.



"Are you ready?" A muscle jumped in Charles's cheek. "I'd like to get going. It's raining and the traffic will be a mess."

"Yes, I'm all set." Julia slipped into the jacket of her pants suit, then picked up her purse, briefcase, computer, and warm duffel coat. The weather report for Boston was snow, snow, and more snow. "If you'll get the suitcase, we can leave."

Hurrying out to the car, she buckled herself into the passenger seat, leaned her head back, and closed her eyes, hoping for a moment of quiet peace. A dull ache began to build behind her eyes, the result of the tension that always filled the air between them.

She watched the raindrops spatter against the windshield, a waterfall parted by the regular motion of the windshield wipers. That was her life, she thought. A curtain falling, parting momentarily, then dropping back in place like a shroud.

When had she realized the commanding presence she'd once admired in Charles was instead an obsessive need for control? The armor of a man never quite comfortable in his own skin? How had the fairy tale wedding morphed into this nightmare? This struggle for survival? Perhaps on their wedding night, when her dreams and fantasies had dissolved into disappointment, shame, and humiliation.

In the seven years of their marriage, he had become steadily more dictatorial, more autocratic, more controlling. She was angry at herself for allowing it, for losing herself in the relationship until she no longer had an identity of her own. And angrier still for not breaking the cycle before this. She'd finally found the courage to do it, but it had been as nasty as she'd expected.

Julia swallowed a sigh. She had stayed in the marriage as long as she could for the twins, but the home life she tried too hard to create had cracked visibly, and it was time to make her move.

Telling Charles she was divorcing him had been her most difficult task yet. Worse, because he'd fought her at every turn, assuming that, as an attorney, he'd hold the upper hand and emerge the victor. Lucky for her, Claire had found her a shark who could draw blood.

"Again, Julia, you have made an irresponsible decision." Charles's words were like tiny pin pricks bringing her back to the present. "I don't know why you have to go away during this particular week. Thanksgiving is Thursday, and you know my parents are very particular about how we celebrate the holidays."

*Yes, I certainly do. More than I want to.*

“Charles, I’ll be back Wednesday afternoon.” She forced herself to bite back her automatic retort. “Miranda is doing all the grocery shopping, she’ll have the table set by Wednesday night and everything ready for me to finish cooking Thursday morning. I’m only doing this for the children anyway, so don’t push me or there won’t be any dinner at all.”

“May I remind you of the very generous monthly stipend your attorney screwed me out of? There are certain conditions for you to continue receiving it.”

“As if I could stop you,” she snapped.

“My parents like to eat Thanksgiving dinner at three,” he reminded her. “It’s a tradition. Nothing should disrupt that.”

“God forbid we should ever break with tradition,” Julia muttered under her breath.

“What did you say?” Charles cast a sideways glance at her.

“I said don’t worry, I’d never break with tradition. Dinner will be on the table exactly at three.”

Charles made no comment, his attention at the moment riveted on steering his way through the traffic with precise moves. “I don’t know why Claire couldn’t have gone instead,” he said finally, petulance creeping into his voice.

“Claire is doing the Thanksgiving Festival starting Friday, as you well know.” Julia was irritated. This wasn’t the first argument they’d had about this. “They have no children. This way I can spend the long weekend with the twins.”

“I’d rather you didn’t work at all and stayed home where you belong.”

“I will not have this discussion with you again at this particular moment.” She fisted her hands to hold her temper in check. “Your choices are no longer a factor in my life. I’m sick of the whole thing.”

“No more than I am. Julia, I’m tired of waiting for you to come to your senses and call off this ridiculous divorce activity.”

*Slap, slap, slap* went the windshield wipers, a metronome keeping time to the throbbing in her head.

“It’s not ridiculous, and it’s almost final.”

“Almost being the key word.”

“Charles...” *Oh, God, why doesn't he shut up?*

"Never mind." Charles's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "You were right. This is neither the time nor place to discuss this. But trust me, we *will* be talking about this when you get back."

"I can hardly wait," she muttered and moved as close to the door as her seat belt would allow.

They sat in silence the rest of the way to the airport. Charles let her out at the Departures entrance, confirmed her return time and flight with her.

"I'll pick you up." It was as much an order as an announcement. Would she never have space to breathe with this man?

"Why do you do this?" she asked. "It's over, Charles. Over. I don't want you hovering and caging me in. I'll take the airport limo home. Or arrange for the car service."

A muscle jumped wildly in his cheek. "Any moment now you will come to your senses and stop this ridiculous charade. I may not be able to sleep in my own bed for the moment, but it is my responsibility to make sure you arrive home safely. We have dinner planned for Thursday."

Ah, yes. The dinner again. It would be a damned shame if she killed herself before the obligatory holiday meal.

Tired of the argument, she simply nodded and slammed the door.

Charles pulled quickly away from the curb, water spraying out in a rooster-tail from under his wheels. The only thing more drenched than the pavement was her heart.

## *Chapter Two*

The snow was thick when they landed, and the trip to the hotel in the little town outside the city was long and nerve-wracking. Julia skipped dinner for hot tea, a hot bath, aspirin and bed.

By morning, she'd recharged her batteries, forcibly pushing all thoughts of Charles from her mind. She took extra pains with her makeup, accenting her deep hazel eyes with flecks of green in the irises, swiping mascara on her thick lashes, pulling her dark brown hair shot with gold highlights into a heavy gold clip, and smoothing on a bright red lipstick to match her red power suit that perfectly fit her trim, five foot two figure. Fortified by breakfast and four cups of tea, she was riding an adrenaline rush when her cab pulled up to the hotel entrance.

The corporate headquarters for Hot Ticket Sportswear was a small two-story building with lots of brick and glass. Julia had a vague impression of landscaping that in the summer would add a luxurious feel to the grounds; then she was inside.

Howard Manning, Director of Marketing, was waiting to lead her through security and up to the board room on the second floor. "We're anxious and excited to see your presentation, Ms. Patterson," he told her.

"Julia, please."

"Okay, Julia." He smiled. "We're definitely ready to see what you propose for our new roll-out."

"Will everyone be there that needs to be?" she asked.

"Pretty much. However, as I explained, we'll do the presentation in two parts. This morning you'll meet with our department heads and the worker bees who'll deal with what you create. This afternoon you get the suits—the executive staff—including our CEO."

The faces greeting her in the board room were smiling and expectant, the usual eclectic mix of young and old, fresh and worn, male and female, and a wide mix of cultures. Manning had

arranged for all the equipment she requested, so she hooked up her computer and brought up the PowerPoint presentation. After Howard introduced her, she drew in a breath and began her pitch.

The morning sped by. She had two-page handouts for everyone that she passed out at the appropriate time and answered questions. But she knew this was all just preparation, a briefing if the company bought her plan. Howard had ordered lunch sent in for everyone, giving Julia a chance to chat informally with the group and prepare for the afternoon.

"Our executive vice president is tied up in a meeting right now," Howard whispered as the executive staff filed in. "He's really the one who says yea or nay. He'll join us as soon as he can."

*Great. Will he expect me to do it all over again for him?*

She sighed and began her presentation again.

It was well into the afternoon and she had just pulled out copies of the proposed budget to distribute when the door to the board room opened quietly and Julia's stomach dropped to the floor. She felt as if an electric surge had slammed into her, plucking at all her nerve endings.

The man who silently took a seat at the end of the table wasn't necessarily handsome, but he was all male. His liquid brown eyes were framed by the thickest lashes she had ever seen on a man. He had a strong jaw and lines of character etched on his face. His straight brown hair, a hint of silver reflecting in the lights, was worn just little long, giving him a slightly rakehell look.

The classic dark business suit barely concealed the power he radiated. More than that, he exuded an aura of self, of authority, of comfort in his own skin that few men are able to attain. She could think of only three words to describe him. Dark. Edgy. Dangerous.

*Careful, Julia. Don't let your mind wander into dangerous territory. Your judgment where men are concerned leaves a great deal to be desired.*

"Let me interrupt a moment." Manning jumped to his feet. "Julia, this is Lucas Buchanan, our executive vice president. He's been in another meeting until now."

"I'm pleased you could join us, Mr. Buchanan." Julia pasted on her professional smile and hoped her voice sounded firmer to the others than it did to her.

Lucas Buchanan nodded at her. "Luke, please. Sorry to be late. Please don't let me interrupt."

She struggled to pick up the threads of what she'd been saying, her brain suddenly addled, and her hands unsteady. Had a man ever affected her like this before? She didn't think so.

Certainly not Charles. It took every ounce of personal discipline to keep focused on her presentation.

Somehow she got through it, even managing to answer questions intelligently. Luke was silent throughout, but his eyes never left her. She knew he would remember and file away everything said. A man like Luke Buchanan didn't get where he was by not paying attention.

Then finally, they were finished, and she was shaking hands with everyone. Howard Manning stood at her elbow like a well-bred guard dog, ushering everyone along. Luke was still sitting at the end of the table, watching quietly through hooded eyes. She busied herself packing everything back into her briefcase, feeling as if she were surrounded by his presence.

"I hope you'll join me for dinner," Howard told her when she was finished.

"Ms. Patterson will be having dinner with me, Howard. Thanks anyway." Luke was suddenly next to her, his arm at her elbow.

"Oh, that's not necessary," she began, but he interrupted her.

"We still have business to discuss, don't you think?"

He phrased it as a question, but Julia had no doubt he was telling her, not asking. She was shocked at the electric jolt his light touch had sent buzzing through her system and wondered if the man sensed how rattled she was. "Yes. Thank you. That would be very nice."

His very nearness swamped her. She felt as if she were being drawn into a vortex, powerless to pull herself out. Sex with Charles had always been... perfunctory. A disappointing crash after what she guessed were unrealistic expectations. But this man, with one casual touch of his fingers, had set bells ringing inside her. She hoped she didn't look and sound as dazed as she felt.

Still lightly touching her arm, he looked at Howard.

"Why don't you carry Ms. Patterson's things downstairs for her and I'll pick her up in front." He turned to Julia. "Five minutes. Howard will help you."

The private elevator doors opened and he was gone before she even knew he had left her side. The place where he'd touched her still tingled and his absence left her suddenly bereft.

"Well, that's a good sign," Howard told her. "He doesn't usually do the wining and dining for the company."

"Oh?" Julia raised an eyebrow.

He took her briefcase and computer and led her to the elevator. "If Lucas Buchanan wants to have dinner with you, I'd say you can consider this a done deal."

“That’s very nice, Howard, but I’ve learned to keep my expectations under control. We’ll see how it goes.”

Once outside, Howard ushered her into a black Lincoln, shook her hand, and closed the car door after her.

Luke turned and looked at her. She was stunned by the heat simmering in his eyes, the unspoken message that danced in the air between them.

His lips curved in a smile. “Here we go,” he said in a warm, deep voice.

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach and Julia felt an unfamiliar flash of heat suffuse her.

*Here we go indeed.*

## *Chapter Three*

"I'd like to take a minute to freshen up, if you don't mind," Julia said as they entered the hotel lobby.

*And take a few minutes to gather my wits about me.*

"Take your time," Luke smiled. "I'll get us a table in the cocktail lounge while you run up to your room. I thought we'd have a drink before heading into the restaurant."

"All right. That sounds good."

In her room, she dropped her briefcase and portfolio, leaned against the closed door and put her hands to her heated face. Her entire body felt flushed, and she had the oddest sensation as her bones shook. In all her thirty years, no man had ever affected her the way Luke Buchanan did.

*What is the matter with me? I don't even know the man. This is crazy.*

There had been no mistaking the unspoken message in Luke's dark eyes when he looked at her, no matter how circumspect his behavior. And even three floors away from him, she still felt his powerful presence surround her.

A cold shower, that's what she needed. Maybe the stinging spray would bring her to her senses. She glanced at her watch. Could she do it quickly? She stripped off her clothes, fully aware that if she exchanged her business uniform for something more casual, she was acknowledging that this was more than a business date.

*Oh, just do it, idiot. Isn't it time to sample life a little?*

She was equally nervous and aroused. A dangerous combination.

She hurried through the shower, drying herself quickly, rubbing cream into her skin and spraying perfume on her pulse points. Pulling on the soft slacks and cashmere sweater she'd brought to travel home in. Gold hoops at her ears. She brushed her hair until it shined and swayed with a natural rhythm. And all the while the image of Luke Buchanan burned itself into



her vision. Unexpectedly, she wondered what he looked like without any clothes on that powerful body naked. Wondered what fantastic things he would do to her? With her?

*Oh, my God! Crazy, crazy, crazy.*

She had a feeling she was on the verge of doing the most daring thing she'd ever done in her life, but Luke Buchanan mesmerized her. She couldn't help herself. Maybe it was her lack of experience with anyone but Charles. Maybe it was the need curling inside her to discover what real passion was. Maybe it was a response to having a man look at her as if she was a desirable woman. Whatever it was, it was blossoming inside her like a flower seed buried too long under snow.

When she entered the cocktail lounge, Luke rose from the booth he'd commandeered, his eyes taking in every inch of her body. When he took her arm as she slid onto the bench seat, his hand brushed against her back, and she had the same instant feeling of electricity she'd felt that afternoon.

"I'd have ordered for you but I neglected to ask what you drink." His deep voice was like a liquid caress.

"Amaretto, please. On the rocks. Thank you." She was grateful when the waiter brought her drink, not for the alcohol but for something to do with her hands.

"You're clutching that glass like a lifeline." Luke's tone was amused, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "You aren't an alcoholic by any chance, are you?"

"No. Not at all." She picked up the drink and sipped at it, feeling the warmth slide through her system, praying her hands wouldn't shake. "Just...winding down." *Or winding tighter.*

"Very nice." His gaze took in every inch of her. "I like the outfit. The color brings out the green in your eyes."

"Thank you." She searched for something else to say, but her tongue seemed immobilized. Compliments had been rare in her life with Charles.

Luke studied her face, his eyes stroking her skin. "Tell me about yourself, Julia Patterson. I know everything there is to know about your agency and absolutely nothing about you."

"I'm really a very boring person, Mr. Buchanan."

"Luke will do just fine." There was that smile again, melting her bones. "And I don't believe anyone who comes up with the creative ideas you do can be boring at all."

"You'd be surprised." She lowered her eyes. His piercing gaze unnerved her, as if he could see beneath her skin.

"Where are you from?" he asked. "What do you like to do?" He grinned. "What's your most secret fantasy?"

Fantasy? Should she tell him she'd been having unbelievable fantasies about him in the quick shower she'd taken that was supposed to cool her off?

"Julia?" His amused voice broke into her mental wanderings. "This isn't a test, just nosy interest on my part."

"I'm sorry. I guess my mind drifted." She took another sip of amaretto. "There really isn't much to tell. I'm just a small town girl living in the big city, with two great kids and a wonderful business."

How could she possibly tell him the truth? That she'd rushed into a youthful marriage, propelled by two sets of parents and the social expectations of friends. That now, if not for her agency and her children, she'd be little more than a cipher in limbo. That her sex life wouldn't even be the envy of a nun.

*No, don't tell him that little tidbit.*

"Tell me more about your kids," he urged.

"My kids?" She stared.

"Yes. What are they like? Kids tell a lot about the kind of people their parents are."

She laughed nervously. "I don't want to bore you to death."

He gave her his crooked smile. "Nothing about you could bore me."

Her children were an area where she could go on for hours. She forgot to be tense and anxious, forgot about everything as she talked about Andy and Beth. As she talked, she sipped on the wonderful amoretto, its velvety texture soft against her tongue. She barely noticed when an empty glass was replaced with a full one, just reveled in the growing feeling of relaxation. Every so often, she'd catch something dark flashing in Luke's eyes, like a shadow of sadness. She wondered what this man had in his life that could cause such hidden melancholy.

Keeping his posture relaxed, his movements and facial expressions betraying nothing of his real interest, Luke watched the woman across from him. The cashmere sweater draped softly across her breasts, and when she leaned forward, he could see the rosy skin exposed by the wide neckline. The muted lights of the cocktail lounge caught the golden highlights in her hair and the glint of green in her eyes. Her translucent skin was slightly flushed, and he wondered if it was the alcohol or his presence. He hoped the latter.

The electricity he felt the instant he met her stunned him. A lot of years had passed since any woman had affected him that strongly. These days, in fact, he'd wondered if he'd burned himself out trying to erase the damage his wife had done. He'd been hard-pressed to conceal his arousal back in the conference room. The moment he looked in her eyes, he'd wanted nothing more than to take her to bed and fuck her senseless.

He could almost feel the silkiness of her skin beneath his hands, the lushness of her body as he explored it, and taste the sweet essence that would be uniquely hers. He didn't ever remember wanting a woman this badly in his life. From the moment he'd walked into the conference room and seen her standing there, his cock had been so hard he'd had to sit down immediately to conceal it.

And what was that all about, anyway? He wasn't a teenager with raging hormones. Or a very young man who'd thought he was marrying a princess who turned out to be a witch—a promiscuous one at that. He'd certainly had his share of sex before and after, but no woman had ever reached deep inside him the way Julia Patterson did just by... being.

She was nervous, and he wasn't sure if it was him or just the situation. He wanted her to relax and be at ease, so he could see if this... *thing*... sizzling between them sparked to life or was just a hopeful figment of his imagination.

He could tell as much about her from what she omitted as from what she told him. Why no comments about her husband? No enthusiastic description of her marriage? What sort of man, he wondered, claimed Julia Patterson as his wife, but lived with her in a relationship so devoid of detail? Here was a woman of great warmth, personal charm, and unbelievable sexual attraction. The man must be a eunuch or a cheat.

He thought about his own marriage, the bitter divorce, and wished that he'd found Julia before someone else did. And before his own life had disintegrated so badly.

"You're staring," she told him. "Is my makeup smeared?"

"Your makeup is just fine. You're just fine." He smiled. "I enjoy looking at you, listening to you. I love the sound of your voice."

She laughed a nervous sound. The longer they sat in the booth, the more overpowering his presence was. She wondered if they could just stay here forever. "You must have pretty empty conversations if mine excites you."

“Not at all. By the way, your proposal is excellent. I had someone bring me their copy during lunch so I could study it before the afternoon session.”

“So you’ve already seen it?” She was surprised. She’d expected to wait the usual week or so before it made its way to the decision-maker.

He nodded. “If the numbers add up the way they look like they should, we definitely have a deal.” He lifted his glass in a toast. “Shall we have another drink to seal the agreement?”

Julia nodded. The almond liqueur was soothing her nerves and melting her tension. Luke was leaning forward, talking to her in his low, deep voice. She couldn’t draw herself away from his eyes, so mesmerizing they locked her in place. Vaguely, she heard soft music somewhere and turned her head.

“They bring in a little duo in the evening.” He motioned to the postage stamp dance floor. “What about it?” At her hesitation, he said, “It’s just a dance, Julia. Between colleagues.”

*A dance. Right.*

A shiver skittered over her spine.

*What am I doing here? Losing my mind?*

Proper, obedient Julia was going to color outside the lines. But she was tempted by the possibility of forbidden pleasure. Of something she had barely been able to dream about. Unknown sensuality that she’d heard her friends talk about and silently longed for.

Wordlessly, almost as if her body was on automatic pilot, she slid from the booth and put her hand in his. His fingers closed around hers with a gentle assurance that sent a surge of warmth through her. Despite what he said, she had a feeling he knew as well as she did that things weren’t quite as simple as a dance. On the tiny floor, he drew her against him and their bodies fit as if poured from matching molds. Slowly they moved to the music, his arm encircling her, his hand holding hers in close to his chest.

She inhaled the scent of him, spicy and musky, mixed with his incredible male essence. Dangerous. The word came back to her again. Break away, Julia. No more drinks. No dinner. Go to bed. Alone. But she knew she’d already made a choice, and her body began to tingle in anticipation. This was the most daring thing she’d ever done, and she felt almost powerless to stop herself.

They barely moved from the one spot on the dance floor as the music flowed around them, thighs pressed to thighs, the heat of his body melting into hers. The flexing of the muscles in those thighs as they moved to their own rhythm made her own quiver. Her breasts, pressed

against the hard planes of his chest, felt suddenly full and heavy. She wanted to purr and rub herself all over him like a cat. When the song ended and he led her back to the table, she had to blink her eyes to remember where she was.

“You dance well.”

“Oh!” The compliment startled her. “Thank you. You make it easy.”

His voice melted her. There was a richness to it, like fresh coffee or warm chocolate that poured over her, through her, and around her. She thought she could listen to him talk forever.

When the waiter brought fresh drinks, he smiled at her with his eyes and they clinked glasses.

Julia had no idea how much time passed as they sat in the lounge, sipping drinks, dancing again, chatting about everything or nothing at all. Luke’s natural warmth and charm continued to put her at ease, but the air between them was charged with sexual tension that was nearly palpable. As inexperienced as she was, Julia still knew she’d have to be dead not to feel it. And wasn’t that pathetic; a thirty-year-old woman whose sexual experience wouldn’t fill two pages in a book.

At some point, Luke took off his jacket and stuffed his tie in the pocket. Each time he led her to the dance floor, their bodies clung closer together. His arms held her with confidence and assurance, almost possession. Without the extra layer of the jacket between them, she could feel the heat of his body through his shirt. The fine cotton was like a silk caress against her cheek, and thin enough that she could feel the hard buds of his nipples. When he moved his head, she could feel the tickle of his breath in her ear and shivered at the tiny fingers of sensation it brought.

His cock pressed against the softness of her through the fabric of his slacks. Her body responded, tiny nerves sparking everywhere. She was electrified that he was as aroused as she was. And she was definitely aroused, to an unfamiliar intensity. Her breasts ached with the need to be touched, and her panties were so wet she was sure he could smell her scent. So this was what it was like. This was what other people reveled in that she’d never tasted. She was sure that if she went to bed with him, she’d die of pleasure.

*If she went to bed with him? Wasn’t it already, in her mind, a foregone conclusion?*

“I can feel every one of your muscles move against me.” His voice was a low hum in her ear. “You have such a graceful body. Soft and warm.”

Warm was an understatement. Overheated might be more accurate.

"Do I offend you with my comments?" he asked, his hands tightening on her almost imperceptibly.

"No." She could hardly get the word out. "No, you don't."

"Good. Because I like telling you. Do you know how very, very beautiful you are?" he asked as they shifted their feet almost in place in a corner of the floor.

His words were soft in her ear, a whisper tickling her skin, sending delicious shivers through her.

"Thank you," was all she could think of to say, feeling like a tongue-tied idiot.

"I can feel your heart beating hard against mine," he told her. "Are you nervous?"

"Just a little... unsure?" She was definitely swimming out of her depth here. "Does that make sense?"

"We don't have to dance any more if you don't want to."

*It's not just the dancing, Luke. And I think we both know that.*

The heat of his breath at her ear sent a shiver racing through her. She knew he was slowly seducing her, letting her fall into it in slow increments, giving her plenty of opportunities to change her mind. Pull away.

"You know what I mean, Luke," she said in a shaky voice, and took a deep breath. "We're talking about a lot more than dancing."

There. She'd said it. Pulled it out into the open. They might as well stop... well... dancing around it. She lifted her head slightly now and could almost see the message written in his eyes.

"It's about whatever we want it to be." He tilted her head back against his chest. "Right?"

His voice was warm syrup slowly wrapping her in a sensual cocoon.

*Do I know what I'm doing? Hell, no, but I want to do it anyway. Oh, my God. Is this me?*

"I don't know how to do this," she finally said, their bodies almost still, her cheek pressed against his shoulder. "I have no experience."

The squeeze of his hand told her he knew exactly what she meant.

"You don't need experience, Julia. You just go with the flow."

The combination of the music and the drinks flooded her system with erotic sensations, transporting her into an almost hypnotic state. But his next words both thrilled and shocked her, not because she hadn't been expected them but because she had.

"I want you, Julia."

The words were said so quietly she almost missed them, but they made her body contract, her heartbeat kick into triple time, and her pulse race madly.

"I want to feel your naked body next to mine," he went on. "Touch you everywhere with my hands."

She shivered, heat flooding her, the walls of her cunt fluttering, and her nipples throbbing. She could almost feel his hands on her naked skin. So many conflicting emotions were roiling inside her. "I'll bet you say that to all the girls," she said, trying to lighten the mood.

His grip on her tightened almost painfully. "Now there's where you're dead wrong. I actually say it to no one these days. And haven't for a long time."

And suddenly, curled against Luke's hard, lean body, she couldn't remember why she'd thought even for a minute this might be a bad idea. She was all but a free woman and the most exciting man she'd ever met actually wanted her. *Wanted her!* And with an intensity she'd never found with Charles. She was practically jumping into this with both feet, without any hesitation at all.

And somehow she felt a rightness to this, a powerful something that pulled her and Luke together.

When the duo announced they were taking a break, Luke led her back to the table, still holding one of her hands. "Are you really hungry?"

"No," she said softly, aware of what he was really asking. "Are you?"

"Not for food," he told her.

Immediate heat flashed through her body again and the pulse beating in her womb reverberated everywhere inside her. One last alarm bell clanged in her brain. *Stop it now, or it will be too late.* But she could have more easily stopped a runaway train.

"This isn't just a whim, you know." His gaze was intense. "I want to be very clear on that."

"Yes." She could barely get the word out.

In moments, he had paid their bill and was guiding her to the elevator. As the car glided smoothly up three floors, he held both of her hands, kissing her lightly as if knowing she needed reassurance.

"It will be all right, Julia." Luke moved his lips to her forehead. "Trust me."

What else could she do?

## *Chapter Four*

Her fingers fumbled so much with the key card that Luke finally took it from her and swiped it through the slot. As soon as they entered her room, she began to tremble, and he drew her into his arms. Sheltering her. Reassuring her.

“Are you scared to make love, Julia? Does it frighten you?” He brushed his mouth against hers and pressed his warm palm against her back. “What kind of life do you have that sex is such an enemy?”

They hadn’t turned on the lights, but illumination from the outside slanted in through the partially open drapes. The darkness made her feel more secure, insulated, but still her mouth couldn’t form any words to answer him. She was very conscious of his maleness, of the feel of his body against hers, of the unfamiliar heat of desire rushing through her. Feelings she had never known before gripped her and held her. She stood there, wanting his touch more strongly than she could admit.

“I’m going to kiss you,” he said. “We’ll just take it from there.”

Slowly, Luke enfolded her in his arms again and began to stroke her back, to kiss the edges of her ear, the side of her neck, the line of her jaw. They were soft kisses, undemanding, and they eased the edge of her nervousness. His hands were warm; wherever they touched, little sparks of fire burned on her skin. He moved his mouth across her cheek to her lips and touched his mouth to hers very gently. His lips were strong and soft at the same time.

But gentleness quickly flew out the window. In moments, he was urging her mouth open, tasting her with his tongue, coaxing her to do the same to him. He tasted of whiskey and maleness, an earthy combination that teased her senses. A jolt of electricity sparked as he probed the hot, dark recesses, seeking every inch of it. His tongue moved over every surface, traced a line across the roof of her mouth, rasped against her own small tongue. This was another kind of



dance, a more sensual one that fanned her senses to life. She was shaking with a kind of need she'd never experienced, and he was doing nothing more than kissing her.

The kiss went on and on. He explored the inner recesses of her mouth, licked at it, his lips moving against hers as he slanted his mouth first one way and then another. His large hands, with their long fingers, cupped her head with a touch that was both gentle and commanding. She could feel the imprint of each finger against her skull. His seduction on the dance floor was nothing compared to the impact of this kiss. Now Julia knew what it meant to be kissed breathless.

With a mind of their own, her arms crept up his back, pulling him closer, sliding her hands against the soft fabric of his shirt. She operated purely on instinct. Her sole sexual experience had been with Charles, and she began to realize she might as well have had nothing after all. Her breasts ached even more, silently begging to be touched and held. Her nipples tingled, fire built between her legs, and she didn't know what to do with it. This was all so new to her.

Without releasing her mouth, Luke slid his hands under her sweater, caressing the soft flesh with featherlight touches on her ribs and her spine, tracing lines and drawing patterns as he learned the curves and angles of her body. His fingers branded her every place he touched her. With an easy deftness, he slipped the hooks on her lacy bra, releasing her breasts and cupping them at last in his hands.

At last! She nearly groaned with relief.

When his thumbs rasped against her nipples, she felt them harden—a delicious shiver ran through her body.

The entire time his hands roamed over her upper body, his mouth never left hers. He kept her welded to him as he fed on her taste, stealing her breath. He tasted pleasantly of whiskey and male, a heady combination. An aphrodisiac that made her head spin and her senses riot.

His finger drew patterns on her spine, caressing each bump and space. They came to rest for a moment on the upper swell of her ass, then walked their way up her ribs to her breasts.

Aroused by Luke's stimulating touch and desperate to feel his naked skin, she brought her hands around to open the buttons on his shirt. Yanking the tails from his trousers, she frantically pushed the garment from his shoulders and down his arms until it fell to the floor. She ran her hands over him, exploring his upper body, wanting to touch him everywhere at once. She

skimmed his chest with her fingertips, relishing in the feel of the crisp hair curling on his chest and the hard buttons of his nipples.

The thickness of his cock pressed against her stomach, increasing her own heat. Her legs were suddenly weak and shaky, and she clung to his lean body for balance. His hands dropped to her waist and slowly unfastened the button on her slacks. The rasp of the zipper being lowered was loud in the room. As he pushed her slacks down her hips and thighs, he lifted his mouth from hers at last. Lowering his head, he closed his mouth over one taut nipple.

"Ohhh." The tiny cry of pleasure rippled from her throat as his lips tugged and pulled on the hardened flesh.

His warm hands moved to cup the fullness of her breasts, his fingers kneading the soft flesh, his thumbs abrading the pebbled nipples.

In a frenzy of arousal, Julia unfastened his slacks and shoved at them, but she was clumsy in her efforts. She made small sounds of frustration as she pushed at the clothing.

Luke finally lifted his head from her breasts, pulling one last, erotic time on a nipple and stepped back to rid himself of his clothes. Kicking his shoes off and yanking away his socks, he knelt in front of her. With careful attention, he tugged her slacks and panties down to her ankles, lifting each foot to step out of them. He pulled off her shoes; then he placed his hands on her hips to hold her steady and pressed his head against her mound, inhaling her scent.

"Ohhh," she said again, the pleasure of the sensation spiraling through her.

And when he opened the lips of her cunt and licked the sensitive tip of her clit, she thought she would melt to the floor. Only her hands braced on Luke's shoulders kept her upright. Again and again he flicked his tongue over the swollen knot, each stroke making her insides quake and her nerves fire. She felt dampness on the inside of her thighs, another unfamiliar sensation. Rarely had Charles ever aroused her to the point of wetness.

*"Get yourself ready for me," he always said.*

*Get out of my head!*

Deliberately, she banished thoughts of him, easy to do as Luke's wicked tongue did its work. Inside her, the manacles locking her down released with agonizing slowness and her body unfolded, one delightful burst at a time. Luke moved his tongue lower, tracing the length of her slit with the tip of his tongue. She cried out with pleasure at the sensations whirling through her body. It was too much. It wasn't enough. Stop! No, she wanted more.

She clutched at his shoulders, digging her nails into the skin as he took her higher and higher. When her climax exploded, every muscle spasmed in response. The walls of her pussy clenched over and over again, and her body shook so hard she didn't know if she could remain upright. She collapsed forward, leaning into Luke, held in place by his strong hands. His warm mouth whispered kisses over the softness of her belly as she tried to regain some sense of balance.

"Remarkable," he said in his deep, sensual voice. "You are the most responsive woman I have ever known."

She had no breath left to answer him.

Luke slow-walked them to the bed and reached for the bedside lamp. Julia stretched out her hand to stop him.

"No. Please. I'm... I've had children... I... I'm not a teenager any more, Luke."

"Thank God. Neither am I." He stroked her cheek gently. "I want to see you, Julia, to look at you. Please. It would give me such pleasure."

Reluctantly, she withdrew her hand and he snapped on the light. She would have crossed her arms to cover herself, but he held them at her sides, his eyes raking her body.

"You're lovely," he breathed. "Why wouldn't you want me to look? You have nothing to hide. Do you know how sexy you are, what a richness there is to your body?"

"My body leaves a lot to be desired, Luke," she protested, still nervous. "Certainly at my age."

"Not for me, sweet Julia. I could feast on you forever."

Now she allowed herself to look at him, to let her eyes take in every inch of his naked body, and she drew in her breath at the sight. As big as he was, his body was still lean but well-muscled, with silky hair on his arms, and a thick mat of curling hair on his chest. A thin line arched down to his groin to the most magnificent erection she had ever seen. She quaked in anticipation.

Then he was kissing her again and carrying her down to the bed with him, tracing a path across her breasts and the roundness of her belly to the soft triangle of curls at the apex of her thighs. He captured her mouth again as his hand moved toward her heat, gently nudging her legs apart. The liquid of arousal trickled from her cunt, and she caught her breath. That had always been a problem where Charles was concerned, so much of a one that he often accused her of choosing deliberately not to respond to him.

But with Luke, her body answered his touch with little coaxing. She loved his strong fingers on her, the heat of his mouth, and the feel of his flesh over muscles were still hard. He dropped his head lower and flicked his tongue on her nipples, then raked them with his teeth. Her breathing quickened and she arched herself into him.

*More, more, more!*

The demand echoed in her head. She wanted him to touch her everywhere at once. Kiss every bit of her. When his tongue traced a line even lower, a dark thrill raced through her. He shifted positions and his fingers gently opened the lips of her pussy. One swipe of his tongue across the sizzling knot of nerves that was her clit made her cry out.

“Luke!”

“Right here, baby,” he murmured, his mouth busy on her sex.

He traced the line of her slit, lapping at the moisture gathered there. His teeth tugged gently on her pubic curls before nipping lightly at her labia.

Julia was sure she would burn alive from the heat racing through her. As her mind spun out, her only focus was her very center where Luke’s mouth was doing wonderful things to her. She forgot to worry, to be nervous, or afraid. All she wanted was more of what he was doing. The walls of her pussy fluttered like leaves in a hurricane, grasping hungrily at Luke’s marauding tongue.

An unfamiliar ribbon of hot need coiled low in her belly then unwound slowly, pushing her to a sensuous plateau she hadn’t even known existed. When his tongue thrust stiffly inside her wet channel, she cried out again and thrust her hips at him boldly.

Magic beckoned, a starburst just waiting inside her to explode and thrust her into space. She reached for it, panted for it, but he held it just out of reach, teasing her, demanding she give everything to him. Her breathing was fractured, her body straining for the explosion she needed like her very breath.

Suddenly, he pulled away and rose to his knees. She pried her eyes open, her body quivering at the edge of the precipice he’d taken her to, shocked at the sudden absence of his touch.

“What’s wrong?” She barely croaked the words, stunned, wondering if she’d done something wrong.

“Shit.” He smacked his forehead. “I am the biggest damn idiot.”

"What is it?" She was frightened. Was he changing his mind? Now of all times? "Please tell me."

"I have nothing with me," he said, his voice grating. "I didn't carry anything because I didn't expect to need it."

"Carry what?" She blinked. "I don't understand."

"Protection, damn it." He smacked his forehead. "I don't want to send you home pregnant. That's all you'd need."

Julia reached out a hand and tugged him back to her, desperate to feel his touch again. "It's okay. I'm like the Boy Scouts, always prepared."

"You're taking birth control pills?"

She shook her head. "Couldn't tolerate them. I have a coil. An intrauterine device. I haven't gotten around to having it removed."

"Thank God," he breathed.

"So there's no worry." She tugged again until he was lying against her. Her body shook with a desire beyond anything she'd ever known. "Please, Luke?"

Now there was no stopping, no thinking. He began his movements again, this time with a greater ferocity. She wanted to hurry him, so great was her need that was building, but he took his time, enjoying every inch of her, every response. He grasped both of her hands in one of his and drew them over her head, stretching her out and forcing her breasts upwards. His lips, his tongue, his teeth on her nipples were driving her mad. She had never known her breasts were so sensitive.

Lazily, he trailed kisses the length of her body. When she felt his tongue probing at her quivering folds again, she nearly jackknifed off the bed.

"Easy." Luke's voice was husky with desire. "You taste like fine wine, Julia. I could drink from you all night."

He released her hands and placed both of his on her thighs, holding them open for his exploration. With his tongue and his long, sensitive fingers, he licked the length of her slit, teasing the sensitive nub of her clitoris, tasting her hot inner sheath. He lapped at her like an ice cream cone before inserting his tongue inside her pussy and fluttering it. She writhed beneath him, her muscles quaking, heat sizzling in her veins and accelerating her heartbeat. As sparks ignited throughout her body, Julia grabbed his head to steady herself, her fingers tangling in his hair, and her hips rising up to meet him.

“Beautiful Julia.” When he lifted his head, she could see her cream glistening on his lips. “I love your skin, your hair, every inch of your body.”

His words captivated her. They were like an aphrodisiac, inflaming her even more.

“Talk to me, Julia,” he rose up and murmured in her ear. “Tell me what you like. What pleases you, what excites you. Do you like my mouth here?” He nipped at her clit. “My hands here?” One long finger pressed into her warm, waiting heat. “Do you like me to stroke you like this?” He slipped another finger in beside it and began a steady in and out stroke.

Julia had never experienced this kind of talk during sex. Charles certainly hadn’t been a fan of it. Once she’d tried, tentatively, and he’d told her they weren’t having a conversation. He had never cared what she had wanted. She had only been an instrument of his self-involved fulfillment. Now Luke, with his voice, his hands, his mouth, was urging her on to a greater and greater state of excitement than she’d known could exist.

Desire built inside her, kindled slowly by Luke’s patient, expert touching. His mouth worshipped her cunt, sucking and licking until she was nearly mindless. His hands held her thighs apart so she was wide open to whatever he chose to do, and he chose to use his tongue and his fingers like wicked instruments of arousal. The tension inside her grew, almost unbearable in its force. She both welcomed it and feared it, knowing something was about to happen that would change her expectations forever.

At the moment she thought her heart would stop, he moved over her, pulling her hips toward him, and slowly entered her. His cock was so thick and enormous and she was so tight he stretched her to the fullest. He moved slowly, obviously taking care not to hurt her, sliding in inch by inch. When he was fully inside her, the head of his shaft touching her womb, he began moving in and out in an age-old rhythm.

“Look at me, Julia,” he commanded.

She opened her eyes and found herself staring straight into his, hot dark brown liquid pools that she was drowning in. Her heart, already thundering loudly, stuttered, and a strange emotion rolled over her. Had she known from the beginning this was more than sex? More than a frantic coupling? More than a sudden itch they’d decided to scratch? Because that wasn’t her, and she had no idea if it was him.

“I feel it, too.” His voice was hoarse, with the strain of control and... something else. “Keep your eyes on me. I want to see you when you come, watch the pleasure in your face.”

She couldn’t have torn her gaze away if she’d wanted to.

Now he increased the tempo, and she moved with him, their bodies slick and sliding against each other. He moved his cock in and out of her wet, grasping heat with a steadily building pace. Inside her body, Julia felt that pressure building, fighting to consume her entirely. She hung at the edge of a steep precipice, wanting to leap over but afraid. Something held her back. At that moment, Luke slid his hand between them and touched her clit, hard. And she came, shattering in a cataclysmic convulsion, swirling in black velvet, colors streaking around her, the world spinning, spinning. She could feel the spasms as his own climax peaked and he emptied himself into her.

It seemed to go on and on until she thought they both would die. Finally, he collapsed on top of her, his heart slamming into her ribs in time with the loud beating of her own. They lay together, breathing ragged, until a calm finally stole over them and their heartbeats returned to a normal rhythm.

Luke raised his head at last and kissed her lightly, nibbling at her lower lip, then her cheeks and her eyelids.

"Can I tell you how unbelievable you are?" he asked. "And what you do to me?"

"This was magic," she breathed, reaching up to hold his face between her palms. "I didn't know it could be this good."

"I could ask you about that, but I won't. I don't want anything to break the spell. Rest, Julia. I'm not near finished with you." He slid slowly from her body. "But first, a shower." He brushed his lips over one nipple. "I can't wait to shower with you."

## *Chapter Five*

Julia had never showered with another person, not even at camp or in college. And certainly not with Charles. Standing under the warm spray with Luke, feeling his hands slick with soap sliding over her skin, was more erotic than she could have imagined—if she'd been able to imagine it. He cupped her breasts and kneaded them gently before rasping his nails over her nipples and pinching them with a light touch. With tender movements, he stroked his way down her stomach to the nest of curls covering her mound, working a lather into them before sliding a finger inside her.

She jerked slightly and he caught her gaze.

“Too sore?”

She shook her head mutely, unable to find words as new waves of pleasure swept through her.

“I love how slick you are,” he murmured, working his long fingers in and out of her. “And hot. God, you could burn me alive with your heat.”

She wanted to touch him too; wanted to feel him in her hands. She wrapped her slim fingers around his cock, now swollen and erect again. She loved the feel of the velvet skin over steel, the smoothness of the broad head, the fine hair covering the sac holding his balls.

He sucked in a breath when she manipulated him with wet fingers.

“Careful, sugar. I don’t want this party to be over before it starts.”

She could hardly believe he’d be ready for her again so soon. Everything with Luke was new and different and exciting. She didn’t want to sleep, afraid she’d miss some pleasurable experience.

And they never truly did sleep, dozing now and then between wild bouts of lovemaking. Julia had never felt so wanton or uninhibited, as if another person had entered her body. She



wanted to pleasure Luke as he had done for her, relishing the feel of his shaft in her hand, the silkiness of his skin, the heaviness of the sacs between his legs. She was tentative at first, but urged on by his cries of passion, she became bolder and bolder.

He took her every way possible, each time more creative and inventive than the last, never allowing her to retreat. Nor did she want to. She was drunk with pleasure, her body constantly demanding more. And the words he kept murmuring to her were exciting words, raw, and erotically stimulating.

She resented the inevitable approach of morning, wanting to push back the hours, and extend the night forever. Lying next to Luke was like bonding with strength, but a strength that protected and cherished. She had never slept cuddled in a man's arms. Charles had always wanted—demanded—his “space” in bed and after a while she'd been only too glad to give it to him. When they finally fell asleep for the last time, they were spooned together, one of Luke's legs thrown over both of hers, and she slept dreamlessly.

When the front desk rang with her wakeup call, Julia was at first disoriented. Why was there a warm male body lying next to her? The every intimate detail of the night flooded her brain. She was at once aroused and anxious. Would he regret what had happened? Would she? Would it be uncomfortable? What should she say? Do?

Then she felt Luke's morning erection rising against her bottom and snuggled against it.

“Careful,” he told her, his voice still drowsy with sleep. “That could lead to dangerous things.”

And so it did, wiping away her anxiety.

There was almost no foreplay this time. They were both ready, as if their bodies knew this would have to last until... who knew when? Luke simply rolled her to her back, bent her knees back to give him full access, and plunged into her pussy. The wet flesh sucked at him, welcomed him, and held him tight. Again he held her gaze, his liquid eyes boring into hers as he plunged in and out of her slick walls. It seemed like only seconds before they both climaxed, a shattering of bodies that consumed them. The walls of her cunt flexed and spasmed as she bathed his cock with her liquid heat.

Spent, they lay wrapped together as they'd done during the night, dragging air into their lungs.

“I don't want to let you go,” he murmured, his lips against her ear, his warm breath like a soft breeze against her skin.

"I don't want to go, either. I think I'll call home and tell them the rest of the year has been cancelled," she said sleepily.

The very last thing she wanted to do was get up. Maybe she could close her eyes and wish them into Never Never Land.

His fingers brushed against her cheek. "You haven't said a lot about your situation at home," he told her, "and I didn't really want to ask you about it."

"Don't. Let's not spoil this."

"Your husband—"

"Is a pen stroke away from being an ex. And no one I want to bring into this conversation." She nibbled on her lower lip, a nervous gesture she'd picked up in recent years. It had suddenly occurred to her Luke hadn't addressed his own material status. "I didn't even think to ask if you're—"

He shook his head. "This is really a discussion for another time, and I didn't want to ruin what's happening here by going into the sordid details."

"Please don't—"

He touched a finger to her lips. "I've been divorced for two years. It wasn't pleasant and neither was the marriage. Enough said. For now."

He kissed her, long and slow, his tongue slipping into her mouth and teasing hers to dance with him. Then reluctantly, Julia pulled herself out of bed. She stopped, self-conscious in her nudity with Luke's eyes on her, and he laughed.

"I find it delightfully appealing that after everything we did, you can still be shy with me." He yanked the top sheet from the bed and wound it around her, brushing her breasts and her hips lightly as he wound the fabric like a sheath. "Go take your shower, then I will. I'd suggest we do it together, but you might never catch your plane."

She felt a blush creep up her cheeks as memories of the previous night flooded her brain. "Okay."

When she was showered and dressed, she waved toward the bathroom. "Your turn. Shall I order us some breakfast?"

"Please. I think I could eat a horse."

Julia giggled, a sound nervous even to her own ears. "If they don't have any horses, will bacon and eggs do?"

"Sure."

She grinned at him as she closed the bathroom door.

Once she was dressed and packed, she again wasn't quite sure how to act. Was she supposed to thank him for the most stupendous night of her life? That seemed both stupid and inadequate. Should she apologize for being so wanton? No, that didn't seem quite right either. She was caught between wanting his approval of her as a woman and not earning his disapproval of her where their business was concerned.

While she waffled about it in her whirlpool of insecurity, breakfast was delivered; she busied herself setting it up on the little table by the window. When Luke came out of the bathroom in slacks and shirt, he walked over to her and gave her a slow good morning kiss. And when he held her chair out for her to sit down, he brushed her hair away from her face and kissed her neck, then nipped the lobe of her ear. Sitting down across from her, he studied her while she buttered her toast and took a small bite.

"You look like heavy thoughts are weighing you down." He paused. "Any regrets?"

Was he nervous, too?

Julia smiled tentatively, memories clanging around in her brain, and again she felt her cheeks heat. "How could there be?"

"Will you be all right when you get home?" he asked her.

Lying in his arms last night, cuddled against his body, she'd told him about the tension the next few days were sure to hold. "Yes. I'll get through Thanksgiving one way or another. Then I'll make sure my attorney gets Charles to sign the final papers so they can be filed... at last." She sighed. "I always feel I'm walking on egg shells around him."

"Why does he continue to create a problem for you? He's already accepted the divorce, right?"

Julia sighed. "I'm not sure he'll ever truly accept it. Not because he loves me, but because he hates to lose. I have an excellent attorney, and he's gotten me an excellent settlement. But Charles would look for any little thing to refuse to sign the final papers and find a way to destroy the agreement in place."

Luke reached across the table and put his large hand over her small one. "Be careful, Julia. From what you tell me, one wrong move could put you in a very bad position."

After that, he did his best to put her at ease, drinking coffee, chatting as if they'd done this forever. The intensity of last night's lovemaking still clung to her, reaching out to her like a powerful drug. She wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed and spend the entire

holiday weekend wrapped in his arms, offering him her body, giving and taking pleasure. Shutting out the rest of the world. Whatever emotion had gripped her last night still clung to her.

She stared down into her coffee cup, her mind whirling. Something nibbled at her, a question she was sure would come out wrong no matter how she phrased it.

"Do you do this often?" she blurted out, then felt the heat creeping up into her cheeks. What an absolutely stupid thing to say. She ducked her head, wishing she could dive under the table. "I'm sorry. That was very inappropriate of me. Not to mention rude."

"Do what?"

"Nothing." She couldn't look at him. "Forget it."

"Julia." He touched her hand. "You can ask me anything you want. So, do I do what often?"

"Go to bed with a woman the first time you meet her," she mumbled the words into her lap.

His fingers idly stroked across hers. "We didn't go to bed, Julia. We made love. There's a big difference. But if it's important to you, I haven't been doing either one for a long time." He lifted his coffee cup, watching her over the rim as he drank.

She lowered her eyes. "I can't believe women would leave a man like you alone for very long."

"Like me?" He laughed. "Horny? Rich? Sexy? What?"

She felt herself blush again. "I should learn to keep my mouth shut. I just keep making things worse. It's just... I look at you and..."

"It's all right." His tone softened. He put his coffee cup down, reached across the table, and took one of her hands in both of his. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh at you like that. It's just a... very touchy subject for me."

"I'm sorry I brought it up." She looked down at her empty plate, unable to meet his gaze. She didn't want to see the coldness she was afraid would be there.

"Julia." He got up and came around to her chair, lifting her to her feet. One finger tipped her chin up and his mouth brushed against hers, just a touch at first, then deeper... but not passionate. It was affectionate, reassuring. His fingers threaded through her hair, and he licked her lips before lifting his head. "You didn't do anything wrong. It was a perfectly normal question. It's just something that reminds me of words my ex-wife threw at me, and not in a good way. That's why I try to make a joke of it."

"Forget I said anything." She chewed at her lip again. "Please. I don't want to spoil this morning."

He kissed her again. "I'm probably very sensitive about it because of... history. And that's all I want to say for now. But don't beat yourself up. You couldn't spoil anything if you tried."

They ate silently for a moment, and then Julia said quietly, "I don't, either." Luke looked at her questioningly. "Fall into bed with someone I've just met."

He reached across the table and wrapped her small hand in his larger one. "If I thought that, it wouldn't be my bed you'd fall into, and we wouldn't be sitting here having breakfast."

Julia stared down at her plate.

"Julia, something very special is happening between us. Let's get that out in the open. This isn't just a hot night in the sheets." He leaned toward her. "I can't wait until your divorce is final. I want to see you more. Explore what's happening between us. This is sudden and fast. I mean, Jesus. This time yesterday, we hadn't even met. But I think it could be real. And if you're honest, you'll admit it hit us both the same way, right?"

"Yes." Her voice was very low. She didn't know how to handle all this, but her heart jumped at what he was saying. "It scares me."

He wouldn't let her look away. "It scares me too. I don't want to do something stupid and kill it before it even has a chance to get started." He studied her face as if looking for answers. "If we sign this contract, you'll be coming back here again. We'll have time together to see where this goes. We can take a good look at the possibility of taking this to the next level. Does that sound good to you? Am I being presumptuous?"

"No... yes," she whispered, almost afraid to break the spell. "No, you're not and yes, I want to."

"Then let's get you to the airport so you don't miss your plane."

Luke insisted on driving her to the airport, pointing out the scarcity of taxis the day before Thanksgiving.

"Besides, it's that much longer I can prolong going home. We close the offices at noon today and I'd hate to be the only one left."

She didn't want to leave him. Luke was right, what they shared went beyond sex. Was it possible to fall in love with someone so quickly? And now, still wrapped in the glow of their night together, she had to leave him.

"Don't come in with me," she said, when they pulled up to the curb.

"I'm not. I'm terrible with goodbyes."

"I guess you'll call me about the contract?"

"Right after Thanksgiving. If I can't get you at your office, I'll try your cell phone."

"All right. Well, goodbye then."

"Goodbye, Julia." He looked as if he wanted to say something else, then simply held her to him tightly and kissed her, a long deep kiss that said more than words.

Julia finally pulled away, turned, and walked into the terminal.

## *Chapter Six*

The plane was late. Naturally. Murphy's Law. It put Charles in a foul mood that never let up. From the time he picked her up until they reached the house, his criticism ran nonstop.

"There was no need for you to pick me up," she finally snapped. "I told you I had my own arrangements. You're the one who insisted, but it doesn't give you permission to chew my head off. You no longer have that right."

"I have that right until I sign those papers," he reminded her.

*Oh God, here we go again. Will I never be able to draw a real breath?*

When he dropped her at the house, she tried to stop him from coming in.

"You'll just upset the children with this mood you're in," she told him. "Please try to remember by tomorrow that you are their father and they expect a little affection from you."

He simply ignored her, pulled her suitcase from the trunk, and followed her into the house. And it didn't matter anyway. The twins were cranky and whining as soon as she set foot inside. And the phone rang incessantly: her in-laws, Claire wanting information on the presentation, and play dates for the twins over the weekend. Not to mention the fact that while Miranda got dinner ready, Charles stood in the hallway, still wearing his coat, complaining yet again about the divorce.

"It's too late," she said for the umpteenth time. "It's done. And I really wish you'd go home and give me some peace and quiet."

"It's not done yet." He repeated what he'd said in the car, his voice like steel. "And maybe it won't be."

Julia stared at him, weighted down by the block of ice that suddenly formed in her stomach. "You said you'd sign the papers," she whispered.

"Perhaps I've reconsidered." His eyes shone with anger.

She knew it was his pride talking, not emotion, but that made it much worse.

Her head was throbbing. "I can't discuss this with you now. I have too much to do, getting your perfect dinner ready for tomorrow. I'll have my attorney call yours on Monday." She turned on her heel and headed for the family room, unable to spend another minute in his presence. Not even a bottle of aspirin would take care of the throbbing in her head tonight.

Thanksgiving dinner was worse than purgatory. Her in-laws, always disapproving of her, carped constantly about her trip, chastised the children if they spilled something, and criticized the food. By the time they left, Julia's headache, which had been building since the previous day, reached blinding proportions. Miranda handed her a cup of tea and she retreated to the bedroom, lying down with a cold cloth on her head.

Friday, with the dinner behind her and no more menacing conversations with Charles, Julia dared to draw a full breath. Her headache had finally abated, and she was beginning to think Charles had just been making unnecessary noise. She dropped the twins at her friend's house and allowed herself the luxury of a day hanging out in her sweats and curling herself in the warmth of the remembered memories of Luke.

On Saturday, she took the twins to see Santa Claus then out for lunch at McDonald's, where they could exhaust themselves in the PlayPlace. The glow from her night with Luke stayed with her throughout the rest of the weekend, and she spent Sunday night indulging herself in the memories. By Monday, she allowed herself to hope that Charles would sign the final papers quickly and she could get on with her life.

"Next time, you can stay home and I'll go on the trip," Claire said, grinning when Julia walked into the office.

Julia lifted an eyebrow. "And that's because?"

"Because then I'd get the phone calls from the guy with the sexiest voice in America."

Julia turned away, afraid Claire would spot some telltale sign on her face. A blush, at the very least. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"If you say so, kiddo." Claire's voice held a hint of amusement. "But Luke Buchanan's called three times. He asked that you call him back as soon as you got in."

"It's business," Julia said, hoping to derail whatever Claire was thinking. "And I think it's good news. He told me they'd probably make a decision this week whether to sign with us or not. Maybe they met this morning. It's an hour later there, you know."

"Here's for luck." Claire held up crossed fingers.



Julia went into her private office and picked up the phone, then put it down.

*This is just a simple telephone call. Strictly business. Pull yourself together and act like the professional you are.*

She looked at the number written on the message slip Claire had given her. The only thing familiar was the area code. Was this his private number? When she dialed and he answered himself, she'd guessed right.

"Luke Buchanan."

"Good morning. This is Julia."

"Good morning."

She had promised herself she would be strictly professional when they spoke, but the deep, warm sound of his voice sent shivers along her spine. Instantly, the image of their naked bodies tangled together in bed came unbidden to her mind.

"Claire said you called earlier."

"I did." She could hear the smile in his voice. "How was your holiday?"

"It was... as expected." The less said about it, the better.

Luke laughed a full, rich sound. "Well, that could mean a lot of things. Did you enjoy yourself?"

*Like having a root canal without anesthetic.*

"It was tolerable." *Liar!* "And you?"

"I could say 'as expected' also."

She visualized him, imagined him in his office, his big body loose in a desk chair, shirt sleeves rolled back as they'd been Tuesday night. The vision of his face nearly undid her.

"Well, I guess that takes care of the pleasantries." Now she was laughing, and suddenly she felt easy, relaxed. He was like a balm to her tightly strung nerves.

"I hope not," he told her. "I'm hoping this entire conversation will be pleasant." He paused. "We signed the contract this morning. Everyone agrees it's exactly what we need and you've hit on the mood we want to project."

"Oh, Luke, that's wonderful." She wanted to leap from the chair and dance. This was their biggest contract yet. "We'll do a great job for you."

"I expect you to. I've seen what you've done before and I have a lot of faith in your work."

"If you could fax the contract to us, we'll sign it and get it right back to you. Then we can get started fleshing out the outline right away."

"It's on the way right now. But will you be able to get much done with the Christmas holidays coming up?"

"Oh, yes. Claire and I will work on it this afternoon and tomorrow. Then I'll call you with some specifics. But we'll really kick into gear after New Year's."

"Can you get away for a couple of days next week?" He cleared his throat. "I'd like you to see the plant and meet the folks who work there, plus see the samples of the new line. With March as our first target date, I don't want to waste any time."

*Get away? Oh, God, would right now be too soon?*

"I think I can manage that." Her stomach twisted at the thought of Charles discovering she was once again leaving town. But she'd see Luke again. Oh, God. She'd have to call her attorney and have him force Charles to sign the papers right away.

"Fine. See if you can work it out to be here next Tuesday and stay until Thursday. Call me when you've made your arrangements." He was silent again. "I miss you, Julia."

"I miss you, too," she whispered, so softly she wasn't sure he could even hear her.

But then he answered. "Good." He paused. "How is... everything else?"

The divorce.

"I'm calling my attorney as soon as I hang up. Charles has sidestepped this long enough. I want those papers signed now."

"Will you be all right in the meantime?"

"Yes. I can handle things," she smiled to herself. "And next week, I'll see you."

He clicked off and she sat at her desk, the receiver still in her hand, her heart beating just a little faster.

"And exactly what kind of business arrangement did you say this was?"

Julia hadn't even heard Claire open the door, much less enter the tiny office.

"They bought the package," she said, grinning hugely. "We got the contract."

"I know." Claire leaned in the doorway. "I came to tell you the paperwork just came through on the fax, but I guess you know that."

"Yes." She opened her day planner and began turning pages. "We need to block out some time together today and tomorrow to go over the outline. They'd like me to come out there again next week."

Claire dropped into the chair in front of the desk. "By 'they,' I assume you mean Luke Buchanan?"

“Well, yes. I mean, he is the executive vice president and the one who had to give it the thumbs up.”

Claire looked at her for a long time before she spoke again. “We’ve been friends for what seems like forever, Julia. I love you more than if we were sisters. I don’t know what went on in suburban Massachusetts, but you can’t hide much from me.”

“Claire, I...”

“No. Let me finish. You know what I think about Charles. What I’ve always thought about him. You have to get him to sign the final papers before he smells something and screws it all up. The faster the divorce is final, the better off you’ll be. And I guarantee you it will be better for the children.”

Claire was right about their friendship. The two had been college roommates and attendants at each other’s weddings. Claire and her husband were the twins’ godparents. And she’d been Julia’s rock of support, her confessor, and her comforter through the whole nasty mess. Many days, Julia wasn’t sure she would have survived without her friend. Charles had never been one of Claire’s favorite people and was always aware that she detested him for the way he treated Julia.

“I’m calling my attorney right now. Charles is still playing the same game about signing, and I’m tired of playing this game.”

Claire raised an eyebrow. “What in God’s name is it for this time?”

Julia shrugged. “He thinks he can talk me into calling off the whole thing.”

Claire’s eyes widened. “Is he crazy?”

Julia sighed heavily. “I think so. Probably. I just want this done. Finally. I’m calling Harry Whitaker right now.”

“Be careful, sweetheart.” Claire’s voice had a warning tone to it.

“About what? What can he do? He’s not going to shoot me.”

“Texas law says a man can get a divorce on the grounds of adultery. If there’s anything going on between you and Luke Buchanan, and Charles finds out, technically you’re still married to him and he can tear up the whole agreement. He can divorce you on his terms.”

Julia picked up the phone. “I’m calling Harry Whitaker right now. He needs to put some muscle into this thing.”

“I’m running out of patience, too,” Harry told her when he answered the phone. “I’ll see if we can’t get this finished in the next day or two.”

"I want it over with, Harry," she told him.

"As good as done," he assured her.

But even after she hung up, an uneasy feeling wiggled through her system.

The next day, she called Luke to tell him she was all set for the trip.

"I'm making plans to arrive Tuesday morning. I'll call you back as soon as I make the reservations"

"The company will take care of those, Julia." His voice was firm. "I'll have my secretary arrange things today."

"I can't let you do that," she protested. "We're going to be making money on this."

"Don't worry. We can afford it. Besides, I was the one who asked you to make this extra trip. And I'll pick you up at the airport myself."

"Won't that look peculiar?" She fidgeted. "I don't want to put you in an uncomfortable position."

"Not to worry. I've already mentioned I'd be taking you to the plant to look around. It's much more convenient to leave directly from Boston than to come here first, so they'd expect me to meet you. Relax. We're all business."

But she could hear the smile in his voice.

"Uh huh. If you say so." She was smiling herself. "Okay. I'll see you next week."

She was elated when she hung up the phone and leaned back in her chair, her eyes far away, and the smile still on her face. How was it possible to feel this way about a man after spending less than twenty-four hours with him? Was she deluding herself? Was Luke just fascinated with her—an equally improbably idea—and she the one making too much of it? She mentally shrugged. It was what it was, and soon they'd be together again.

She was still sitting there, dreamy-eyed when Claire wandered in.

"Mm-hmm. Do I sniff another phone call with the sexy voice?"

"Business, Claire." Julia waved a hand in the air. "Just business."

"This is me, honey." Claire's laughing was knowing. "You might convince someone else of that, but I know you too well. So what's the word today? Are we set for the rollout campaign?"

"I'm going up there for three days next week," Julia said, suddenly busy with folders on her desk.

Claire cleared her throat. "Uh, Julia? What did Harry say about the signing?"

"He's confident we can complete this by tomorrow." She mentally crossed her fingers.

"I sure hope so, kiddo. If he does, I'll be treating you to a celebration like you've never seen before." Claire went over to her friend and hugged her tightly. "Enjoy yourself next week, Julia. You've earned some happiness."

But a feeling of unease pricked at her the next morning when Harry called her.

"Charles is out of town until next Tuesday," he told her.

"What?" Her fingers tightened on the telephone and she felt as if someone had dropped a chunk of ice into her stomach. Did he think this was some kind of punishment? That he could dangle the carrot forever until she changed her mind? "Harry, I—"

"I know, I know," he interrupted. "I said it all to his attorney. But I promise you I'm all over it. I muscled his attorney and told him to quit mucking around or we'd go back to court and ask for even more."

Julia allowed herself a tiny laugh. "At least it's nice to contemplate. Listen, I'll be gone for three days next week, but I'll keep in touch by phone."

"Don't worry, Julia. Consider it a done deal."

But she knew it wasn't done until that signature was on the documents. She worried about it enough to give herself a stress headache and make her nerves raw.

"Julia, I swear." Claire shoved her fingers through her curls in exasperation. "I don't know why the hell you let him get away with this. He's just a bully who enjoys yanking your chain." She blew out a breath. "I thought Harry was a shark who ate people like Charles for breakfast."

Julia fiddled with a pen on her desk. "He is. I've just... been trying to keep this as simple as possible. Not irritate him any more than he already is. To get it over with."

"Simple? Over with?" Claire threw up her hands. "Honey, it's been anything but simple. And it's still not over. That asshole has practically made you beg for everything. What the hell has Harry been doing? He should have gone after him with a jackhammer."

"Harry got him out of the house," she reminded her friend, "and worked out the custodial arrangements for the twins the way I wanted them. Charles can't just pop in and ask for them on a whim."

Claire made an unladylike noise. "The only reason he even takes them on his appointed days is because he knows it pisses you off. He doesn't have to worry about winning the Father of the Year Award."

"And he can't stick his nose in my business any more, either," Julia said defensively.

"Yeah?" Claire studied her face. "How's that working out for you?"

“Fine,” Julia said in a flat voice, but they both knew she was lying.

Julia worried all week, imagining any number of disasters. Every time the telephone rang, she expected it to be Charles ready to pounce on her for something. Or Luke changing his mind. Or Harry telling her Charles had changed his mind. Not to mention the fact that time dragged interminably as she counted off the days one by one. She and Claire spent two days brainstorming the Hot Ticket campaign, an exercise which forced her to focus, but the rest of the time her mind was like a restless nomad, wandering into dangerous territory.

At last, the following week arrived.

Monday night, Julia packed and unpacked at least three times, then decided to take a bigger suitcase and throw everything on her bed into it. She simply couldn't make a choice. She read the twins a story after dinner, tucked them into bed, and went to bed herself.

The next day couldn't come soon enough for her.

## *Chapter Seven*

Luke was waiting for her at the baggage carousel, ruggedly handsome in his charcoal suit with a dark overcoat folded over one arm. A warm smile creased his face and his eyes danced as he spotted her. She simply couldn't help herself. She threw herself into his arms.

"Hey," he said in a soft voice. "I'm glad to see you, too."

He held her so tightly she thought her breath would leave her. He felt so good to her, and his scent wrapped itself around her in a delicious cloud. She'd remembered that scent every day since the last time she'd seen him.

"I've probably embarrassed you in front of the entire city of Boston," she laughed, pulling back.

"Maybe only half of it," he joked. "But don't worry. They'll tell the other half."

Driving away from the airport, she couldn't get enough of looking at him, staring at his face as if memorizing it. Aviator sunglasses now hid the warm brown eyes and thick lashes that she remembered, but her eyes took in every line of his face- the strong jaw, and broad forehead. Sunlight glinted on the faint threads of silver in his thick brown hair. He was freshly shaven, and she inhaled the spicy scent of his aftershave.

He reached a hand over to her and she took it, lacing her fingers through his. It felt so good being with him again. Just his nearness made her feel warm and giddy, almost like a teenager. She could hardly believe she was finally here, sitting next to him, touching him.

He squeezed her hand. "I've missed you, Julia. Tell me you missed me a little bit."

"You know I have. More than a little. I feel like it's been forever since we were... together."

"Well, I have a little surprise planned for later that I hope will make up for it."

"Oh, good." She sat up straighter. "I love surprises. What is it?"

He laughed that full throated laugh that she loved so much. "If I told you now, it wouldn't be a surprise, now would it?"

And no matter how much she begged and teased, he just smiled and shook his head.

They headed away from Boston, the crowded city soon falling away to a suburban landscape. It had snowed heavily over the weekend. She'd followed the weather reports, so she knew what kind of clothes to bring. Now she saw pristine white drifts mounded against mostly brick houses and decorating the bare branches of the trees. The brilliance of the sunlight glinted off the surface, making everything look fresh and new.

The plant was just at the edge of a tiny hamlet called Livingston, a two story brick building with wide windows on both floors.

"We like to give our employees a lot of natural light," Luke said. "Most of the town works here in one capacity or another, and we want to keep them happy."

The plant manager was waiting for them in the lobby. Behind him was a small reception committee barely concealing their nervousness at a visit by the executive vice president. But Julia watched Luke put everyone at ease, and the tour progressed in a relaxed atmosphere. Lunch was served to them in a corner of the cafeteria.

"I'm sorry," the plant manager apologized to Julia, "but we don't have a conference room or formal dining room of any kind." He looked at Luke and grinned. "The boss says this is a no frills operation."

"As it should be," Julia said. "I'm really impressed with the efficient way everything runs. Besides, cafeteria food is my secret vice."

She was amazed that she and Luke were able to maintain their professional poise with the sexual tension that vibrated between them throughout the day. She was too afraid the people with them would sense it. These people worked for Luke. She couldn't let them speculate on something that might be damaging to him. Once she caught him looking at her, a tiny grin teasing at his lips, and she ducked her head, turning to look at something.

At the end of the tour, the plant manager presented her with a Hot Ticket sports bag filled with some of the Hot Ticket items. He included samples of the new items they'd be producing.

"Thank you," she told him. "Having these things in front of me will help us as we work through the project."



"It was a pleasure having you here today." He held out his hand. "Everyone's excited about the new campaign."

"Thank you." She shook hands with him. "My partner and I will be doing our very best for you. We're excited about it, too."

She waited while Luke chatted with the man for a few minutes. Then he ushered her back to his car and they drove away. She leaned her head back against the seat and blew out a breath.

"You did great," Luke told her. "They all love you, no big surprise there." He squeezed her hand. "You're a pro."

"I enjoyed meeting everyone, and the operation is very impressive." She stretched her legs out. "Are we heading to the hotel now? Are we having dinner there?"

"Not exactly."

"What does not exactly mean?"

"This is where my surprise comes in."

She could hear the smile in his voice and maybe just a touch of nervousness, too. Luke, nervous? "Don't worry. I told you I like surprises. But how soon will I get to see it?"

"Just relax. I'll give you a little commentary on the Massachusetts countryside and pretty soon we'll be where we're going."

He drove at a leisurely pace along the narrow country highway, pointing out towns they passed. Some were little more than four corners with a general store and gas station. They'd driven for about an hour when he turned off the highway onto a recently-plowed narrow lane and followed it to a clearing.

"Okay." He turned off the engine and put the car in park. "We're here."

Julia stared out the window. A tiny, perfectly shaped log cabin, with a peaked roof and a tall chimney, stood like a jewel in the drifts of unspoiled snow. The evergreens that guarded it were draped in the same snow as if a painter had just daubed them with his brush. It reminded her of something from Currier and Ives. She was enthralled with the picture.

"Where are we?" she asked. "Who owns this place?"

"I do." Luke grinned. "Care to come inside?"

Julia was dumbstruck when she walked into the cabin, which turned out to be basically one huge room. The walls and floor had been polished to a high gloss, beams criss-crossed overhead below the peak of the ceiling, and part of one wall was taken up with bookshelves and

a stereo unit. One corner of the area was outfitted as a very efficient kitchen setup, and next to it was a door that Julia assumed led to a bathroom.

A tiny breakfast set, a long couch, two deep chairs, and a king sized bed covered in a traditional quilt took care of the furniture needs. The colors in a thick rug brought warmth into the room, and an inviting fire was laid in the fireplace.

"This is fantastic!" she said. "I feel like I stepped into Little House on the Prairie. How did you happen to buy it and what do you use it for?"

"Later," he told her, taking her coat and hanging it on a hook by the door. "First we relax." He took out glasses, a bottle of amaretto and a bottle of Canadian Club from a kitchen cupboard. "See," he grinned, "I even remembered what you like to drink." He poured a generous portion into each glass, added Coke to his and ice to both, then handed Julia's to her. "A toast. To us."

"To us," she agreed in a soft voice. *I hope.*

They touched glasses and Julia sipped at the smooth liquid, feeling it warm her blood and ease her tension.

"We have steaks for later," Luke said, "but we don't need to hurry." He winked at her. "I thought we might find something to amuse ourselves before dinner."

*So what now?* she asked herself. *I don't know how to do this. Do we make polite chitchat first while we sip our drinks, or do we just rip our clothes off and dive into bed? Last time it was such a natural thing, I didn't have to think. This is different. Planned. How am I supposed to behave?*

Luke picked up on her nervousness. "Did I presume?" he asked her. "If this is not what you want, tell me now and I'll take you to the hotel. No harm, no foul."

"No. I mean, yes." She was stammering and she took a deep breath to pull herself together. "You didn't presume at all. I want this too."

He handed her a box from the counter. "I thought you might like this to change into after a long day. It's one of the outfits we shipped a lot of this winter. Usually, there's a logo of your favorite football team on the sleeve, but I don't even know if you like football, so I snagged a plain one."

She opened it and caught her breath. An outfit of the softest fleece nestled in tissue paper, navy blue with pink roses trailing over it.

"It's beautiful." She ran her fingers over the material. "And I love football."

"You look good in blue," he said. "You wore blue the night we were... together, and looked terrific in it."

"Oh, Luke, thank you for being so thoughtful." She blew him a kiss.

"Well?" he gestured at the box. "How about modeling it for me?"

"Of course." She set her glass on the counter and picked up the box. "I...I'll just be a minute."

She disappeared into the bathroom, grateful for the chance to freshen up.

"Relax," she told herself as she stripped off her clothes. "It's Luke. And you wanted this, right? Right?"

She kept up a running monologue as she used the scented soap and fluffy towels he'd set out for her. As she folded her clothes and set them on the edge of the tub, she gave in to a naughty urge and stripped off her thong and bra, too, slipping them beneath the jacket of her pants suit.

*In for a penny, in for a pound.*

The two piece outfit felt as soft as an angel's kiss against her skin as she drew it on, and when she looked in the mirror over the sink, she realized Luke was right. The blue did bring out the brilliance of the color in her eyes. A quick brush through her hair and a swipe of lip gloss on her mouth, one last look in the mirror, and she was ready.

*Deep breath, Julia.*

When she came back into the room, the fire was crackling in the fireplace, music was playing softly in the stereo, and Luke was half sitting, half lying on the couch. He'd removed his jacket and tie and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. She loved the play of muscle in his arms and the glint of the firelight on the dark hair of his arms.

She twirled in front of him. "Well? What do you think?"

A slow, languid smile spread over his face. "Gorgeous. Just as I expected. How do you like it?"

"I love it." She smoothed a hand over the fabric. "It's like being wrapped in a feathery blanket. No wonder you sold so many of them."

Luke put his drink down, stood up, and took her hand. "Dance with me." He pulled her easily into his arms, nestling her head against his shoulder, their linked hands folded in between them. They moved slowly, almost in place, in the same rhythm they'd been caught up in the last time.

Julia felt transported here in this cabin in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by snow and pine trees, warmed by the fire, and lulled by the music. The rest of her life fell away and for

the first time since she arrived at the airport that morning, she relaxed, tension sliding away from her body like a cloak someone had removed.

"You smell wonderful," Luke murmured in her ear. "I wish I could have bottled your scent and kept it with me to open every now and then." He pressed her to him tightly. "God, you don't know how much I've missed you, Julia. One night together and I couldn't get you out of my head."

"I missed you, too," she said, feeling the steady thud of his heart against her.

"Did you bewitch me, Julia?" His lips moved against her hair. "Did you cast a spell?"

Her laugh was unsteady. "I'm not sure I'd know how."

"Oh, I think with you, no knowledge is even required."

His words made her feel giddy, excited. It was the kind of nervous energy one got from dancing on a thin wire.

Luke kissed her forehead, then her cheek, sliding his mouth until he found her lips. Gently he pressed his tongue until she opened for him, meeting him with her own tongue. The kiss went on and on as if they were fused together while the music drifted into the room and they moved together so slowly.

Luke moved his hands so they slid beneath the knitted band of the top. He drew a sharp breath when he realized she had not put her bra back on.

"Tempting me already?" His voice was just a tiny bit unsteady.

"Hoping to." Hers had the same slightly shaking timbre to it.

Her breasts were bare to his touch. He cupped them in his hands, caressing the soft flesh, lightly rubbing his thumbs across the nipples. They hardened almost painfully at his touch, and Julia felt that same needy ache that had sizzled through them the first time he'd touched her. His fingers gently squeezed the flesh of her breasts, his palms bearing their weight. She could barely stifle the tiny moan that vibrated in her throat.

As they danced, his hands continued to play with her breasts, rub them, and tease her nipples. His lips brushed tiny kisses over her forehead, down the side of her face, along the column of her neck. His teeth nipped at her ear lobe. Against the softness of her belly his thick, hard erection imprinted itself onto her body. Heat surged through her like a flash fire, enveloping her in a scorching grip.

With almost no effort Luke slid one hand down over her ribs, across her tummy, and into the waistband of the pants. His hand caressed her hipbone, fingers trailing lightly over it, before

finding the smooth globes of her buttocks. He moved over them, one and then the other. When he slid the tips of his fingers into the warm cleft, he drew an instant response from her. Another moan. A sigh. She pressed herself closer to him, her breath catching in her throat. The more he drew his fingers through the crease, the more rapid her breathing grew.

When he moved the hand around to touch her between her legs, she gasped.

"You're wet." His voice was almost guttural. "Slick. Very slick. And your sweet pussy lips are so swollen, Julia. I remember how they looked that night, the lamplight glowing on their deep pink color, your little clit so swollen and just peeping out."

His words were stimulating the nerves in the walls of her cunt, making the flesh quiver with need and anticipation. She clung to his arms, steadying herself against the erotic onslaught. When he probed her folds with one finger, her pussy clenched around him and she made a strangled sound in her throat.

"You're killing me," she moaned.

"But it's so sweet, isn't it? So hot and wet inside. You grip my finger the way you grip my cock. You like my fingers inside you."

She could barely nod her head. Her bones were already turning liquid and her muscles threatened to give out on her.

Luke withdrew his hand and licked his fingers, eyes darkening. "Sweet," he repeated. "The best taste there is. *Yours* is the best."

Despite the trembling in her fingers, she managed to undo the buttons on his shirt, her gaze locked with his as he continued to run the tip of his tongue over his fingers. His nostrils flared as he inhaled the scent of her sex. He laughed very softly when she fumbled with the fabric of his shirt, yanked it out of his slacks, and tossed it aside. His breath hissed when she ran her fingers over his chest, reveling again at the silky feel of his thick chest hair and the hardness of the muscle beneath.

When she skimmed her fingers over his nipples, he wrapped his own fingers around hers and pressed them hard against his chest. A tiny thrill sizzled through her that she could arouse him so quickly and easily. Experimentally, she dragged her fingernails over the flat nipples, then put her lips around one of them.

Luke grabbed her shoulders, his fingers tight on her in their grip.

"Careful." His voice was hoarse with rising hunger. "I want to make this last for you, but I've been on the edge wanting you since you left here."

Julia raised her eyes. "But I love touching you. Feeling how you respond to me."

"We'll have plenty of time for that." Gently he moved her hands to her sides. They had stopped dancing and were standing still, the firelight warming them, and the music weaving a soft cocoon of sound around them.

Sliding the soft fleece of the pants past her hips and thighs, he knelt to help her step out of them as he'd done in the hotel room.

*Jesus!*

His dick was rock hard, vibrating with the blood flowing through its veins and begging for the soft feel of Julia's hands, her mouth, and her incredible pussy. Luke gritted his teeth to hang onto his rapidly fraying control as his hands skimmed over her velvet-soft skin. He'd had a lot of women in his life—probably way too many—but none had ever affected him like Julia Patterson. With her, everything was new and fresh. He felt like a different person. It was just as he'd told her that night. This wasn't sex. This was making love.

He wanted to take her every way possible. Plunge into every opening of her body and fuck her until she didn't even know her own name. Taste every inch of her body until it gave up all its secrets. He wanted things with her that he'd never wanted with anyone else.

He pressed his face against her soft public curls and inhaled her scent, the tang of it flowing through his system. His fingers pried open the lips of her cunt, exposing her clit, and he pulled it into his mouth. Julia balanced herself with her hands on his shoulders. When he grazed her clit with his teeth, she shook all over and delicious sounds of pleasure exploded from her lips.

He licked in earnest, pulling her labia back further to expose the slick pink flesh of her slit. He feasted on it, lapping and sucking, using his thumb to keep her clit in a constant state of arousal. Her entire body was trembling now as he licked and drank in her sweet cream.

When he slid two fingers into the hot well of her vagina, she climaxed at once, pulsing around his fingers, her moan a low throaty sound, her body convulsing, fingers digging into him as she desperately tried to maintain her balance. He stroked his fingers in and out and sucked again on her clit until he'd wrung the last drop from her.

Then he rose, pulling her against him tightly and pressing his mouth to hers so she could taste herself on his lips.

"I love you," he murmured against her open mouth. "It's quick, it's fast, but I know what I feel."

“M-Me, too.” Her voice trembled as much as her body did.

“Good.” He lifted his head to smile at her. “It’s always nice when it works out that way.”

He broke away from her long enough to toss some of the pillows from the couch onto the floor, then laid her down on them in front of the fire. He felt his groin tighten even more as he looked at her naked in the firelight, flushed and wanton. She was sated, yet the message in her eyes plainly told him she wanted him again.

With swift movements, he discarded the rest of his clothes and lowered his naked body to the cushions next to hers.

Julia lay there, warmed by the flames and the look of pure desire in his eyes. She was too aroused to even care that her body might be less than perfect for him. Watching him shed his clothes, she trembled in anticipation of his touch again, the feel of his body against hers. Her hands itched for the solid feel of his muscles, the crisply curling hair on his chest, the thickness of his visibly engorged shaft. An unfamiliar sensation gripped her, one she couldn’t ever remember feeling. Pure lust.

Lordy! He’d just brought her to a climax so instantaneous she’d barely had time to catch her breath, yet here she was craving him again. More cream seeped from her pussy at the images conjured up in her mind.

In seconds, Luke was kissing her again, a voracious kiss that seemed to draw from her very soul. She felt his hands skimming her body, lightly touching her everywhere. Without urging, she opened her legs for him, felt him cupping her mound, opening her folds, sliding first one, then two fingers into her again. She moaned and moved against his hands.

“You feel so good,” he whispered. He moved his moistened fingers down into the cleft of her buttocks again, rubbing them against the skin in that hot, tight place. Placing his lips on her already swollen and sensitive bud, he sucked and nibbled as his fingers kept sliding, probing, and her nerves exploded like firecrackers.

“Easy, easy,” he crooned, withdrawing his hand and placing one of hers on his throbbing erection. “See what touching you does to me?” He felt her close her fingers around him and pulsed in response. “I want to make this last for you, sweet Julia, but I want you too badly.”

“Please,” she begged, moving her hand up and down on him. “Don’t wait.” She wanted to feel him inside her again, feel the length of him filling her, stretching her. Her body ached for the fulfillment he gave her.

He pulled her hand away, moved over her to position himself, and thrust slowly. At last he was inside her, and it was the most incredible feeling in the world. She was so ready for him that he found himself buried to the hilt almost at once. Slanting his mouth over hers, probing with his tongue, he mimicked the movements of his body as he drove slowly in and out of her. Her fingernails raked his back as she clutched at him, their bodies slick with sweat, skin sliding against skin.

“More,” she cried. “More. More, more.”

In an agony of frustration, she moved her hips against him, trying to draw him in deeper. She was so close, almost there, hanging on the edge. “Harder. Please. Please.”

“Julia.”

She opened her eyes wide to look at him, seeing the tension in his face, the sweat beading his forehead. Their eyes locked and she felt as if he were staring into her very soul.

He felt her tremors begin, her sheath grasping at his hot shaft. Then with a hoarse cry, he gave her the release she sought and carried them over the edge.

Waves of pleasure washed over her, her body wracked by spasm after spasm. Julia clenched around him, milking him, as he poured into her body, filling her. On and on it went, until she thought her heart would stop altogether.

Finally spent, they collapsed in a tangle of boneless limbs, pulses racing, hearts pounding.

Julia didn't know how long they lay there. The weight of his body on her was heavy, but nothing could have induced her to move him. She felt transported, as if something momentous had just happened. And, in fact, it had. Even more than the one night they'd spent together, she had given herself completely to Luke Buchanan.

“Jesus,” he said, barely raising his head, “you make me wish I was sixteen again.” He touched his forehead to hers.

As they lay there, waiting for their breathing to return to some semblance of normal, they realized that what had begun that first night in the hotel had blossomed into something very real.

“I've been thinking about this since the last minute we were together,” Luke told her.

“Me, too” she said, desperation in her voice. “I can't seem to shut my brain off.”

He held her to him tightly. “Mine, Julia. No matter what. You'll always be mine. Does that scare you?”

“Maybe. A little. I don't know.” She drew a shaky breath. “How did we get here so fast? What's happening to us, Luke?”



"I don't know," he sighed. "It just sort of snuck up on us, I guess." He looked at her. "We have to talk about it, you know."

She nodded. "I want to."

He stood up and reached a hand out to her. "But first, I'm famished. I think I worked up a good appetite."

Julia grinned at him. "I'd say so."

Luke threw on jeans and a T-shirt that he pulled from a dresser drawer and began taking things out in the little kitchen area. Julia slipped the soft fleece outfit back on, took her drink, and sat at the kitchen table, watching him broil steaks and slice tomatoes. They kept conversation light while they ate, and after Luke cleaned up, they took their drinks and sat in front of the fire."

"How is it you have a cabin way up here in the middle of nowhere?" she asked.

"It's a long story. And messy. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"It's about you, and I want to know everything I can about you." She leaned against him, cuddling against his body when he put his arm around her.

He took a long swallow of his drink. "Long story short, my marriage began to fall apart the day after the ceremony and I never quite figured out why. Not even two children could patch the cracks." He finished the drink. "Then I found out my wife was sleeping with every willing candidate she could find. If it had a pulse, she fucked it."

"Oh, Luke." The pain in his voice sliced through her, and she wished she knew what she could do to ease it.

"We kept it together until the boys were both out of high school, but by then I'd had all I could take. I'd changed corporations twice, always moving up. I might be a failure at marriage, but not in business. Somehow, I have a knack for looking at a company and figuring out what it needs to do to remain profitable and increase the bottom line. When Hot Ticket recruited me to be executive vice president, I thought it would give us a fresh start."

"It didn't?"

"No, and I had to do something before everyone in the company knew about it. So I filed for divorce and sent her back to Alabama. But I bought the cabin shortly after we got here, as a place I could go to hide from everything." He stood up, looking down at her. "No one's ever been here with me except you. It's important you know that."

Something pulled at her heart when he said that. He'd deliberately chosen to share his most private space with her, a choice she took as a gift.

"I'm glad." She smiled up at him. "And thank you."

One corner of his mouth turned up. "I sound disgustingly sorry for myself, don't I?"

"No." She shook her head. "Just painfully lonely and shortchanged by life."

He fixed himself another drink, but when he sat down beside her again, he seemed to have run out of words, silently staring into the fire.

Julia waited for him to speak, but when he didn't, she just rested her head on his shoulder and reached down with one hand to link her fingers with his.

Luke raised their joined hands and kissed her fingers.

"Whatever you tell me is part of who you are," she said, breaking the silence. "The person I love is the one you've become. People say the past is always with us, but now we have a chance to make a new future." She leaned over, pressed her lips against his, and was rewarded by an answering pressure.

His mouth opened and his tongue reached into her, setting her on fire.

"Works for me," he said when they broke apart.

He pulled her with him as he stood up, took their drinks and set them carefully on the coffee table, and led her to the bed. With deliberate precision, he removed the fleece top and bottom, kissing each part of her body as he exposed it, his mouth hot and wet and open. When he placed her naked body on the bed, he ripped off his jeans and T-shirt, tossing them to the floor as he lay down beside her.

This time, they moved to the bed, making love in as many ways as their minds could invent. And every joining, every sensation, was wrapped in words of love, of the new feelings surging through them. Finally, sated and exhausted, they spooned together, bodies nestled comfortably.

Julia fell asleep at once, completely spent by the intensity of their lovemaking, but Luke lay with his eyes open for a long time, staring into the dark. A fierce yearning gripped him. He thought how wonderful it would be if it were Julia he came home to each day, Julia who sat across from him at dinner, Julia who slept curled in his arms every night. He was impatient for her to be free, so he could make the dream a reality.

## *Chapter Eight*

Julia was proud of them the next day. Through all the intense meetings at the Hot Ticket headquarters, the small conferences, the explanations, she and Luke were totally professional. Somehow they managed to act like two business people, keeping the sexual tension under control.

"We could always get jobs as actors," she teased Luke when they were alone. They were seated in the corner booth at the Holiday Inn in the lounge where they'd had drinks that first momentous night. "We played our parts pretty good."

"You were the consummate professional," Luke said with affection.

"What's wrong?" The smile on her face faded at whatever she saw on his face.

"Nothing." He reached across for her hand, pushing away the thoughts of the years of his life he'd wasted. "Not a thing. What could possibly be wrong? I'm sitting here with the most beautiful woman in the world anticipating yet another night of unbelievable sex."

Julia blushed. "I don't know if we can possibly top last night." She looked around the room. "I'm curious why we're staying here tonight and not the cabin? Aren't you worried that some of your people might wander in here for a drink and see us?"

"Not a bit." He shook his head. "Taking you to dinner is expected, and the choices are limited. I didn't want to chance it at the cabin in case we get snow. While being stranded there with you is very appealing, it might present problems neither of us wants to deal with."

"You know, Charles should have signed the divorce papers by the time I get back."

"Yes." His grip on her hand tightened. "That's another reason I don't want you to be delayed. You need to be there in case there's a problem. I don't know the bastard, but from what you tell me, he's going to go to the mat on this. I'd like to keep you locked away until it's a done

deal, but I know you have other responsibilities. The twins, for example. And I don't want anything to go wrong to delay this one more day."

Julia nodded her head slowly. "I've been checking my messages. Harry texted me to tell me Charles still wasn't back from his trip, but he was supposed to be back today. Harry called the other attorney and demanded a firm appointment for tomorrow morning. If all goes well, by the time I get off the plane, Harry should be at the courthouse filing the papers.." She didn't want to let him know how worried she was, how a feeling of unease kept tickling at her like the rake of the claws of a beast. Damn Charles to hell, anyway.

Luke's deep brown eyes captured hers and held her gaze. "I wish I could promise you everything will be fine, but you're a strong woman, Julia. You'll survive whatever happens."

She exhaled a long breath. "I didn't use to be, you know. I let Charles bully me for years. That's why he thinks he can get away with it now." She leaned forward and smiled. "Somehow I lost myself along the way, but you're helping me find the person I really am."

"A warm, smart, funny, wonderful woman," he told her. "You know you can call me whenever it gets rough, right?"

"Yes." She smiled at him. "But this is my mess. I want it over and done with and not slopping over onto you. The next time we're together, I want it to be without any strings still dangling."

"It will be," he promised her. "I have faith. We couldn't have something this good happen to us and then lose it for some stupid reason."

The musical duo started their first set of the evening and Luke wordlessly led Julia to the dance floor. She allowed him to pull her body in close to his and tucked their clasped hands against his chest. She rested her head against his shoulder. She had an incredible sense of déjà vu. As they moved slowly to the rhythm, she could feel his arousal hard against her, nudging at her, calling her senses to come out and play.

"I can't believe how hard I am," he whispered in her ear. "By all laws of nature, I should be dead by now."

"I'm glad I make you feel that way." He had no idea what a sense of new power it gave her to affect him that way.

Again they barely moved, shuffling their feet in place to the notes of the soft ballad.

"Hungry?" Luke asked, as they made their way back to their table.

Julia shook her head. "No, Not at all."

They looked hard at each other for a long moment, then Luke nodded and signaled for the check.

They rode the elevator silently, and at her door she gave Luke the key card to open the room. He flipped the light switch and the two bedside lamps poured their golden color into the bedroom.

"Let me just look at you," Luke told her, "and just feast my eyes on you. I want to remember every single inch of your body." One piece at a time, he peeled away her clothes, not kissing her or touching her in any other way, just absorbing her with his eyes. When she was completely naked, he took a step back and carefully looked at every inch of her body. His hands itched to caress her warm breasts, to pluck her erect nipple, to dance his finger along the slope of her belly into the soft curls below, and finally into her welcoming wetness.

"God, you take my breath away," he told her. "You are so gorgeous."

"You must have a distorted view of me," she said shakily. "My body certainly shows the wear and tear of motherhood."

He shook his head. "Only to give you a warmer, richer look." In an instant, he had divested himself of his own clothes and stood before her, just as naked.

Now it was Julia's turn to look, to devour him with her eyes, storing up memories to last her a lifetime. She would never be able to fall asleep again without seeing that strong chest with its crisp, curling hair, the flat brown nipples on his chest, the erection whose remembered presence in her body would have to carry her through forever.

Then they were kissing, deep, voracious, carnal kisses, where their tongues did an erotic dance and probed every inner recess of their mouths. Luke guided her to the bed, pausing only to reach down and rip away the covers. Then they were laying side by side, their mouths fused together, hands reaching for each other.

Luke tore his mouth away, trailed kisses along her cheek, then grasped both of her hands in one of his and stretched them back above her head.

"Tonight, my love, I'm going to show you what it's really all about." And he proceeded to do just that.

For Julia, it was the most sensual experience she'd ever had. His hands on her skin seemed to burn against her, plucking at her nerves, leaving little fires in their trail. He laved each breast until she thought she would go mad with the sensation, then drove her even crazier as he plucked on each nipple with his teeth until they were swollen and aching.

The touch of his lips on her stomach was like a feather, teasing her with the lightest of touches, then using his tongue to draw circles on her skin—the tongue that knew just how to convey the most carnal invitation. Julia sensed him move his body and his tongue dipper lowed. She followed his hand as it nudged her thighs apart. When she felt him kissing the soft curls at her vee, then moving his tongue along the length of her womanhood, she nearly came off the bed.

“Easy,” he whispered. “We have so much time. I want you to remember this forever.”

*As if I could forget one minute with you.*

Then he was parting her already throbbing folds with his thumbs, laving every inch of her cunt, finally tasting the inside of her. She jerked against him and he moved to use both hands to hold her in place. God, her skin was so soft, like fine silk, and her breasts felt like supple globes. But the cream at the entrance to her pussy was like tasting honey—heady, intoxicating, and stimulating.

“Please, please,” she moaned softly. “Oh, please.”

“Not yet,” he whispered against her skin. “Not yet, my love.”

He used his mouth and his fingers expertly, drawing on all his knowledge and experience. He knew exactly when he brought her to her peak and drew back, not ready to let her come. He held her hips firmly, bringing her back to his mouth, and began again. He brought her to the edge so many times he lost count, each time taking her a little higher, a little further. He relished the taste of her on his lips, the sensations of tremors that thrummed against his fingers. And on and on it went, his mouth and fingers playing her body like a fine instrument.

Finally, when she was sobbing, begging, pleading for her release, he captured her nub between his teeth, slid two fingers into her slippery sheath, then three, and took her over the edge. She climaxed with huge shudders, bucking against his hands and mouth, biting her lips to keep from screaming his name.

Before the spasms had even subsided, he moved into place over her, his shaft so hot and hard it nearly caused him pain. He thrust into her, slowly at first, feeling her liquid heat surround him, then harder until he was buried to the hilt. He felt the still-quivering walls of her pussy clutch around him and nearly lost what was left of his control.

He heard Julia gasp then moan softly. Lifting his head he saw her eyes glazed with pleasure, her face hot and flushed with passion. He paused to gather himself, then began moving within her, slowly at first, then faster and faster. He felt Julia moving in rhythm with him,

thrusting her hips, her legs wrapped around him to pull him closer, their sweat-drenched bodies moving slickly against each other.

He slid nearly all the way out, then thrust hard into her, doing this again and again until she began to plead once more. He could feel her orgasm building again and he gritted his teeth to hold onto his control as long as he could. And then he couldn't stop. Neither of them could. He slammed his mouth against hers, swallowing her moans, as they both spiraled into space, bodies shaking, hearts pounding in tandem, falling, falling, until they were spent.

It was a long time before either of them spoke. Finally, Luke raised his head, cleared his throat, and said, "Are we still alive?"

"I don't know." Julia wet her lips. She could barely breathe. Her entire body felt like a blob of jelly, boneless, limp, muscles turned to butter. "I actually think I've died and gone to heaven."

Luke rolled to the side, keeping one arm around her and bringing her with him until she was nestled close to him. "Julia, I..."

She reached up and pressed her fingers against his lips. "Don't say it. Whatever it is. For tonight, let's not talk, okay?"

"I'm not sure I'm good for much more after that," he chuckled in a rusty voice.

"Oh, I don't know. Give me a minute and we'll see." She trailed her hand softly down his body, feeling each muscle with the tips of her fingers. "It's amazing what a few minutes of rest can do."

"Not at my age," he laughed. "Don't let your expectations exceed reality."

Still, he wondered where they could go from here. They'd said things to each other, opened their hearts, but how could they blend their lives together? She had young children. He had sons that knew nothing about their father's desire for a new life. But how could he give up perfection when he'd just found it?

Pulling her against him, he said in a low voice, "Julia, I wish. . ."

She leaned over and kissed him, effectively stopping all conversation. "Don't say it. Not right now. Okay?" Then she curled against him and closed her eyes.

They didn't sleep, just dozed. Luke woke to find his body doing things he'd thought impossible just a while ago. Warm sensations were flooding through him, snapping him to attention. He tried to clear his head, and suddenly realized what was happening.

Julia looked up at him, her eyes hot and demanding. She had wrapped her fingers around his shaft, sliding them up and down the skin covering the hard core, coaxing a response, while her lips swallowed the tip and liquid drops of cum from the slit. Watching her was one of the most erotic experiences of his life. Luke could not have protested if he wanted to. The sensation was exquisite torture, rousing him when he'd thought no reaction was possible again.

"Just lay back and enjoy it," she told him. "Now it's my turn."

And so it was. As he'd done for her, she took her time, drawing it out as long as she could, letting her hands slide so tantalizingly along his now-hot erection, cupping the heavy sac between his legs, her tongue sliding across the soft velvet tip.

When she licked the tiny drops of moisture that spilled out, he nearly lost it altogether. If he'd been able to, he'd have reached up, moved her on top of him and thrust inside of her. But she was too determined. He finally gave himself up to the sensation, and when she drew him over the edge, he lay there and shuddered in unbelievable ecstasy.

They slept spooned together, but not restfully, despite being spent physically. They were glued skin to skin, unwilling for space to come between any parts of their bodies. Julia woke while it was still dark and snuggled back against Luke, wanting just a few more moments of his warmth and the feel of his wonderful body.

His arms wrapped around her again and she could feel his arousal pressing against her. His hands began moving over her, and they made love one last time, slowly, gently, savoring every moment of it because they knew it was probably the last time.

Eventually they dozed, and when the phone rang, Julia cursed wakeup calls in general and this one in particular.

She fumbled for the receiver and mumbled, "Hello?" two or three times before realizing it was her cell phone ringing.

Instantly she sat up, swung her legs over the side of the bed and punched the talk button.

"Yes?" The readout on the bedside clock said four in the morning. Who would be calling her at this hour?

*Oh, God, not the kids. Please don't tell me something happened to one of the twins.*

"Julia?"

"Who is this?" She rubbed her face, trying to wipe away the vestiges of sleep and make her brain work.



"It's Claire. Julia, are you there?"

"Claire?" She wrinkled her forehead, then grabbed at her heart. "Oh my God. Claire. The children. Are the twins all right?"

"Yes. I didn't have another number for you, so I called your cell. I know it's always on."

"What's wrong? Why are you calling?"

Luke was awake now, sitting up on the edge of the bed next to her, his big, warm hand soothing as he stroked her back and shoulders.

"Miranda called me a few minutes ago and asked me to get hold of you. She thought it would be easier if I told you about this rather than having it come from her."

"What do you mean? Damn, Claire, what's going on?"

"It's Charles. He's had a massive heart attack."

## *Chapter Nine*

“What?” At her shriek, Luke tightened his grip on her and pulled her close to him.

“Apparently it happened around midnight, but it wasn’t until a little while ago that one of his partners, who happened to be with him, thought to get hold of you.”

“Of course.” Her voice was bitter. “Everyone knows about the divorce. I guess they didn’t think his children needed to know.” She raked her fingers through her hair. “Oh God, Claire.”

“I came right down to the hospital so I could find out what’s what.” Claire made a sound like a snort. “That asshole partner of his acted like I was carrying cyanide or something. Anyway, the doctors are with him now. I’ll see what I can find out and call you back.”

“The children.” That was all she could think about at the moment. “I’ll have to tell them.”

“Let’s find out what’s going on before you do. How soon can you leave? Can you come right to the hospital when you get here?”

“Of course. Absolutely. I... I’ll have to call the airlines. I’ll have to... Oh, God.”

“Call Miranda, then call me back when you have your reservations. And pull yourself together, kiddo. We’ll get through this together.”

“I’ll call the airlines then order you some tea.” Luke held her gently to him, trying to ease the tension that gripped her body. “Go take a shower.”

“It’s my fault.” She felt such a heaviness she almost couldn’t breathe.

“Stop that.” He tilted her face to look at him. “Nothing is your fault, and I refuse to allow you to take the blame for this.”

“But...”

“We’ll talk about it after you’re dressed. Go on.” He patted her gently on the rear end, urging her toward the bathroom.

By the time she was dressed, Luke had new reservations for her and a pot of tea was waiting on the night stand. She gulped the hot liquid gratefully.

While Luke showered quickly and dressed, Julia called Claire back with her flight information, then spoke to Miranda.

"The children are still sleeping," she sighed. "I'm just glad he wasn't here when it happened."

"Me, too." Julia could imagine how that would have affected the twins. "I'll call you when I get to the hospital and find anything out. Why don't you try to go back to sleep?"

Miranda laughed, sadly. "As if. Just call me when you get there. Do you want me to keep Andy and Beth home from school today?"

Julia nibbled her lower lip. Should she? "No, let's keep everything as normal as possible until I have some answers."

"You take care of yourself," Miranda admonished before she hung up.

"I think I should take a cab to the airport," Julia told Luke, zipping up her suitcase. "You don't need to go running me around in the middle of the night."

"No." Luke was emphatic. "Out of the question. I'll drive you to the airport." He gave her a slightly roguish smile. "I won't have you taking that ride by yourself. Julia, this isn't some little quickie, where I run out when the going gets tough. I'm here for you. I care for you and about you. Hang onto that, okay?"

She smiled weakly. "How did I get so lucky as to have you walk into my life?"

"I'm the lucky one." He hugged her quickly. "Finish your tea."

The hot drink was doing her stomach some good, but she didn't think anything would help her heart. Guilt and misery and expected loneliness were fighting for possession of that fragile organ, and at the moment, guilt was winning. In spite of that, one thing was certain. Leaving here was going to be hell.

When she had put on her coat and was waiting by the door with her suitcase, Luke took her face between his palms and kissed her, a long, deep, soul-satisfying kiss.

"Remember this when you fall asleep at night, sweet Julia," he said. "I know I will."

"I will," she whispered, her throat tightening.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

Luke had prearranged to have the bill sent to his office, so they went directly to his car. They tried to make small talk on the rise into Boston, but Julia's mind was too preoccupied and finally Luke let her be. Both of them avoided the elephant that seemed to be sitting in the car with them.

Discussing business wasn't even an option.

"Don't worry about the contract," he told her. "I'll get in touch with Claire and we'll work things out."

"Oh, Luke. The contract." She was anguished. "I didn't even think about how this will impact my time."

"Hopefully not much," he told her. "Charles is out of the house and the final deed is almost done. But you'll be wound up getting your kids through this. Claire and I will take care of things."

When they pulled up to the curb at the airport, Luke killed the engine, undid his seat belt and reached for her. "I can't let you go like this."

"Oh, Luke, what choice do we have?" Tears spilled from her eyes and etched tracks on her cheeks.

"I know the choice I want," he said roughly, "but I know what you're facing. Call me, please?"

"I will. Just let me get home and see what the situation is."

He got out of the car, opened her door, and took out her suitcase. As he headed toward the terminal entrance, she stopped him.

"Don't come inside with me. Please. I don't think I could handle it."

"Julia..."

"Please. Do this for me."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes. It will be easier this way, if it can be easy at all."

A light snow was beginning to fall and the soft flakes dropped easily on their heads and faces, but neither of them seemed to notice.

"There is so much I wish I had time to say to you," he told her.

"Me, too." She touched her fingers to his lips. "But don't. Please. It's hard enough as it is. We'll have time when things settle down."

"Let's hope," he muttered. "All right. Just be sure to let me know how things are. I'll be worried about you. Here. Give me your cell phone."

She pulled it out of her purse and handed it to him. He punched some numbers and gave it back to her.

"There. My private number's in there. I'm speed dial number one. I'll have my phone on all the time. Call me whenever."

"Oh, Luke." Her voice broke and she made a visible effort to get control of herself. "Why couldn't we have met fifteen years ago?" she asked in desperation.

"I don't think we would have been ready for each other then." He kissed her one last time, then enfolded her in his arms. "Just remember. No matter what happens in your life, you will always be mine."

"Yes, I will." She was fighting tears and clinging to him as if she'd never let him go. She took a step back. "Goodbye, Luke." And then she couldn't help herself. "I love you." She yanked up the handle of her suitcase and nearly ran into the terminal, dragging the luggage behind her.

Julia went through check-in and security as if in a fog. She bought herself another cup of tea and sat in the waiting area, sipping at the hot liquid, hoping it would ease the sudden chill invading her. The man sitting next to her was kind enough to nudge her when the call for boarding came. She entered the plane and took her seat like a robot, buckled in and leaned her head back.

Images flashed through her mind: she and Luke dancing, bodies moving slowly to the music; that first night together, the wonder of exploring each other's bodies; the night in the cabin, warmed by the flames of the fire; and last night, their final night, and their kiss, poignant more than sensual. She felt tears begin to trickle from the corners of her eyes, and her stomach began to knot.

"Excuse me. Are you all right?" The flight attendant was leaning towards her, over the empty seat next to her.

"Yes." Julia sniffled, then tried on a smile. "Just fighting a cold is all."

"Can I get you something?" The attendant was obviously concerned.

"Some hot tea would be nice, if you could. And thank you." Maybe she could drown herself in an ocean of the stuff.

"Tea it is. Coming right up."

She realized as she sipped the hot liquid that now she would always associate tea with Luke. She hoped she would still be able to drink it without crying. The drink seemed to settle her still-jumbled stomach enough that she could relax a little, but it did nothing to rid her of the feeling of despair creeping over her.

When the plane landed, she pushed her way through the lines, apologizing as she went, and raced for ground transportation and a cab.

“Methodist Hospital,” she told the driver. “And please hurry.”

\* \* \* \*

The snowstorm demanded Luke’s attention as he headed out of Boston, but not enough to keep thoughts from clogging his mind. Julia’s face kept floating in front of him. His lips were still seared from their kisses, his skin branded by her touch. Watching her leave, walk away from him, had been like having his heart ripped out of his chest.

Knowing Julia, sharing himself with her in more ways than the physical one, made returning to his solitary life a difficult task. When he’d walked away from his wreck of a marriage, solitary had seemed like the best choice. It had taken him far too long to realize what a shallow woman he’d married. By then they had two sons and the chain around his neck was firmly in place. He’d stayed believing that whatever it cost him, no other man would raise his children.

But that hadn’t worked out quite the way he’d expected. His sons were in Alabama with Patty and she’d done her very best to ruin the relationship they’d had. With Julia, he saw hope for the future. A life he’d never thought he’d have.

Damn Charles anyway.

The closer he got to his condo, the more uptight he felt. Life had dealt him a harsh blow and he needed to figure out how to deal with it.

\* \* \* \*

Julia paused at the entrance to the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit waiting room. Forcing herself to breathe slowly, she slowed the accelerated pace of her heart, wet her lips, and swallowed. For this, she needed to be in control of herself.

Every available seat seemed to be filled, but she spotted Claire in a corner, leaning back, eyes closed. She walked over to her and touched her shoulder gently.

“Oh!” Claire startled, then focused her eyes as she recognized Julia. “Oh, my God. Julia.” She stood and hugged her friend, and for a moment the two women took strength from each other.

"Why are you still here?" Julia asked. "You must be exhausted. Not to mention the fact your husband is probably wondering where you are."

"Brad's fine. He was here, too, as a matter of fact, but I finally sent him home. I figured you'd rather have just me here."

"Thank you for that." Julia motioned toward the doorway with her hand. "Can we go into the hallway and talk?"

Claire nodded. They walked to the far end of the corridor and paused near a tall window.

*All my crises seem to occur on rainy days.*

"All right." She touched Claire's arm. "Tell me everything."

"Okay. I had to pry this out of that jackass he was with." Claire rubbed her forehead, an effort to sort out her jumbled thoughts. "He and Rod McGuire apparently had dinner at the Downtown Club, then ran into a couple of clients and sat in the bar talking with them for a long time. Charles got up to say goodbye, grabbed his chest, and fell down in terrible pain. McGuire called an ambulance and they brought him here."

Julia looked around. "Oh, God." Julia bit her lip. "It's the divorce. I know it is."

"Stop that." Claire's voice was sharp. "Get this through your head. Nothing you did caused what happened. Nothing. Are we clear on that? This would have happened whether you were there or not."

*And Rod McGuire, of all people. Damn.*

Not only Charles's partner but his oldest friend. When Julia and Charles married, Rod had made it patently clear that he thought she was a poor choice and had never bothered to mask his dislike.

Julia took a deep breath. "All right. Go on."

"About three in the morning, McGuire finally figured someone should call the house and let you and the children know what was happening."

"Charles didn't know I was out of town," Julia said in a low voice. "I'm glad they came here. Charles's doctor is on staff."

"McGuire filled out the insurance papers. Told me bluntly he'd handle everything and I could go home." She made a sound of disgust. "Said I didn't have any business here but it would be nice if Charles's wife showed up."

"He knows about the divorce." Julia was angry. "They all do."

"He was just being an arrogant ass. Ignore him."

"I don't know how to thank you for coming down here." She hugged Claire again.

"I didn't want you to walk into this by yourself with no one but the Ice Man for company."

Julia hugged her. "What have you been able to find out?"

"By the time Dr. Vinoy got here, they had him stabilized in Emergency. Then Vinoy called in a top cardiologist. I have his card here someplace." She dug around in her purse, produced a thin piece of pasteboard. "Insisted that he give it to me. Rombauer. Ethan Rombauer. He said for you to have him paged when you got here."

"This is all my fault." Julia chewed at her bottom lip. "God is punishing me, I just know it."

"Julia." Claire's voice, though heavy with fatigue, was sharp. "I won't even allow you to go there. God doesn't hand out heart attacks or anything else as punitive measures."

"I never should have seen Luke again," she said in an anguished voice.

"Stop that. In no way are you responsible for this. You get little enough pleasure as it is. Don't destroy what's left to you." She shook her head. "I was surprised to discover Charles had a heart at all."

"Claire! My God!"

"I know, I know. Don't speak ill and all that. But I will not permit you to take this on yourself. Charles is a big boy. He knows enough to take care of his health. Whatever happened is on him. And you deserve to have a good life without him."

"But not this way."

She felt the weight of guilt pressing on her heavily. She had gone from one man's loving, virile arms to another's critical condition in a few short hours. She couldn't separate her stolen happiness from the disaster unfolding before her.

"What's going on now?" she asked with a sigh. "I need to find out what his situation is. Can I see him?"

"Come. I'll take you to the CICU. After that we'll get them to page Rombauer."

But before they could enter the CICU, they were stopped by a tall, very angry man pacing in the corridor. Rod McGuire looked like a thundercloud come to life. He stopped pacing and planted himself in front of Julia.

"I stayed until you finally got here," he ground out. "I'm just thankful that Charles was with someone when this happened."



Just what she needed, the devil himself. Julia clenched her fists, digging for some semblance of control.

"Thank you for taking care of things, Rod. I really appreciate it."

He glared at her. "Maybe if you'd been here with him instead of who the hell knows where, none of this would have happened." His eyes were like twin flames. "They won't let me in because I'm not family, but I told the cardiologist I'll be calling regularly for updates. *Someone* has to make sure Charles is being cared for properly."

"Rod, I—"

"Stop it, Rod." Claire took Julia's arm and dragged her away. "She doesn't need this right now. We'll keep you informed."

"Oh, God." Julia was glad for Claire's physical support. Rod's verbal attack had nearly undone her.

"Forget him," Claire said in a furious whisper. "And pay no attention to anything he said. He's a jackass, just like I always thought. Come on, let's find out what's going on."

Each of the rooms in the CICU was fronted by glass walls, to give the nurses at the central station an unimpeded view of the patients. The area was permeated with the acrid, medicinal smell common to hospitals. Unconsciously, Julia wrinkled her nose against it. Nurses in scrubs of various colors either sat at the long central console or moved about in the patients' rooms performing required tasks.

"May I help you?" One of the nurses had approached quietly, and without seeming to, effectively blocked their path.

"This is Julia Patterson, Charles Patterson's wife." She waved sketchily in the general area of Charles's bed. "She's just arrived from the airport and would like to see her husband."

"Of course. I'm Maria Hollander, the head nurse on this shift," she told Julia. "We've been expecting you. Dr. Rombauer left a message to page him as soon as you arrived. Let me take you into your husband, then I'll make the call."

"Thank you." Julia bit her lip. "He looks very still."

Maria nodded. "He's been given a lot of medication to keep him sedated. Right now that's best for him."

"Will... will he know I'm here?"

"He might." She smiled. "It helps just for them to have human contact, even if they're heavily medicated. Touch his hand. He'll sense it." She led Julia to a place beside Charles and slid

a chair over for her to sit in. "Five minutes. That's all we allow. But the doctor should be here by then."

Claire squeezed Julia's arm. "I'll wait here. I don't want to see him, anyway. I might be tempted to finish him off myself."

"Claire!" Julia protested.

"Go on, sweetie. Do your thing. I'll wait for you over there." Claire indicated some chairs against a far wall.

"Okay. And... thanks."

Charles was in the bed at the absolute center of the area. He lay unmoving, surrounded by a variety of machines that beeped or dinged or fed fluids into his system. His blond hair was uncharacteristically rumpled, his face drawn and darkened by an emerging stubble of beard.

Tears threatened to spill from her eyelids. Fatigue, she told herself. She'd stopped crying over Charles years ago. But this was different. It tore at her to see a man as powerful as he was lying in bed so weakened, looking almost shrunken in the ubiquitous hospital gown, as still as if life had already left him behind. Regardless of her feelings where he was concerned, he didn't deserve this.

His chest rose and fell evenly, and if not for the lines of pain etched deeply on his face and the vast array of technology keeping him alive, she might have thought him simply sleeping. How difficult it was to think that less than twenty-four hours ago, the man who lay like death in the hospital bed had been a domineering force in her life. Even a frightening one. God surprises us all, she thought.

"Charles?" She wet her lips and tried again. "Charles, can you hear me? It's Julia."

No response. Not even a twitch of his fingers.

She forced herself to sit quietly, speaking softly to him, hardly even aware of what she was saying. It seemed only moments had passed before Maria Hollander was beside her again, signaling her time was up.

A tall cadaver-thin man waited just outside the glass door.

"I'm Dr. Rombauer, Mrs. Patterson." He held out his hand and she shook it. "Let's find a place to sit down so I can fill you in on your husband's condition. You look exhausted."

"I've just flown in from Boston. I was there on a business trip." *And the most incredible pleasure I've ever experienced.* "I don't understand how this happened. Charles always seemed in excellent health."

"Unfortunately, that's often the case."

Claire rose as they came toward her. "I'll wait in the hall while you talk."

"No." Julia put a hand on her arm. "Please stay." She looked up at Rombauer. "Is that all right? You've already spoken to Mrs. Westbrook and I'd prefer to have her here."

"Your call," he nodded.

Julia perched tensely on the edge of her chair while Rombauer opened the chart in his hand.

"I'll try to explain this as clearly as I can," he began. "Your husband has had what you call a heart attack and what we call a myocardial infarction. In some cases it's mild, in others it's a lot more severe."

"And in Charles's case?" she asked.

"I'm afraid his is in the latter category."

He went on to explain in what Julia would later describe as his 'delivering the bad news voice' the details of Charles Patterson's condition. Hands gripped tightly in her lap, throat dry, Julia listened as he talked about damaged heart muscle, restrictive blood flow, scar tissue, and high blood pressure. After a few minutes, the words all seemed to blend together and she had trouble distinguishing one fact from another.

"I appreciate the abundance of detail, Dr. Rombauer, but can you just give me some kind of simple prognosis? My mind isn't functioning too well right now."

He closed the chart and looked at her carefully, a clinical assessment. "Of course, forgive me." He paused. "Were you aware your husband was being treated for high blood pressure?"

Julia tried to conceal the shock she felt. "I was not. Charles never mentioned a word to me." And how like him that was, to conceal any evidence of imperfection lest it be seen as a chink in his armor. "But we're separated. I don't know if anyone's told you that. Our divorce is all but final."

He raised his eyebrows. "No. No one bothered to tell me. Maybe I should be discussing this with someone else?"

"No." She shook her head. "He's still the father of my children and a part of the family circle."

"All right, then." He leaned back in the chair. "I've discussed this with Dr. Vinoy. Apparently Mr. Patterson's been taking medication for three or four years. When he was

diagnosed, his blood pressure was dangerously high and Dr. Vinoy stressed to him the importance of keeping it under control.”

Julia tried to process what she was hearing. Rombauer droned on about the high blood pressure as the underlying cause of the heart attack, the loss of blood to the heart muscle, and its subsequent damage. Scar tissue. Restrictive blood flow. Congestive heart failure. She felt as if she’d been dropped into a medical drama without the benefit of a script.

Swallowing twice to wet her dry throat, she asked, “How long will it take him to recover? Will this be a long process? What kind of care will he need?”

The look of kindness in Rombauer’s eyes was the signal, and she braced herself.

“I’m afraid there is just too much damage to the heart.” He shook his head. “There is no way for it to recover.”

Shock ran through her. “He’s going to die.” A statement, not a question.

“Probably within six months.”

Julia thought she would faint. The room spun slightly and she felt Claire’s hand on her arm steadying her.

“Surely with all the advances in modern medicine,” she protested, “there’s some way to fix this.”

Rombauer shook his head. “More than three quarters of the heart was damaged. The only option would be a transplant, but even if we could find a donor match, your husband is not a good candidate for the surgery.”

“I don’t understand.”

Rombauer went on to explain that the lab tests had revealed a rare blood condition that made surgery of any kind very risky, and made cardiac surgery prohibitive. The best they could offer Charles was medical attention to keep him comfortable.

“I should call his parents,” she said suddenly.

“I called them,” Claire said. “I waited until it was light. I know how they hate having their sleep disturbed.” She could barely keep the distaste from her voice.

“Are they coming to the hospital?” How on earth was she going to face them?

“Oh, sure.” She made a face. “On their schedule. They told me they needed time to compose themselves first.”

Julia refused to imagine the scene she'd face when the elder Pattersons arrived. They would blame her, of course. Normal behavior for them. Everything that went wrong in their lives could be laid at her doorstep.

And of course she'd never hear the end of her trip out of town. A wife's place is with her husband. *I should have had it tattooed on my backside.* Well, her place wasn't there any more, even if they chose to ignore the divorce proceedings.

Their arrival would be an intrusion into the routine of the hospital. Without concern for other patients and their families, Howard Patterson would demand attention in his loud, authoritarian voice while Eloise would stand like a carefully placed wax mannequin, totally unmoving, nodding her head to punctuate each of her husband's words. He would threaten with his power if doctors and nurses didn't rush to do his bidding where his son was concerned.

She fervently hoped they didn't expect her to take him home with her. The Pattersons had a huge home and plenty of money, as did Charles. They could take him home and hire whatever care he needed.

She tried to focus on what he was saying now, but she felt a fog closing in on her, a wall of heavy cotton fleece wrapping around her. The doctor caught her just before she slipped from the chair to the floor.

\*\*\*\*

When she opened her eyes, she realized she was in an unfamiliar room, sunlight pouring in through a large window. The room was strange, the bed unusually high. Claire was sitting in a chair next to her, flipping through a magazine. Brad Westbrook, Claire's husband, was standing at the window, staring through the open drapes at the brightness of the day.

"Where am I?"

Claire closed the magazine and leaned forward. "Dr. Rombauer had them put you in a vacant hospital room."

"Am I sick?" She tried to sit up, but the spinning of the room made her nauseous.

"No, just exhausted and emotionally drained. Everyone was quite worried about you."

"Charles." The memory stabbed at her. "How is he?"

"Doing fine. He's being well taken care of."

"We're much more concerned with you, Julia." Brad had turned from the window to look at her. "Charles is receiving the finest care his money and his insurance can provide. You have to think about yourself. You have children that need you. Now more than ever."

He was right. It was just so hard to think. *Too much. Too many things to deal with.*

"What time is it?" Her brain felt fuzzy.

"About three o'clock," Claire told her. "You had a nice nap."

"I haven't called Miranda yet," she realized and sat up, moving slowly. "Can I make calls from here?"

Claire picked up the receiver from the bedside telephone. "I already spoke to her, but I know she'd like to hear from you personally." She put her ear to the instrument, spoke briefly, and handed it to Julia. "You have a dial tone now. Go ahead. Would you like us to wait in the hall?"

Julia shook her head. "No. Please stay." She looked at both of them. "I'm not sure I can get through this by myself."

Brad had come to stand beside the bed. He squeezed her shoulder gently. "We're here for you, kiddo. All the way."

"I'm so glad to hear your voice." Miranda's relief was evident. "You doing okay, Julia?"

"Yes. Fine," she assured her. "How are Andy and Beth?"

"Good. I haven't said anything yet. They just got home from school. I decided to go ahead and send them."

"Probably a good idea. I'll be home later. I'll tell them myself. I should know more about what's going on in a little while." When she hung up the phone, she looked at Claire and Brad. "What about Charles's parents?"

Claire made a face. "They were here this morning. Threw their weight around. Complained about everything. Didn't seem too happy about your situation. Then they left."

"Left?" She was stunned.

"Yeah. Howard said Eloise is very delicate, you know."

"Like a praying mantis," Brad snorted.

"They'll be back tonight," Claire warned. "Are you ready?"

"As much as it's possible to be."

She found her clothes in the narrow closet and took them into the bathroom with her. She'd dearly love to have a long, hot soak but that certainly wasn't possible here and now. She splashed cold water on her face and when she looked in the mirror, she nearly frightened herself. The face staring back at her was familiar, but it was bleached white with dark smudges beneath eyes that were filled with anguish.

*Luke!*

*No. I mustn't think of him now. If I hadn't let myself...*

Let herself what? Be a human being for a change? Respond to a man who made her feel like a woman. Intellectually, she knew neither her impending divorce nor her connection with Luke had any relation to Charles's heart attack. But the enormous guilt gene that Charles had fed throughout their marriage smacked at her. It cracked its whip and jammed her back into the dutiful wife mode again.

Somehow the fact the final divorce papers hadn't been signed appeared as some kind of omen to her, a sign that her penance for pleasure was to stand by Charles during this terrible situation. With a heavy heart, she pushed away thoughts of Luke and headed back to the CICU.

She insisted on seeing Charles again for the scant five minutes allowed. Once again she tried to coax a reaction from him but he lay wax-like in the bed, unresponsive, his chest slowly rising and falling while the machines beeped and dinged. Claire came and led her to the CICU lounge where Brad had a cup of hot tea waiting for her. She held it with hands still not quite steady, grateful for the warm liquid as it seeped through her still frozen body.

The elder Patterson chose that moment to arrive, taking in the little tableau with barely concealed scorn.

"I hold you responsible for this, Julia," was Howard Patterson's opening salvo. "If you spent your time taking better care of Charles instead of running God knows where around the country, this wouldn't have happened."

Claire was like a warrior, rising fierce and angry against the invader. "You might want to rethink that, Howard. Charles is an adult. He can take care of himself. Perhaps it might have helped if he'd told Julia he was being treated for high blood pressure, among other things."

"Too bad your day was so busy you couldn't get back here until now," Brad said, making his point.

Howard placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. "Eloise was so distraught I wouldn't allow her to leave the house again until she'd rested."

"Mmm hmm." Brad turned away from them. "Julia, I think you need to lie down again."

She shook her head. Running away from this wouldn't help. "I'm fine, Brad. Honestly. But I could use another cup of tea." By the time this was over, she'd probably never be able to drink it again, but right now it was sustaining her.

"Coming right up." He slid past the Pattersons as if they weren't even there.

"I demand to see the doctor," Howard said, his authoritarian mantle now firmly in place.

"The nurse will page him for you." Claire was not about to leave Julia's side for a moment.

"You know the divorce brought this on," Eloise accused, her face pinched. "There's never been a divorce in this family. Charles was mortified."

"Mortified?" Claire was furious. "Maybe if he—"

Julia put her hand on her friend's arm. "Leave it alone, Claire. It's a losing battle."

Rombauer arrived at that moment. Howard planted himself aggressively in front of the doctor and barked his questions. In his dictatorial fashion, he gesticulated, demanded, ordered, and excoriated. Rombauer listened patiently, providing information in a calm, controlled voice.

Watching him, Julia saw assessment and recognition flare in his eyes. He was no fool, she thought. Quietly, he assured Howard he was free to call in as many specialists as he wanted, but pointed out that before he did, the patient's wife would need to be consulted.

"Wait a moment," Julia began.

Rombauer turned to her. "Mr. Patterson has a medical directive and power of attorney. His partner, who came in with him, brought them in this morning. You're listed on both of them as the person making all medical decisions."

She was stunned. "B-But that's impossible. Charles and I were... are..."

"That's nonsense," Howard thundered. "We are responsible for his care. They are all but divorced."

Rombauer shrugged. "I'll be happy to show you the documents, if you like. But until Mr. Patterson is able to make any changes, whatever actions are needed will be her choice and hers alone." He paused. "You are, of course, free to consult with her and give her your input. I'm sure she'll be happy to consider your wishes."

Julia could have sworn a smile flirted with the corners of his mouth. His face was his normal impassive mask, but his eyes quite clearly stated he did not like Howard and Eloise Patterson. And Claire and Brad had to turn away to contain themselves.

Howard's face twisted in contempt as he turned on her and delivered a speech that would have stripped the skin of someone who cared. But in the years of their marriage, Julia's feelings for them had long since disappeared. The thick shell she had developed where they were concerned insulated her from any pain they might now inflict, and she hoped they'd get out of there before she told them to go to hell.



At a time when normal families pulled together and surrounded each other, the Pattersons' single purpose was gaining control and shutting Julia out. If things hadn't been so dicey—the destruction of her marriage, the separation, the impending divorce—she might even have laughed. She was caught in a trap she didn't want, yet it was her only weapon against a familiar enemy.

Howard was infuriated that he could not intimidate her, and the presence of Claire and Brad only increased his rage. Through it all, Eloise sat without moving, avoiding so much as a glance in Julia's direction. The only words she spoke were to demand that Claire find her some coffee.

"Preferably with hemlock," Claire muttered, then touched Julia's shoulder briefly. "I know, I know. I'm going."

If not for Brad's intervention, Julia knew she would have said things best left unspoken. Forceful in his own way, he thanked Rombauer for everything and asked if the Pattersons could see their son. Eloise waited for her coffee, but Julia followed the nurse as she led Howard down the hall to Charles's cubicle.

"My God," Howard said, a muscle jumping in his cheek as his eyes swept the room full of machines and his son lying immobile in the bed. He didn't approach the bed, simply watched from the doorway while Julia waited outside until the nurse came to tell him his time was up.

Eloise was sitting on the hard plastic chair drinking her coffee. She raised her eyes to Howard's as he walked toward her. He simply shook his head.

"He's still not awake, my dear. Perhaps tomorrow will be better."

Eloise silently set her coffee cup down on the miniscule table and rose.

"We'll arrange our visits so we needn't collide with each other," Howard told Julia. "We'd prefer to visit in the evening."

*Don't ask me what I'd prefer.* "Actually that will work out well. I can be home then with the children."

"Oh. Yes. The children."

*As if they were belongings that at the moment didn't have a place to be put.*

"Well then," he continued, "we'll be leaving. Eloise needs to get home to lie down. This is quite an ordeal for her."

"Ordeal, my ass," Brad said when they'd left. "I noticed they didn't once ask if you were all right, Julia, or if there as anything you needed."

“What a couple of cold fish,” Claire added.

“They just don’t know how to deal with a situation requiring emotion, that’s all. Nothing has ever disturbed the smooth surface of their lives. And I don’t expect them to think of me. The minute they discovered they didn’t have me under their thumb, I became the enemy.” She sighed. “It’s all right. But I don’t know what to do about the power of attorney. The last thing I want under the circumstances is to make those kinds of decisions.”

“Well, honey.” Brad gave her a lopsided grin. “I hate to tell you, but you’re stuck until Charles is alert enough to appoint someone else.”

“Maybe if I sneak in and pull out all his tubes and wires, we won’t have to do anything,” Claire teased.

“Claire!” Julia was shocked that her friend could call up gallows humor like that.

“Just kidding.” Then she winked at Julia. “But it would solve a lot of problems.”

“Right now I think I’d like to go home and see the children. I’ve done all I can here for the moment.”

“I’ll get the car and meet you two downstairs.” Brad headed for the elevator with his long strides.

She had never been so glad to see her house in her life. Brad had barely carried in her luggage when she fell into Miranda’s comforting arms, sobbing as if the tears had built up forever. Only she wasn’t sure who she was crying for: Charles, herself or Luke.

## *Chapter Ten*

It hardly seemed possible that it was only five o'clock in the afternoon. Julia felt as if a year had passed since Claire's phone call that morning. The twins were wildly glad to see her, hugging her with great ferocity and pressing their bodies against hers.

"They know something's wrong," Miranda had said when Julia came into the house. "Kids sense those things. They've been watching out the window for you for the last hour."

"I missed you guys so much," Julia said, hugging both of them at the same time. Their faces were smiling, but she could see the fear of the unknown in their eyes. She knew exactly how they felt. How would she tell them that from this moment on their lives had dramatically altered?

*You are my salvation, even though you don't know it. You will keep me sane and grounded when the urge to run away becomes too strong.*

"How come you didn't come home this morning like you said?" Andy demanded.

Julia swallowed. "Some... things came up. In a little while, we'll sit down and talk about them."

"What things?" he demanded in his child's voice.

"After dinner," she insisted.

"Will you eat with us, Mommy?" Beth begged.

"Please?" Andy added. "We didn't see you for three whole days."

Julia's head throbbed and her stomach was doing a war dance again, but no way could she deny these adorable imps.

"Yes." She hugged them tightly. "I'll eat with you. But just some soup and tea," she told Miranda. "I think it's about all my system can take right now."

“Why don’t you change and I’ll get something on the table. Now kids,” and Miranda began herding the twins toward the family room, “give your mama a few minutes to herself and then you can all sit down together.”

*Bless Miranda. Life would be abysmal without her.*

Julia dragged her suitcase upstairs, unpacked and showered, and put on comfortable sweats. Charles hated her to sit around the house in them, but right now she needed the feel of comfort they gave her. Then she thought about the set Luke had given her. How his eyes had lit up when he’d seen it on her, and darkened with passion as he’d slowly removed it. She opened the drawer where she’d placed the set, folded neatly. Her eyes stung with tears and she thought her heart would crack wide open.

*Luke!*

*I was just finding myself and now I’m being swallowed up again. I need you, Luke.*

But Luke was an impossibility at the moment, and who knew for how long. Resolutely, she closed the drawer and headed downstairs.

Miranda had opened a can of chicken noodle soup and fixed her tea, so she sipped and chewed while the children ate spaghetti and told her all about school. She wanted to keep them distracted as long as possible.

“I got to do the puppet for story hour,” Beth bragged.

“But I got to help on the playground,” Andy countered.

And they were off, playing Can You Top This, but in a giggly way, anxious for their mother’s approval.

But the topic of Charles could not be avoided for long. Miranda helped her with bath time and when they were in their pajamas, she took them both into Beth’s room and sat on the bed with them.

“You know Daddy hasn’t been living here for a long while,” she started.

They nodded solemnly.

“He’s divorced, like Mitchell’s daddy,” Andy said matter-of-factly.

“Well, almost.” What a strange society we live in, she thought, that the idea of divorce was so commonplace with children.

“That doesn’t mean he doesn’t still love you as much,” she told them.

Beth and Andy exchanged a look.

"Okay," Beth said. Her tone of voice told Julia all she needed to know. At seven years old, the twins had already accepted the fact that their father found it impossible to love them, or maybe anyone. How terrible. Damn Charles anyway.

"Well, one of the reasons I'm late is because I had to go straight to the hospital because Daddy's very sick."

Again they exchanged a look. Sometimes Julia wondered if they weren't really one person split into two bodies.

"Will he be all right?" Andy asked after a long pause.

"I don't know." *Be truthful*, she told herself. *Lies never help*. "Right now the doctors are trying to figure out what to do to help him."

"What's wrong with him?" Beth wanted to know.

Julia took one hand from each of them. "It's his heart. He's had a really bad heart attack and there's a lot of damage."

"Heart disease is the number one killer in America," Andy recited in a solemn voice.

*Oh, my God. What are they teaching second graders these days?*

"That may be true," she said slowly, "but right now we have to wait and see what the doctors say."

"Can we see him?" Beth asked.

Julia shook her head. "Not just yet. He's still in a special part of the hospital where children can't visit. But the minute the doctor says it's okay, you can see him."

"Mommy?" Andy's voice suddenly sounded very small. "Are you going away, too? Are you sick?"

Tears stung her eyelids. "Oh, no, sweetie. Mommy's just fine. And I'll always be here for you." She gathered them close to her and hugged them against her body. A fierce protective feeling came over her, even as her heart felt broken in two.

*Luke!*

She hadn't a clue how to prepare them for the time to see the man who projected such strength now lying white and drawn, surrounded by a myriad of machines that monitored his every bodily function.

Before leaving the hospital, she had discussed it with Rombauer. He had advised her as best he could, but he was, after all, a cardiologist, not a pediatric psychologist. He referred her to one of the offices in the tower next to the hospital, called the doctor, and the man had taken the

time to come to her at the CICU. He was unbelievably kind and told her what he could in the abstract. He did, however, predict that the suddenness of their father's illness and his impending death would require professional care, and she promised to schedule appointments.

Now she made a mental note to see about that tomorrow.

The nausea was creeping up on her again, but she gritted her teeth until she had tucked the twins in bed and heard their prayers. Then she pulled on a warm nightgown and collapsed in her own room, forcibly quieting her unsettled stomach and falling asleep with images of Luke unwinding across her dreams.

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The days passed as an unending train, one after the other, all linked together. Julia woke early each morning to breakfast with the twins and gave them the security of her presence to start the day. When the school bus left them at the door each afternoon, she was there to greet them, answer their questions, and eat an early dinner with them.

In between, she was a haunted-looking wraith moving between Charles's bedside and the CICU lounge, waiting for the brief visits she was permitted, and fighting the nausea and fatigue that kept her in its grip. Each night, she crawled gratefully into bed, falling into a dreamless sleep.

Rombauer made sure to spend a few minutes with her each day, always pragmatic but in his own way supportive. She was sure Howard Patterson put him through intense grilling sessions in the evenings, but he never mentioned a word to her.

Miranda was a rock. She grounded them, coddled them, and made them laugh when tears threatened. She was the one constant as they all grappled with the ways their lives were changing.

Julia's days at the hospital became divided into five minute and fifty-five minutes intervals. Each time she was allowed into the cubicle, she sat beside Charles's bed, watching him sleep, watching the machines, searching for any sign of response. At the end of two weeks, Rombauer told her he thought one more week should do it, and Charles could be moved to a private room.

Somewhere between the hospital and the children, she tried to squeeze out a few minutes for the agency, rushing to the office when she could, trying to accomplish a day's work in an hour or two. Claire finally sat her down one afternoon, told their secretary to hold their calls, and shut the office door.

"Enough," she said. "You're not Superwoman, nor does anyone expect you to be. The Hot Ticket campaign is moving along and only requires maintenance at the moment. Believe it or not, I can handle the rest until things settle down."

"I just feel so guilty dumping all this on you." Julia stared at her friend, misery stamped on her face.

"I'm happy to be dumped on. Right now everything's under control. Save your strength for when I really need you. And spend your time with the kids."

"I'm taking them to see Charles on Monday, when they move him into a private room. I think it will be less intimidating for them."

"Let's hope Charles will be less intimidating."

"Claire, for God's sake. The man is dying. Cut him some slack."

"Honey, regardless of his physical condition, Charles has a lot to make up for in the way he's treated you and the kids. Just keep that in mind while you're running yourself ragged with this." She scanned Julia's face carefully before she spoke again. "Luke's been calling."

"Luke." She said the name slowly.

"Yes." She grinned. "You know, the man with the sexy voice." The grin disappeared. "He's very concerned about you. He really wants to talk to you."

"I can't, Claire." Julia felt tears gather behind her eyelids. She had tried so hard to push away thoughts of Luke, his warmth, his tenderness, his passion. "What can I say to him? I feel so damn guilty about everything as it is."

"You can dump the guilt, Julia." Claire made a sound of disgust. "I heard what Rombauer said about Charles's physical condition. Nothing you did precipitated this attack. Or its aftereffects. Nothing."

Julia looked up at her friend, pain lancing through her. "Then why do I feel like it's all my fault?"

"Probably because Charles has you conditioned to accept the fact that happiness isn't something you deserve. Call him, honey. Call Luke. He desperately wants to hear your voice for himself."

Julia shook her head. "I can't. I couldn't handle it. I am doing everything I can to handle everything else. You talk to him, okay?"

"And what exactly shall I tell him?"

"Tell him I love him and I'm sorry," she whispered and fled to the powder room.

Despite her continued fatigue and the incipient nausea that never seemed to ease, despite the ache in her heart for Luke, whom she forcibly banished from her thoughts, she had somehow prepared herself to be compassionate with Charles. He was ill, he was dying, and she was ready to provide whatever support he needed. From a distance. She would forget the emotional wasteland of the past six years and do her best to give him aid and comfort. Perhaps the heart attack would make drastic changes in his personality, give him a new outlook on life.

*What fairy tale have you been reading, Julia?*

The first few weeks, she thought it might actually work. Of course, most of that time Charles was still in CICU and heavily sedated. Their communication consisted mostly of him squeezing her fingers whenever she placed her hand in his. Besides, she thought later, what could happen in five minute visits?

By the time they moved him to a private room, the heavy sedatives were cut back, Charles was more alert, and she discovered that, if anything, he was more irascible and domineering than ever. He criticized everything, bullied the nurses, and bemoaned his situation. Julia, of course, was the repository for his vitriol. She brought the children on Christmas Day, bearing perfectly wrapped gifts, but it was an ordeal they were all happy to have over with.

Miranda had done all the holiday things for her to keep the twins distracted. She even put up the tree and had Andy and Beth help decorate it, and she took them to see Santa Claus and chauffeured them to children's holiday parties. It kept them distracted and gave Julia breathing room.

She was about as far from the holiday spirit as it was possible to get. It took all her self-discipline just to remain calm as she listened to Charles vent his rage day after day. He resented the illness that was sapping his life away, and with it the loss of control. The worst thing that could happen to Charles Patterson, and she was his verbal punching bag.

"Why do you do it?" Claire asked. "For all intents and purposes, you aren't even married to him anymore."

"I feel so guilty," she cried for the hundredth time. She blew her nose. "Jesus, I'm turning into a whiner and a dishrag. Smack me, will you?"

"I would if I thought it would do any good." Claire studied her, eyes filled with sympathy. "Julia, Luke calls every single day. The man is in torment. Please, please, please just give him one call."

"I can't." Julia turned away. "If I hear his voice, I'll lose it."



"Honey, he'll wait for you until this is over. You know it. All he needs is one word from you. Why are you so insistent on punishing yourself? This is not your fault."

*Because it's very clear to me I don't deserve any happiness.*

"I'll see."

"Charles will probably be dead in six months." Claire's voice was hard. Pragmatic. "Are you going to give up what appears to be the best thing that has ever happened to you for some idiotic notion of wearing a hair shirt?"

"And exactly how would I explain to my children that while their father was dying, I was planning my future with another man?" she snapped.

Claire threw up her hands. "I give up."

When Julia finally brought the children to see Charles, it was emotionally exhausting for everyone. Despite all her preparation, walking into the room and seeing the reality of the situation was a terrifying experience for Andy and Beth. The smell of antiseptic and the lingering odor of illness permeated everything.

Their fear of the situation was palpable, and Charles, totally self-involved, did nothing to ease their panic. Julia forced herself to keep her voice and attitude cheerful and reassuring, but she was happy when they could all escape to the car. Beth and Andy were deathly silent on the drive home, and not even Miranda could coax a smile from them.

She spent the remainder of that afternoon and evening at home with them. When she called Charles to tell him she wouldn't be back until the next day, he simply growled, "Fine," and slammed down the phone. But Julia knew the twins needed some guarantee that their lives hadn't crumbled away and left them adrift. She would have to be their anchor, their refuge, their source of comfort. But she couldn't do it alone, and Miranda wasn't the answer.

The next morning she called the pediatric psychologist and scheduled appointments.

Charles resented the time she spent away from him with the children and didn't hesitate to let her know it. He dealt poorly with his situation, finding fault with everyone and everything. Julia realized one day with sudden clarity that he was terrified of dying, that the death sentence pronounced on him had him paralyzed with fear. She tried to convince him to seek professional help, to have someone more qualified than she to guide him through this, but he turned a deaf ear.

Religious support was out of the question. The last time Charles had been in church was for their wedding, and that had been only under protest. He considered organized religion a challenge to his self-control.

Rombauer recommended two therapists he deemed excellent who had extensive experience with dying patients. Charles took the slip of paper with their names, tore it into shreds, and dropped the pieces into the bedside wastebasket.

"Can they give me back my life?" he asked, vibrating with anger. "Unless they can do that, I'm not interested in seeing them. It's a waste of time."

It was obvious he was looking for an assurance that wasn't there, a guarantee that he was immortal, that he'd been misdiagnosed, that he would wake up the next morning sitting at his desk reviewing a legal brief.

His partners visited in a preselected rotation. Julia used these opportunities to have a cup of tea in some isolated spot. Rod McGuire and Carter DeWitt were carbon copies of Charles—autocratic, dictatorial, and unmoved by the bumps and hurdles of life. The very qualities that made them good litigators made them unlikable human beings. Each time one of them arrived, Julia had the feeling they blamed Charles for disrupting their perfectly-oiled legal machine.

One morning, Rombauer fetched her as she approached the room and walked her down to the lounge at the end of the hall. Three weeks had passed since Charles had been moved to the private room and she hoped he was planning to tell her what happened next. She wasn't sure how much longer she could keep up her routine. On the one hand, she dragged herself to the hospital every day with her load of guilt heaped on her back. On the other, she hoped Charles would soon be going to his parents' home so she could put some distance between them. Seeing him every day and putting up with his increasing temper was testing every bit of her personal discipline.

Rombauer had one of the nurses bring her tea—he'd discovered her aversion to coffee—and sat down next to her. She watched him with nervous expectancy.

"Mr. Patterson is napping right now," he began, "so I thought this would be a good time for us to chat."

"About?"

"It won't be much longer before we've done everything for him that we can do at a hospital. His status will change and he'll need to be discharged."

"Discharged?" *Where was this going?* "But... I mean, his condition..."

The doctor nodded. Yes. His condition. "He's going to require a great deal of care and his medications will have to be monitored constantly. He needs to be in a place where he can get it."

Panic surged through her, nearly choking her. "Dr. Rombauer, despite what's happened, Charles and I have been separated for months. Our divorce is all but final. What about his parents?"

*God knows they have plenty of room and money to care for their precious son.*

"I've spoken with them, but Mr. Patterson explained to me how delicate his wife is and what an emotional strain this would be for her."

Delicate? Eloise? Julia wanted to laugh hysterically.

"His condition will continue to deteriorate," Rombauer continued. "His organs will fail. He will be bedridden for whatever time he has left. They feel that, even with help, it would be more than they could deal with."

"B-But what am I supposed to do with him?" The nightmare just kept getting worse.

"Not to worry." His smile was so understanding she wanted to cry. "Under the circumstances I'm recommending he go directly into a nursing home from here."

Nursing home? Of course. The best solution. She was ashamed of the wave of relief that washed over her. She didn't know what she had imagined, but none of it had been pleasant. Yes, it was appropriate that Charles could be in a place where he could get the right kind of care.

"As his medical representative," he went on, "it will be up to you to choose the place and make the arrangements."

"Dr. Rombauer." She swallowed hard, trying to ease the panic rushing up to consume her. More decisions. More challenges. All of which Charles would argue about. He resented his crippling condition almost as much as he resented her, and what he referred to as her "defection." "Charles is alert now. I think he should remove my name from those documents and make his own decisions."

Rombauer shrugged. "I spoke to him about it, but he was adamant that it still be your responsibility."

*Punishment. He's going to continue to punish me.*

She wanted to laugh hysterically, because he didn't really even know what he was punishing her for.

"I have no idea where to start looking for one."

“Not to worry. There are two or three excellent ones that I can recommend. If you like, I can check with them, let you make the selection, and take care of the arrangements when the time comes.”

“Oh, please.” Relief surged up. “That would be wonderful of you.” She took a sip of her tea. “Have you spoken to Charles about this?”

Rombauer frowned. “Yes, and I have to warn you, he’s not happy with the idea. I’ve tried to explain the necessity as best I can. Perhaps you can help with this.”

*Not happy. I’ll bet that’s an understatement.*

Her stomach knotted. Discussing something with Charles that he’d already closed his mind to was not her favorite activity. She rubbed her hands over her face, feeling drained.

“All right, I’ll do my best. Thank you, doctor.”

She excused herself and raced for the restroom as her stomach heaved its contents back up into her throat.

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“I will not be locked away in some medical prison like a drooling old man.” Charles glared at her as she walked into his room.

“Hello, Charles. I’m glad to see you feeling a little better today.”

“I am *not* feeling better and I’m quite sure you’re not glad to see me.”

Julia sat down in the chair beside the bed. “Dr. Rombauer said he’d explained to you why you need to be someplace where skilled care is available at all times.”

“I’m sure you’d be happy with that,” he said bitterly. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

“Charles.” She gritted her teeth. “All I want is to make sure you have the best care possible.”

“A comfortable place to die, right? How nice for all of you. Even my parents have explained how difficult it would be for them to have me at their home.”

For one brief moment, Julia felt a stab of pity for the man that nobody wanted. But then she steeled herself. She was losing herself again, and she had to hang onto whatever shreds were left.

She dredged up every scrap of patience, but it was like trying to dam a tidal wave. The entire day was spent with Charles’s self-pity drowning her. Her nausea was worse than ever and Charles wrinkled his nose in disgust whenever she raced for the bathroom. Whatever bug she’d picked up wasn’t going away. She’d probably have to make time to see a doctor.

Sitting in a chair by the bed for hours at a stretch wasn't doing her body any good, either. These days it didn't seem as if it belonged to her, with its variety of protesting twinges and soreness. She was angry at herself for this physical weakness at a time when she needed to be at her strongest, but her body had a mind and will of its own.

The day stretched interminably. Rombauer's visit to discuss nursing home options only precipitated Charles's worst explosion yet, an outburst that caused his machines to beep and ding, nurses to rush in, and medication to be administered. At four o'clock when he finally dropped off to a sedative-induced sleep, Julia left to go home to the children. Tonight she would make a telephone call that would require all her staying power. Howard and Eloise would have to be drawn into the nursing home debacle. Perhaps Charles would listen to them.

\* \* \* \*

Luke replaced the handset on his telephone and sat back in his desk chair, watching Mother Nature dump her latest deluge of snow outside his window. The flakes were falling so fast now, they resembled a white curtain hanging from the sky. The atmosphere was dull grey, matching his mood.

Four weeks since he'd left Julia at the airport and the best he'd been able to accomplish was conversations with Claire. Much as he tried to push thoughts of her aside, she was a constant resident in his mind. How was she doing? How was she handling things? Most importantly, what did the future hold for her? For them?

He regretted more than anything the unfinished feeling they'd parted with. Foolishly, he'd assumed they had plenty of time to explore a future together, to see if one was even possible. To see if the blossoming love was real. Would the obligations that weighted them down be an effective blockade, or could they weather the predictable storm and forge a life together? He hadn't expected life to intrude so roughly, leaving them like a book with no ending.

"She's doing as well as can be expected," Claire had told him. "But you know our Julia. She's determined to martyr herself for Charles's condition."

"Damn it, why won't she at least call me?" Luke had raked his hands through his hair in frustration. "Maybe I could find some way to help her."

"Luke." Claire's voice was quiet. "You are the only happiness Julia's found after seven years in emotional hell. She's feeling very guilty about it. Unreasonably, she wants to blame this whole mess on what she calls her selfish indulgence."

"But that's so ridiculous."

"I know. But there it is." Claire was silent a moment. "I've talked until I'm blue in the face. But she's trying to bolster the twins as well as herself."

"I've half a mind to just get on a plane and show up," he said roughly.

"Please, don't do that. She'd crack and fall apart."

"Just keep me in the loop, okay?"

More than anything, he wished it was possible for him to be there to hold her in his arms and soothe away the pain. If only she would call him or take one of his calls. He wanted to smash something, throw something, rant and rave. He hated the fact she blamed all of this on herself, as if the brief happiness they'd shared was undeserved.

He closed his eyes, remembering the silken feel of her skin, the delicate floral scent she wore, the velvety texture of her hair.

God, how he missed her.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Pregnant!

Julia lay on the examining table in the doctor's office, listening to the confirmation of her own fears. She'd done all she could do to get through the holiday season, hoping that afterwards she'd begin to feel better. When she didn't, pestered by both Miranda and Claire, she had finally called her doctor. Except by then she was sure she knew the diagnosis. Something she should have known right away. The immediate and constant nausea. The dragging fatigue. All the symptoms she'd had with the twins almost from the moment of conception.

"No question, Mrs. Patterson," Dr. Berlin said from the foot of the table. "A little less than two months. Does that jibe with your calculations?"

*Unfortunately, yes.*

"Mrs. Patterson?" he repeated.

"I'm sorry. Yes. Yes, it does."

"Well, I hope this is good news. I know you were disappointed when you couldn't take the birth control pills, but we've had pretty good luck with the Coil." He chuckled slightly. "Although they do fail once in a while."

"Well, it seems this is one of those times," she told him.

"You'll need to be cautious," he told her. "Miscarriage is sometimes a problem with the Coil in place. No strenuous exercise and, I hate to tell you, no sexual activity. I hope your husband won't mind too much."

"I can assure you that won't be a problem. My husband has suffered a severe heart attack and his health isn't good."

"Oh. I'm so sorry to hear that." He paused. "Is the situation such that you might consider terminating the pregnancy? This may not be the best time for you to be giving birth."

"No!" She nearly shouted the word. "No," she said more quietly, "that's not a consideration." She touched her abdomen as if to protect the growing child from harm.

"I'll take your word for it. But if you do change your mind, you'll need to decide soon."

"I won't be changing my mind, Dr. Berlin."

"Fine, then." He stood up and reached out his hand to help her sit up on the table. "I don't need to tell you what to do, but because you're past thirty, we'll want to watch you a little more carefully this time."

"I understand. I'll do my best." *And how exactly will I accomplish that under the circumstances?*

"Make your next appointment on the way out. You're nearly through the first trimester and I'd like to see you every two weeks from here until the ninth month."

Julia was still in shock when she climbed behind the steering wheel of her car. She'd suspected as much with the nausea then the first missed period, but initially chalked it up to stress. There was plenty of that to go around. She rested her hand against her lower abdomen. A child! Luke's child! Something of his she would always have to cherish.

How the hell was this going to play out with Charles? God! Could things possibly get any worse?

She didn't head for the hospital as she'd originally intended. She needed time to absorb this before she faced Charles again. She drove to her favorite café, ordered a pot of tea and the butter cookies she loved, and spent an hour examining her situation.

A combination of dread and elation filled her. A good plot for a movie, she thought. Marriage falling apart. Wife takes a lover. Husband lies near death from a heart attack. Wife is pregnant with another man's child. What a melodrama. If she had any tears left after the last week or two she'd cry, but she felt dry and empty.

Unconsciously her hand rested on her abdomen, and a soft smile curved her lips. Luke! The thought of his child was a life raft in a sea of despair. Would it be a boy or a girl? Would it have his wonderful eyes, his thick hair?

She shook herself. She was in no position to be daydreaming. She didn't want to think what would happen when she couldn't conceal it from Charles any longer. Maybe if things worked out Charles would be... gone... before she really began to show.

*Terrible! Awful! How can I think that?*



She was gripped by a feeling of dread that her world was about to explode when she walked into Charles's hospital room. Carefully composing her face, willing her nausea to go away and pasting a smile on her face, she greeted him with as much pleasantry as she could muster.

"You're late." His tone was accusatory, as if she were a child who'd missed a curfew.

"I'm sorry. I called and the nurse said you were sleeping."

He tossed aside the magazine in his hand. "Where have you been?"

"I... um... had a doctor's appointment. Just a checkup," she added quickly. *Coward.*

"You're pregnant." His voice was sharp and tinged with anger.

Julia recoiled in shock, as if from a physical blow. "Pregnant? W-Why... I mean"

"Don't try to lie to me. You never were very good at it."

"H-How did you know?" she asked, instinctively looking down at her stomach, still flat.

"No, you aren't showing." His smile was nasty. "It wasn't hard to figure out. Did you think I'd miss the signs? The morning sickness that lasts all day? The changes in your body? The fatigue that you never could hide? I don't know why you couldn't have neat pregnancies the way other women do."

"Neat... pregnancies." What the hell did that mean?

"My heart may be damaged," he went on, "but my brain is still fully functional." When she was silent, he asked, "Have you no comment to make?"

"What shall I say, Charles? Yes, I'm pregnant."

"I can hardly believe this," he said. "While I've been fighting a heart condition you've been whoring in some man's bed."

She dug her nails into her palms to keep from crying. "It wasn't like that."

"No?" He lifted an eyebrow, a scornful look on his face. "Then what was it like? An immaculate conception? It certainly isn't mine."

"Charles, I..." She swallowed, took a breath.

"Anyway, I thought you were using one of those devices." He vibrated with rage.

"Yes, and it's still in place. But Dr. Berlin says they have a greater rate of failure than the pills."

"Which your *sensitive* system couldn't tolerate."

"A lot of women can't take them, Charles." *I will not apologize*, she thought. *I will not be on the defensive.* "Anyway, what's done is done."

He stared at her from the hospital bed with the most malevolent look she'd ever seen.  
"Get rid of it."

"What?" She turned clammy with shock, her heart first racing then threatening to stop altogether.

"You heard me. Get rid of it. Right away."

*Oh, my God. Get rid of Luke's baby? They'll have to kill me first.*

"That's not your decision to make." She sounded braver than she felt, but she would fight for this child.

"For God's sake, Julia, for once in your life will you think of someone besides yourself? How will the children react when they find out you're carrying someone's illegitimate brat? Or my partners? Or my family, for that matter."

"What?" She nearly fainted, collapsing into the chair before she fell to the floor.

"I'm appalled that you would prostitute yourself in another man's bed. And before long everyone will know it. How do you think that will play out for a man with a damaged heart?"

*Prostitute? Oh, Jesus.* The nausea roared back with a vengeance, threatening to overtake her. She made a dash for the bathroom, reaching it just in time. She took a minute to splash cold water on her face and try to pull herself together. She was still shaking but not as badly when she went back into the room.

"There." Charles had a smug look on his face. "That's exactly what I mean. Here I am practically an invalid, and I have to listen to the constant sounds of retching every day."

"I'll try to keep the vomiting contained to the hours I'm away from you," she said sarcastically.

"I hope you at least had sense enough to pick someone out of town. That's all I'd need is for the entire city to be smirking at me behind my back."

"He's not from here and he's no one you know. He's a wonderful man who gave me the most pleasure I've ever known in my life." The words were out before she could stop herself.

Charles clenched his jaw, and suddenly one of the machines behind him began beeping rapidly. In seconds the nurse was beside the bed. Julia stood aside while the woman checked his vital signs and reset the machine.

"Just a little irregularity." She smiled and patted his hand. "Nothing to worry about, but you mustn't let yourself get excited."

When she had gone, Charles looked at Julia, his face set in an expression of disgust. "I suppose you would have been more than happy if your news had killed me and I was out of the picture completely."

"Please don't say that." She was back in control again. "I don't wish anything to worsen your condition. But I am keeping this baby, Charles, so that's that. Besides, when you go to the nursing home I can stop visiting you and you won't have to see it."

"You may not realize it," he said with a smirk, "but you may have just handed me the keys to the kingdom."

She frowned. "I don't understand . You'd better explain."

"Not now. Right now I'd like you to leave." His voice was cold, like chipped ice. "I have a lot of thinking to do and I'd rather do it alone."

"Fine." Julia gathered up her purse and jacket. "I'll be back tomorrow. I think you can get through the night just fine without me."

Outside the room, she leaned against the wall, her legs threatening to collapse under her.

"Mrs. Patterson?" One of the nurses was standing next to her. "Are you all right? Can I get you something? A drink of water?"

Julia drew a breath and exhaled slowly. "No. Thank you. I'm fine now." She walked to the elevator on rubbery legs, her mind whirling. She felt guilt enough about Charles's condition without nearly hastening his demise, but she was not getting rid of this child. It was all she had of Luke, of their love. On that point there would be no compromise.

\* \* \* \*

She called Claire from the car. "Can you stay a little later today? I need to talk to you."

"Sure. Of course. What's up? Is Charles worse?"

"No." *Not exactly.* "I just need to chat with you a few minutes."

"No problem. Come on. I'll wait for you."

All the way to the office, she rehearsed how she would break the news to Claire. She should have been easier than Charles, but for some reason this was worse. When she walked in the door, all her practiced speeches failed her, and she simply blurted out, "I'm pregnant."

Claire stared at her, open-mouthed. "It's his, isn't it," she said, eyes flashing.

"Whose?" Julia tried to keep her voice level.

"The deep voice. It is, isn't it? Come on, Julia, we've known each other forever. 'Fess up."

Julia was silent and Claire laughed.

"How fascinating. A love child. Our proper Julia. Good for you."

"Claire!"

"Don't 'Claire' me. You needed a little spice in your life, being married to that ice cube. And I won't help with that hair shirt you insist on wearing by condemning you for this."

"Charles is just. . .reserved."

"Ha!" Claire barked a laugh. "Reserved, my ass. How are you going to tell his majesty? The man you're all but divorced from?"

"He guessed. All my nausea and vomiting. He remembered. We had an unpleasant little conversation today." She dropped into the chair in front of Claire's desk. "I don't think I'd like to repeat that process."

"I can't imagine what he said." It was a statement, not a question.

"No. You can't. He wants me to have an abortion."

"What?" Claire was nearly speechless. "That bastard. That's harsh even for him."

Julia twisted her hands. "He knows it's not his. That's reason enough."

"But. . .you're practically divorced. And would be if he hadn't been such a prick. It's none of his business." She shook her head. "Let him go to the nursing home and rot there."

"I... I just..." She felt herself sway.

"Oh, my God. Stop." Claire came out from behind the desk. "You need some tea. Sit down and let me fix you a cup." She literally pushed Julia onto the couch, pulled a tiny footstool over to prop her feet on, and plugged in the kettle in the powder room to heat water. In minutes she was handing Julia a steaming mug of fragrant liquid. "Drink. So. The baby is Luke's."

Julia nodded. "Yes. It is." Her hand automatically went to her stomach.

"What happens next? I'm sure you didn't agree to an abortion."

"No way. I told him I'm keeping this child and nothing he said could change my mind."

"Good for you. Who knows how long Charles will be around, anyway."

"Claire!"

"Julia, you can't run away from the truth. His heart condition is very serious and Rombauer told you the prognosis is not good."

Julia shoved her hand through her hair. "This couldn't be happening at a worse time."

"Are you going to tell Luke?"

"Are you out of your mind?" Julia's jaw dropped.

"The man has a right to know."

"The man also knows I have a husband who is dying, twins that need my love and support, and an uphill battle all around. I know Luke. If I tell him, he'd hang up and jump on the next plane to San Antonio. How would I possibly keep that little secret?"

"Secrets have a way of coming out, Julia. One of these days it will come back to bite you."

"Well, this one has to remain well-hidden." Her heart ached every time she thought of the short amount of time she and Luke had spent together, how much they'd crammed into it. If this child was all she would ever have of him, she would cherish it more than life itself.

"When are you due?"

"August."

"You're going to have to make some preparations. For one thing, you need to tell the twins. And by the time another month rolls around you'll be in maternity clothes, so it won't exactly be a secret."

"I know, I know. Oh, God." She looked into the mug as if it held the answers she was seeking.

"You really should go home and get some rest. You look like hell and this is no time to neglect yourself."

"Thanks so much."

"Are you going back to see Charles tonight?"

Julia shook her head. "He made it plain he wants to do some solitary thinking, and to tell you the truth, I'm not at all sure I could stand to be around him at the moment."

"*He* has to do some thinking? Girl, you'd better do some thinking of your own. Go on home, take a hot bath, and cuddle your kids. That's an order."

"Yes, ma'am." A ghost of a smile chased itself across Julia's face. "Whatever would I do without you?"

"I'm not about to let you find out. Don't you worry. I'm going to cuddle you like a piece of china. No traveling and no late events. I don't have kith or kin waiting for me and I'm happy to do it all." She hugged her friend. "Something special in your life. You need it."

\* \* \* \*

Charles was propped up in bed, freshly shaved and bathed, when Julia entered his room the following morning. His face still held the same implacable look and anger still simmered in his eyes.

“Good morning.” She forced a pleasant tone into her voice. She walked over to the bed and leaned over to bestow her usual chaste kiss, but Charles turned his head away.

“I think at this point we can dispense with the charade, don’t you?”

“Fine.” Did her face show her relief? She sat down in the chair next to the bed. “How are you feeling today?”

“The same as every day. My health doesn’t vary, as you well know.”

“Then let’s get on with the business at hand.” She was proud of the businesslike tone of her voice.

“I’ve given the entire situation a great deal of consideration. I don’t have much else to do, as you well know.”

“Yes, Charles. I’m aware of your incapacitation.”

“At its best, it’s still a problem. Even if the child were mine, this would not be the best time for you to be pregnant.”

She said nothing. Silence was her best tack right now.

“Since you insist on keeping this bastard child, there are only a few options. It would create more embarrassment than I’m willing to endure to have you parading around fat and swollen and have to deny the child was mine.”

“Yours?” She raised her eyebrows. “B-But... I mean, the divorce... everyone knows...”

“Yes,” he spat. “The stupid divorce. Another manifestation of your childish behavior.”

Anger surged through her. “Childish—”

Charles held up a hand. “Please let me finish. Under the circumstances, divorce is no longer even a consideration. Especially since my signature is the one holding up the process and I have no intention of signing that paper now. Or ever.”

Julia felt the nausea creeping up again. Every word was like a body blow.

“So, what to do,” he went on, as if discussing some errant business problem. “What solution would be a fair compromise for all parties concerned? Having looked at the entire situation from all angles, I’ve decided to offer you a bargain.”

“A bargain? How magnanimous of you. What do I have to do, cut my heart out?”

“Here are the terms if you want to keep the child,” he went on, ignoring her remarks. “Dr. Rombauer made it quite clear that my days are numbered and my condition will continue to deteriorate. He is recommending I be moved to a nursing home.”

“Yes. He’s discussed it with me.”

"That is absolutely not an option, as far as I'm concerned. For whatever time remains to me, I choose not to spend it in the care and company of strangers"

"Then what's the alternative?" Julia frowned, puzzled.

"I want to go home."

"Home?" She was sure her voice squeaked.

"Yes. We can turn the den into a room for me, a hospital bed can be brought in, we can arrange for home health care. All of that can be done quite simply."

*Bring him back into the house? Where she'd never have a minute's peace?*

"And?"

"And the rest of my care will fall to you."

"You're out of your mind." She clenched her fists at her sides. "You want a pregnant woman to be at your beck and call twenty-four seven, taking care of you? How will I even manage?"

"That will be up to you. You have Miranda to help you. Let her earn that outrageous salary we pay her. However you do it, I expect the finest care and attention. Are you listening?"

She nodded, gritting her teeth.

"Since the only alternative is an embarrassment I can't deal with, we will tell everyone the child is mine. That we tried a... reconciliation that we thought might work."

She goggled. That was the only word for it. "Are you out of your mind?"

"There is nothing wrong with my mind. I have been over this from every angle. I will allow this child to have my name and share equally in my estate. The public would expect it."

*The public. Of course.*

"You will say nothing of this to anyone," he told her. "For the next few months you will be the loving, dutiful wife I had always hoped you'd be, sharing with me the joy of the coming birth."

"As if anyone would believe you wanted another child."

He held up a hand. "Please. It will be up to you to make them believe it."

"And your parents?"

"I'll handle them." He paused to steady himself with some deep breaths. "There's one more condition. This man, whoever he is, will never become a part of your life again. Ever. That's not negotiable. It would pain me greatly to think that as soon as my body was cold, you'd be running off to a love nest."

“And how will you insure that, you bastard?” *Luke!*

“I met last evening with Rod McGuire. He’ll serve as my executor. He has sealed instructions to follow if you break your promise. You and this brat will lose everything that has come to you and you will be branded as a whore to your children, to this city, and the business community you seem so in love with. And I will have my parents sue for custody of the twins.”

Julia thought she would faint. This was a nightmare.

“Additionally, I will leave a letter to be delivered to Andrew and Elizabeth detailing exactly how you betrayed this family and that their half-sibling is a bastard child.”

“But you don’t even know who he is.”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to know. If you should so much as have coffee with a man unknown to him, Rod will investigate him thoroughly and use his best judgment.” He twisted his lips in a caricature of a smile. “And don’t think the future holds any hope for you. Whore. Rod has promised me that any man who tries to make a place in your life he’ll methodically destroy. I hope it was all worth it.”

“God, you are the cruelest man I know.” She felt sick and shaken.

“Cruel? You call me cruel? You’re the one who ran off to another man’s bed.”

“If it weren’t for the twins, I’d tell you to go to hell, heart condition or not. But I won’t put them through the circus I know would erupt if everything came out now.”

“Well, Julia, those are my terms. Take them or leave them.”

The important thing was the child. Luke’s child. She had to safeguard its future at all costs. Especially now, when it seemed it was all she would ever have of him. And she could not put her children through a public scandal.

“I’m waiting, Julia.”

She nodded. “You win. Now excuse me while I throw up.”



## *Chapter Twelve*

"You're exhausted," Claire said.

It was late in the afternoon and the April sunlight was slanting in through the big picture window. Julia's pregnancy bump was growing, although certainly not as much as it had with the twins. She had insisted on at least doing desk work from home, so for weeks Claire had been bringing her projects to work on. Giving in turned out to be much easier than arguing the case.

"I'm fine." Julia pushed her hair back from her face. She'd had it cut shorter, something else for Charles to express his displeasure about, but it made it much easier to care for.

"No, you're not." Claire studied her, critically. "You've got to let Miranda take up more of the slack."

"She's already doing a lot. Anyway, Charles won't even let her in the room."

"Well, isn't that too bad," Claire said waspishly. "He's determined to make your life as much of a living hell as possible."

Julia sipped at her tea. "The weaker he gets, the more fearful of death he becomes. This is just his way of expressing it."

"You're making excuses for him," Claire said in a flat voice.

She knew that, but it helped her deal with his demands and unreasoning rages. The months had dragged interminably, a leaden weight that seemed to stretch every minute into hours. Bringing Charles home was the easy part. The mechanics of preparing the den for him, of arranging for home health care, of listening to instructions from Rombauer were accomplished with a minimal amount of stress. She'd scheduled the ambulance to deliver him while the children were in school, unwilling to subject them to the distress of watching him being carried in and arranged in bed, while a nurse hooked up his monitors and his medication.

That first afternoon when Andy and Beth came home from school, Miranda had swept them into the kitchen where Julia explained very carefully, over cookies and milk, what their routine was now going to be like and how quiet they would need to be. She thanked God for the size of the house, the distance of the family room from the den where Charles was set up, and the intelligence of her seven-year-olds who seemed to absorb everything without too many questions. She also gave thanks to Dr. Grenfeld, the therapist they'd been seeing, who had worked with Julia to prepare the children for this drastic alteration in their lives.

Claire reached over and put her hand on Julia's. "Just remember, it won't do either the twins or this new baby any good if you're out of the picture too."

As her pregnancy progressed, she was forced to make adjustments.

"I'm sorry he yells at you," she told Miranda one night, after a particularly unpleasant episode

The twins, frightened by Charles's rage, had huddled against Julia, bravely swallowing tears. While Miranda calmly finished Charles's nighttime routine, Julia read Andy and Beth a story and tucked them into bed.

"Don't make no never mind to me," Miranda said airily. "I just close my ears and my mouth when I walk into that room. You go on up to bed, Mrs. Patterson. He's asleep for the night and if you fall down, I can't carry you." She grinned.

Julia took her advice, sliding gratefully between the silken feel of the sheets, seeking a comfortable place for her swollen body.

\* \* \* \*

"He's stopped calling," Claire announced.

It was the middle of May. Charles had already outlived the doctor's predictions, but it was obvious that any day could be his last.

"Who?" Julia wrinkled her forehead. She'd gone to the store and the July heat of the Texas summer had undone her in the few moments she was exposed to it.

"Who do you think? Mr. Sexy Voice."

"Luke?" The thought of him was like the painful stabbing of a sword. How many nights had she lain awake in her bed, longing to feel his hands on her just one more time. His mouth on hers. His cock inside her. As his child grew within her, the longings became even more acute. "I thought he stopped long ago."

"He's persistent, I'll give him that. But I think he finally got the message."

"He needs to get on with his life," Julia said, her voice tinged with sadness.

"I think he wants to get on with it with you. You know, there's nothing that says when this is all over you can't call him."

Julia shook her head vehemently. "No, I can't. And please don't ask me about it anymore. If you're really my friend, you'll leave it alone."

But that night when she crawled into bed, for the first time in months she allowed herself the luxury of tears. Stuffing the pillow against her face so her sobs would be silent, she wondered if the tear in her own heart would ever heal. How cruel life was to offer her the golden ring and then snatch it away with such violent abruptness.

During the following week, Charles began sleeping most of the time. By the weekend he quietly slipped into a coma and then he was gone. Julia sat in the kitchen, numb in every extremity including her mind, while the funeral home picked up what was left of the man she'd once thought she loved. A crew from the medical supply company disconnected machines, packed up supplies, and returned the den to its original state. One hour and it was as if Charles had never spent a sick moment in it.

Miranda had the children upstairs and was absorbing their sorrow with her usual kindness and unflappability.

"Here, drink this." Claire set a fresh mug of tea in front of Julia. She had come over the moment Miranda had called her.

"I think I'm turning into a tea bag."

"It's all herbal and decaffeinated. Dr. Berlin said there's nothing in it to harm the baby, and maybe it will do you some good." She waited a heartbeat, then said, "I hate to bring this up, but have you thought about funeral arrangements?"

"I didn't even have to give them a moment's consideration." Julia twisted her lips. "Charles was thoughtful enough to make all the preparations with his parents and his partners. The service will be at the funeral home, and he'll be buried in the family plot at the cemetery. All I have to do is show up."

"I'd take that as a relief, rather than an offense. You don't need to be entangling yourself in that right now. The baby's due in a month."

"I know, I know. I just feel like I'm on the outside looking in on everything."

"Sometimes that's a good way to be," Claire said softly.

The day Charles was buried was blazing hot. The crowd of mourners couldn't help but be conscious of the very pregnant widow struggling in the broiling sun. Seated at the graveside, clutching the hands of her children, her face shadowed by an enormous black hat, she might have drawn more sympathy if not for the obvious way she was shunned by Eloise and Howard. And Charles's partners. Especially Rod McGuire, who had made his hatred and distaste for her known every time he visited Charles during the past months. Both at the funeral home and the cemetery he'd kept as far from her as possible, but the expression on his face left no doubt about his feelings.

Most of the people at the funeral were friends of the elder Pattersons or the partners, or even clients. Julia had made very few friends on her own. After the first feeble attempts on her part, she'd resigned herself to being ignored by the partners' wives and anyone connected to the Patterson family. They'd made it plain she had neither the breeding nor the pedigree to gain acceptance into their charmed circle. She'd realized after a long time that the primary reason Charles married her was because he thought he could control her and mold her into merely an extension of himself. And for a long time that had worked. She'd lost herself completely.

Without Claire she'd never have gotten through the day. The service itself seemed endless, and at the cemetery the minister droned on interminably while everyone surreptitiously blotted at their perspiration. Julia felt as if she'd been stuffed into an oven in a tight corset. By the end of the graveside service, she could barely breathe.

With Andy and Beth, she took one white rose and placed it on the casket. Then she gladly let Claire lead them away to an air-conditioned car and home. The mourners had been invited back to the senior Pattersons after the service, but Julia begged off, using her condition as an excuse, and insisted the children didn't need to be in such a depressing environment. It was time for them all to move on with their lives. It wasn't as if either Charles or his parents had a warm, affectionate relationship with the twins.

"They should be coming to your house," Claire said angrily.

"Forget it" Julia brushed her hair away from her face. "Let Howard and Eloise play the grieving parents. These are all their people anyway. I just want to be done with it."

Julia spent most of the month of August secluded at home. She never asked about the agency, never ventured outside. Every moment of her time was devoted to the twins and the child about to be born.

Her seclusion was interrupted, however, by one unpleasant call from Rod McGuire.

"Per Charles's instructions, I've deposited a significant sum in your checking account," he told her. "But we do have some important things regarding the estate to handle." He cleared his throat. "I'd like to wait but Charles was very specific with his instructions."

"Yes, I'm sure he was." She was sitting in the big chair in the family room, her swollen feet propped up on a footstool. "Just tell me when you'd like to do this. I'd rather you came to the house, if you don't mind. Going out is not as easy for me these days."

"Yes. I understand." The censure in his voice was hard to miss. "Then it's important we meet. I'll have my secretary call and schedule it."

"Fine. Thank you." What else could she say?

He clicked off, without a goodbye.

She dreaded the meeting, knowing Charles had deposited all their secrets and his anger with his partner, but it was an unpleasant task that couldn't be avoided.

A week later, McGuire sat facing her in the den where Charles had spent his final days. The acrid odor of medicine and illness had been banished through Miranda's elbow grease, but the miasma of death still hovered. Julia seldom came into the room now, but she determined it to be the most fitting place for this discussion. She sat at the desk, McGuire across from her.

"I find this somewhat uncomfortable, Julia." He opened his briefcase and extracted a file.

"I'm not too happy myself," she said.

"You must admit, considering your... um... situation, Charles was more than magnanimous."

Julia gritted her teeth. "My pregnancy..." she stressed the word, not caring if it embarrassed Rod, "is something that happened. We can at least call it what it is."

"Nevertheless, Charles was very disturbed about it. I'm sure you know that."

"Rod, can we stop tap dancing?" She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She couldn't seem to find any place to put herself these days. "I don't have time to listen to a lecture. You and I both know why I brought Charles into the house for those last months. My pregnancy was an unexpected turn of events, and Charles chose the path he did so he could save face. My feelings were never part of the equation."

"I admired him for the way he handled it." He eyed her swollen body with evident condemnation. "I'd have just tossed you out into the street."

*I'm sure you would.*

Julia took a deep breath to steady her voice. "Let's just get to the heart of the matter here. I'm well aware of the terms of the will and of the letters you hold, so what else is there to discuss?"

Rod's mouth became a thin line of disapproval. Julia knew full well being Charles's executor had become a distasteful problem for him. He extracted a sheet of paper from a folder.

"This is the deed to the house. It and its contents are left specifically to you. Charles wanted to insure that Andrew and Elizabeth had a proper home to be raised in. I've had the name on the deed changed."

"I'll be sure to cancel the rental on the mobile home," she said acidly.

McGuire ignored her remarks. "There was substantial life insurance, all payable to the estate, as well as Charles's investments." His smile was cold. "He had an incredible mind when it came to that."

"Yes." What was she supposed to say?

"At Charles's direction, I set up a fund to provide monthly income for the care of Andrew and Elizabeth. Individual trust funds have been set up for them, which they will receive when they're twenty-five, as well as separate trusts to pay for their education expenses." He raised his eyes to look at her. "He was far more generous than I felt he was obligated to be."

"Obligated to?" she nearly shouted. "You can bet he was obligated, whatever you think. Those are his children and he damn well better have provided for him."

"Julia." Rod frowned at her. "There's no need to curse."

She took a deep breath, aware she was rocketing out of control. "And the baby? That was part of the deal from hell."

"I'm getting to that." He frowned. "I must tell you I advised Charles against this but he was determined to honor the agreement he made with you. So yes, you'll be interested to know," Rod went on, his disgust obvious, "that he established a substantial enough sum to include support for this bastard child, also."

Julia ground her teeth. She would get through this. She would.

"Would I be assuming too much to think Charles made some kind of arrangements for me? I was technically still his wife."

"Technically being the operative word," Rod said in a hard voice.

"So am I the pariah that gets left out in the cold?" She'd find a way to make things work if that turned out to be the case. She hadn't really expected to be taken care of, anyway.

Rod sneered. That was the only word for it. "I'd say you're a very lucky woman, Julia. Charles left you what I would call a significant sum of money." He rose and handed her a sheet of paper. "This is your current bank balance, and the other is the investment account we've set up for you. It will generate a nice income each month. Of course, you're free to move the funds if you choose."

Julia was stunned at the amounts on the sheet Rod handed to her. She had hoped the trust funds for the children, but the additional support money would allow her to do many things for the baby that might otherwise not be possible. She and Claire were still taking minimum salaries from the agency, and in fact, she had not drawn any herself in months. Her choice. She couldn't justify it while she contributed so little to the effort.

"Thank you," she said, breaking an uncomfortable silence. "And thank you for handling this for Charles. I realize he put you in a difficult situation, but he had confidence in your ability to see that his wishes were carried out."

"Charles and I were friends since grade school," he said stiffly. "I told him not to marry you, but he refused to listen. You turned out to be exactly what I thought. A piece of trash." He stared at her pregnancy bump. "And to get pregnant with another man's child was just the frosting on the cake. I must tell you he was devastated by the situation, something that I'm sure hastened his heart problems."

"I doubt that." Before she could stop herself she said, "You must have a heart before you can have problems with it." Turning away from Rod, she picked up a pen from the desk. "I think our business is concluded. Just show me where to sign and tell me which copies of everything are mine."

When they were finished, Rod McGuire swept a thick stack of papers into a pristine manila envelope with her name printed in neat block letters and handed it to her.

"Everything else deals with charitable bequests. I assume you don't feel the need to be involved in those."

She nodded. "Then we're done." She started to rise from her chair.

"Except for the letters."

She froze. "I don't think we need to discuss the letters, Rod." She gave a slight gasp as the baby chose that moment to kick. "We're both aware of them, and of the terms. You won't have to open them."

"This won't go away." His voice was colder than winter.

“Eventually Andy and Beth will be of age,” she pointed out, “and the threat of custody or guardianship will no longer be a factor.”

“No matter how many years pass, Julia, or how old the children get, it will be my great pleasure to destroy any chance at happiness you might try to have. You ruined Charles’s life. I will enjoy ruining yours.”

She kept herself together until he was out of the house, into his car, and out of the driveway. Then she walked into the kitchen, sat down at the table, and for one last time gave in to the tears that threatened to choke her. When she stopped at last, she felt as if she’d cried for hours, her throat was raw and her eyes were burning.

She touched her stomach and felt the baby kick again. *At least I’ll have this*, she told herself, her heart so full of despair she didn’t know if she’d ever smile again.

*Oh, Luke. I’ve made a terrible mistake. I thought it was right at the time, but I should have had more courage.*

She didn’t know how to deal with the grief that was more of a relief than anything else. She felt guilty that someone might see into her mind and read her thoughts. Only Claire knew the real truth about her marriage and she wanted to keep it that way.

As Julia’s due date approached, she was petted and cosseted to the extreme by Claire, Miranda and the twins. Andy and Beth were enthralled with the idea of a baby brother or sister and Julia was grateful for the distraction from their sorrow.

On August twenty-fifth, Julia gave birth to a gorgeous baby girl, Courtney Emily Patterson. When she held the baby in her arms for the first time, she whispered to her, “Your daddy would love you if he could see you. We’ll be a team, you and I, and maybe someday I can tell you about him.”



## *Chapter Thirteen*

*Thirteen years later*

“Courtney, I will not ask you again. Where did you go after school today?”

Julia was trying hard to keep her frustration with her thirteen-year-old daughter under control, but the belligerent teenager was making it difficult for her.

“I went to Laura’s house.” The tone was both petulant and hostile.

“Try again. I called there looking for you.”

“What difference does it make? No one cares what time I come home, anyway.” She started to leave the room but Julia grabbed her arm.

“Not so fast. You’re not leaving here until I know where you were. And exactly what did you mean by that last remark?”

“You’re never here when I get home.” The tone was both angry and self-pitying. “Beth and Andy have their own places. They hardly show up here except for a command performance. And Miranda just bitches at me.”

“We are lucky to have Miranda at all, let me tell you. And Beth and Andy work. You know that. They were both very lucky to get jobs when they graduated. Plenty of kids are out of college and can’t find work at all.”

“Understood. They’re wonderful. Can I go now?” Without waiting for an answer, Courtney flounced from the room, anger in every line of her body.

Last night they’d celebrated Courtney’s thirteenth birthday, although Julia wasn’t sure it was much of a celebration. She’d chosen a restaurant that was Courtney’s favorite, but the tension

around the table had been like a wall of steel. Her daughter saw the milestone as an open door to test the limits even further.

"Someone needs to give that child the spanking of her life," Miranda said, coming back into the kitchen. She had tactfully left Courtney and Julia alone during their discussion.

"Yes, well, I don't think that's something I can take on. Although it's a good idea." She grinned at the thought. "Anyway, I'll just have to find another solution."

How she wished Luke was there to help her, give her advice.

*We have a beautiful daughter who seems to be bent on ruining her life. Where have I failed her? What can I do about it?*

So many times she had resisted the urge to call him, tell him, and ask for his involvement. Each time she stopped herself, knowing how impossible that was, and how unfair it would be to him. And then, of course, there was the agreement, the greatest deterrent of all. But it left her feeling alone and bewildered as to how to cope with her burgeoning wild child.

Although now that Andy and Beth were twenty-one, and the threat of a custody battle no longer hung over her, there was really nothing stopping her from seeking Luke; nothing except her own fear of censure and rejection. So she kept her memories of Luke bottled away in the corner of her mind where she could drag them out on her worst nights.

Not for the first time, Julia wished she liked to drink. It would certainly take the edge off at times like this. Coping as a single parent with a rebellious teenager was like riding on a roller coaster.

She'd stiffened her spine and smiled until her face hurt when Beth and Andy went off to college. They both went the University of Texas at Austin, Beth to major in business and Andy in engineering. And they were worried about leaving her alone, with just Courtney who even then was showing signs of fierce rebellion.

"I'll be fine," she told them. "I have Miranda. And Claire. And you'll be less than an hour away."

Their insistence that they call her daily, that they take turns coming home to see her, was evidence enough of the guilt they felt at their excitement, and the prospect of being on their own. Julia put on her best face and shooed them off to begin their next life journey.

Courtney, who had been a model child, began to show signs of acting out when she hit twelve. Precocious and bright, she challenged everyone and everything. She believed rules were made to be broken and did so on a regular basis.

"Mom, you would let her get away with murder," Beth had said just this past weekend. "You were much stricter with Andy and me."

"I know, I know." Julia bit her lip, exasperated with herself. "I just look at that face that's still so angelic and have a hard time believing she does the things she does."

"Well," Beth said, looking at her mother steadily, "take it from me, she does."

"Have you talked to her?" Maybe Beth could get through where Julia couldn't.

"Of course. So has Andy. She doesn't hear a word we say."

She hated to admit that things were really getting out of hand. Courtney was missing school days, forging Julia's name on excuse forms, and hanging out with people two or three years older than she was who looked like ads for "Just Say No To Drugs."

"I forbid you to bring those people into the house," Julia raged one night. "You shouldn't even have anything to do with them."

"They're my friends," Courtney shouted. "They don't judge me and they think I'm wonderful."

"Of course they do. You spend your money buying them food and other things. Why wouldn't they think that?"

Julia finally curtailed Courtney's allowance, despite the screaming and yelling.

"We'll talk again when you can learn to manage your money better," she said, her voice firm. "That's the end of the discussion."

The echoes of that argument still rattled around in her head. By the time she gathered herself and went upstairs, Courtney was in her room, the door closed as usual. Julia could hear the sound of the CD player racketing as she knocked.

"What?" Hostile, as always.

"I need to talk to you. Open the door." Julia had ordered Courtney to keep her door unlocked, in case of fire or some other emergency, but the girl stubbornly refused to listen to her.

"I'm busy."

"You'll be a lot less busy if I have to take an ax to this door, young lady. Open it now."

In a moment, the door open a few inches, Courtney standing there in her usual pose of defiance. "What is it, Mother?" She stressed the last word unnecessarily.

"I came to tell you that I will be picking you up after school tomorrow and bringing you back to the office with me. You can help me around the office and do your homework. I'll be

waiting for you at the end of the driveway so you won't be embarrassed to have your friends see that you talk to your mother."

Courtney stared at her, mouth open. "You're kidding," she said finally.

"No, I'm not. I'm tired of never knowing where you are or who you're with. And don't even think of ducking out on me. You won't like the consequences."

She turned away and heard the door slam behind her. Another wonderful evening at home, she thought. She turned to see Miranda holding a small tray.

"I made you some nice hot chocolate," she said. "You look like you could use it."

"I think my child-rearing skills have totally disappeared," Julia sighed.

"You did a fine job with the twins," she reminded her.

"Yes, but at least they began life with the presence of a father," she pointed out.

Miranda snorted in disgust. "On their birth certificate. Maybe. But that man didn't have a spot in his heart for any of you except to trot you out on display when he needed to. Remember who you're talking to here."

"Charles tried his best," Julia protested. "He just..."

"Didn't know how to be a person," Miranda finished. "Whatever those kids got came from you. Look how great the twins turned out."

"Well, I've certainly lost my touch with Courtney."

"I'll tell you, she seems like a piece of her life is missing. I ain't smart enough to figure out what it is, though. All this thumbing her nose at everything? She's just trying to find where she belongs, because she ain't one bit like those other two."

*How astute of you, Miranda. Something is definitely missing but there's not much I can do about it.*

"Well, we'll see what happens tomorrow. I have to make a start somewhere."

Lying in bed, Julia kept seeing Luke's face rising unbidden before her eyes. She ached with longing for him, the same longing she had tried to bury for fourteen years. When Charles's illness and his demands had dragged on her too much, it was the memory of Luke that carried her through. In the long hours when Charles wallowed in self pity, demanding her presence besides him at all times, she could close her eyes and remember the feel of Luke's hands on her body, his mouth on hers, the muskiness of his scent.

*There is no way I will call him now. I cannot interrupt his life. Not after all this time. Anyway, I don't even know where he is.*

Five years ago, succumbing to an impulse and a fit of loneliness, she had called Hot Ticket. Bright Ideas had long been through with the original project. The two additional campaigns they'd subsequently been hired for Claire had handled. Mindful of the letters in Rod McGuire's safe as well as the man's promise to haunt her life, Julia had kept her distance. But she'd had an uncontrollable need to reach out to him that one time, just to hear his voice.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Buchanan is no longer with the company," the impersonal voice had told her.

Julia was stunned. "But, where is he? Where did he go?"

"I'm sure I don't know, ma'am. Would you like me to transfer you to Human Resources? They might be able to help you."

"No, that's all right. Thank you." That's all she'd have needed, to have the whole company know she was trying to track him down. So he was God knows where and she couldn't reach him if she wanted to.

Julia wondered if mental telepathy really worked. If it did, maybe he'd get some of the signals she was so desperately sending out.

\* \* \* \*

"I have to pick Courtney up after school today," Julia announced to Claire at the office. "I'm bringing her back here."

"In chains?" Claire asked with a sardonic smile.

"Not funny. I hope you don't mind but she's going to be doing her homework here every day. Maybe some filing if we need it. Something that will keep her contained and off the streets until I take her home for dinner." She chewed her lip. "I can't just dump this on Miranda."

"Try the police station. I understand they have pretty secure rooms there."

"This isn't funny," Julia told her. "I swear I don't know what I'm going to do with that child."

Claire poured coffee for herself, fixed a cup with hot water and a tea bag, brought both cups to the desk, and handed one to Julia. She sat down in the chair opposite her.

"We need to talk turkey, kiddo," she said.

"Turkey? About what?"

"About the fact that you're going to fall apart one of these days. Wait, wait," she said, as Julia tried to interrupt. "You might not want to admit this, but it's obvious for everyone to see."

The last time I saw you smile at all was before Charles got sick.” She gritted her teeth. “That man ought to be glad he’s dead or I’d kill him myself.”

“This is not Charles’s fault,” Julia said. “Besides, he’s been dead for a very long time.”

“Yes, and he nearly took you with him. I can’t believe the days and weeks you sat in his hospital room, then at home at his beck and call, while he played the typical invalid. Trust Charles to only think of himself.”

“He was very ill, Claire. What was I to do?”

“Oh yes, God forbid he should have given you a minute’s peace. But never mind, that’s only part of it.” She looked hard at her friend and partner. “You were exhausted when he died, eventually the twins went off to college, and since then you’ve been raising the brat from hell by yourself. And it’s killing you.”

“She’s just having trouble finding herself,” Julia protested. “It’s been tough for her growing up without a father.”

“You know, she has a father who could be with her if you weren’t so stubborn.” Claire watched Julia’s reaction. They’d been down this road before and Julia adamantly refused to do anything about it.

“And you know my answer,” she said now. “The same as always. I don’t even know where he is. And he probably has a whole new life by now. I can’t just disrupt his life by calling and saying, ‘Hey Luke, guess what? We have a daughter, she’s almost a juvenile delinquent, and I need you to help me straighten her out.’”

“I still think he’d want to know,” Claire insisted. “There are ways he could participate without disrupting his life.”

“No. That’s final. Now let’s do what we need to before I pick up the brat and bring her here.” Julia sighed. “At least I can make sure she does her homework.”

“You need a man in your life to yank the reins on that child.” It was a mantra Claire never tired of repeating.

Julia waved a hand in the air. “You know the terms Charles set down. That’s just impossible.”

“Julia, Julia, Julia.” Claire shook her head. “The twins are twenty-one, so custody is no longer an issue. I mean, the Pattersons don’t even acknowledge Courtney. Andy and Beth are out of college so their education is paid for. What’s the worst that can happen? That ass McGuire cuts off the funds? So sell the house, downsize, whatever. You’re making good money here now.”

"He could pull out those letters Charles left for the children. Destroy my relationship with them." She rubbed her forehead. "Courtney hasn't ever understood why her so-called grandparents ignore her. I'm afraid if she knew the truth it would push her even further over the edge."

"Honey, she can't fall much further. And maybe if you told her the truth it would give her the answers she's looking for."

"No!" Julia almost shouted the word. Then she dialed it down. "What if she decided to go looking for Luke? Another disaster in the making. No, I have to do things the way I'm doing them."

"All right, forget about men and let's talk about the brat. I have an idea. Bring her to the office and she can work for me. I can use her three hours a day after school to file, enter stuff on the computer, and organize my project folders for me."

"We have a staff, for God's sake. What's left for her to do?"

"Plenty. Just leave it to me. Anyway, I'm a lot tougher than you are. Let's see how she toes the line with me."

It was certainly an interesting experiment. Courtney climbed into the car reluctantly when Julia picked her up and sulked all the way to the office. When Julia told her she had a job for her and what she'd be doing, her anger was almost palpable.

"So you can babysit me?" she asked furiously. "What about my friends? I want to hang out with them after school. This sucks. And I don't want to work for you. All you'll do is criticize me."

Julia flinched. "Courtney, if you made better choices about your friends and paid attention to house rules, this wouldn't be necessary. Anyway, technically you won't be working for me. You'll be working for Claire."

"Oh, great. The warden herself." Courtney slouched down in his seat. "I think she's a refugee from the Gestapo."

"That's enough, Courtney. I'll expect you to conduct yourself courteously and professionally, and do what you're told. You might not like some of the alternatives."

"Oh? And what are they? Locking me in chains and throwing me bread and water."

"Don't tempt me," Julia said sulfurously. "Here we are. Try to remember that under that pathetic layer of hostility, you're actually a decent human being."

It actually went better than Julia expected. Claire had work ready for Courtney as soon as they walked in. She showed her how to enter client information in the database and print reports. She also instructed her on how to organize client folders.

Julia watched sideways across the reception area through the slightly open door to Claire's office. It amazed her to see Courtney's resentful posture change as she listened to and tried to absorb the instructions. When she started to do her assigned work, she didn't look enthused, exactly, but she had more animation on her face than Julia had seen in a long time.

*Maybe this will work. Maybe this will make a change in her attitude.*

If it kept her away from the dregs of humanity she seemed to enjoy hanging out with, Julia would consider it a major accomplishment.

Her next thought was, *I must insist on getting her new clothes.* Courtney had, for whatever reason, taken to wearing spandex bicycle shorts and oversized T-shirts as her normal style of dress. They had been the clothes Julia had bought her for hanging around the house or riding her bike, not for school and certainly not in an office where business was conducted. How had she even let her get away with wearing them to school? Because it was one more argument she didn't want to have?

Julia sighed. Claire was right. It was a constant uphill battle that kept her edgy and exhausted. She was spoiled, because the twins had been so easy to raise. What would Luke say if he could see how his daughter was turning out? Would he blame her? Would he help her?

*Well, never mind. I'm certainly not going to drop this bombshell into the middle of his life, not that I could anyway.*

Just before they got ready to close up shop for the day, Claire wandered into Julia's office with a fax in her hand.

"You aren't going to believe this," she told her partner.

"Believe what?"

Claire still looked slightly dazed. "I just got a call from someone at Connell Wilson. You know them, right?"

"You're kidding." Julia's eyes widened. "Who *doesn't* know about them? I read in the business journal they just gobbled up some smaller companies."

"Yes, well, it appears they've got something new going and we're invited to the party."

"What?" Julia dropped her pen. "I don't believe you. We're small potatoes compared to the agencies they use."



“Well, I was a little skeptical myself when the call came in, so I had the guy fax me the request in writing. Here it is.” She held out the piece of paper she was holding.

Julia took it from her hand and skimmed the message. Connell Wilson, a national manufacturer of sporting goods and apparel, following some recent acquisitions, was changing its name and wanted a major advertising campaign to establish its new identity. Would their firm be interested in making a presentation?

“Major advertising company,” Claire repeated, dazed.

“This just came out of the blue?” Julia asked. “No recommendation from someone?”

“Just like that. Then we got a follow-up phone call about ten minutes after they sent the fax.”

“But why us? Connell Wilson is really big league. And we’re far from being close to major.”

“Read what it says. They’re aware of similar campaigns we’ve done before and they’d like to talk to us.” She flopped down in one of the client chairs. “This is too weird, right?”

“Maybe they have our stuff on file.” Claire and Julia had done a very big, very structured mailing on Bright Ideas in a prospecting, throw-everything-against-the-wall-and-see-what-sticks campaign.

Claire sat up straight. “If we get this account, it would mean really, really big bucks, Julia. Not that we aren’t doing all right. We’ve got a nice portfolio of clients and they usually recommend us to others. But this is like representing the palace.”

“Can we do something this huge?” Julia asked. “We might need to hire additional staff.”

“We can worry about that later. Bright Ideas has come a long way since the Hot Ticket rollout, kiddo. That got us a lot of referrals and we’ve been humming ever since. This could be our biggest step up the ladder yet.”

“You think?” Julia was the conservative one, Claire always the more adventurous of the two. They balanced each other out, allowing them to look at an opportunity like this from all angles.

“I do.” Claire nodded. “If you agree, we should go ahead, I’ll call this guy back and get him to messenger over all the information we’ll need. Then I’ll ask him when they want the presentation.”

Julia drew in a breath, then exhaled. Maybe a challenge like this was just what she needed. Something to take her mind off her personal problems. And Luke. "All right. Let's do it. Let me know when you have the info and we'll do some brainstorming for ideas."

Claire jumped up and hugged her. "Good for you. We need to stretch our wings. Besides, it means I can keep Courtney gainfully employed and under our thumb."

"Well, good luck with that," Julia said skeptically.

But driving home, she noticed a slight change in Courtney's demeanor. The girl actually engaged in conversation. She bristled when Julia mentioned the clothes thing, but at least agreed to think about it. To Julia, this was a major change, and she offered up silent prayers.

They ate the wonderful dinner Miranda had made for them, but then Courtney went off to closet herself in her room.

"No telephone until your homework's done," Julia hollered after her.

The only reply was the usual slamming of the bedroom door. Julia sighed. At least they'd had a brief interval of sanity.

"Drink this and relax," Miranda said, bringing her a glass of wine. "That child needs a firm hand. You need to quit worrying because she has no father and make sure she's got a mother with gumption."

"Couldn't you wave a magic wand and change us all into Cinderella?" Julia asked ruefully.

"Wouldn't that be something to hoot about. Meanwhile, you drink your wine and unwind. I can tell you got somethin' big on your mind."

And so she did. Later, discussing it with Beth on the phone, the full scope of the project if they got it suddenly hit her.

"You can do it, Mom," Beth said, very matter-of-fact. "You've got the skills and the background. All you'd be doing is promoting a beach instead of a sandbox. No big deal."

"Easy for you to say, my darling daughter. Everything comes so easy to you."

"Yeah, yeah, that's me. The big star."

But they both knew that in less than a year, Beth had made herself all but indispensable at the financial services agency where she worked. She had a natural talent for numbers and for reading business trends. She loved her work and her bosses loved her. She had already scored one large bonus and would probably get another at the end of the year.

"How's Courtney?" Beth asked, changing the subject.

"Just as hostile as ever," Julia sighed. "I swear I've never seen two sisters more unlike each other. You spoiled me, Bethie."

"Mom, she's thirteen and full of angst," Beth reminded her.

"There's that word," Julia sighed. "Angst. I'd like to take it out of the dictionary."

"Want her to come spend the weekend with me?" Beth had her own apartment in the northwest area of San Antonio, not far from work and away from the danger of city streets. It wasn't large, but she managed the cost herself, and that was a determining factor for her.

"I don't know. We'll see. She started a new job today working at the office."

"You think that's a good idea?" There was concern in Beth's voice. "She thinks you're too much of a guard dog as it is."

"Well, she's working for Claire, so it's a little different."

Beth chuckled. "If anyone can whip her into shape, Claire can. I swear, Mom, how can someone so pretty be such a drill sergeant?"

"Well, at least Courtney didn't bitch about it. We actually had a decent if brief conversation, although now she's locked up tighter than a drum in her room again. I'm hoping this gives some order to her life. I'll do anything to get her away from those derelicts she insists on calling her friends."

"At least she doesn't have to put up with Grandma and Grandpa," Beth snorted. "That's almost a blessing."

Charles's parents had deliberately and obviously ignored Courtney's existence, something Julia found difficult to explain when Andy and Beth suffered through the once a month dinner. After a while Courtney simply stopped asking. Julia was pretty sure Charles had made the situation known to them; and while they said nothing either publicly or to the twins, as far as they were concerned, Julie and Courtney might as well not have existed. It was a mixed blessing. It meant no more punishing dinners and silent criticism, but it also robbed Courtney of the only extended family she might have had.

"I'll tell you what." Beth broke the silence. "Why don't I pick her up Friday from the office and she can stay with me 'til Sunday. We can hang out and watch chick flicks and play with my makeup. Maybe I can get her to tone hers down."

"Oh, honey, that sounds so great, but I hate for you to give up your weekend like that."

"No problem, honest. Maybe it will give you and Claire time to brainstorm about the new account you're going after. I need a break, anyway. Too much going on."

Julia wisely pushed it further. "In that case, do you think you could take her shopping Saturday?" she asked hesitantly. "She needs to get out of that awful spandex and she has no fashion sense whatsoever. She said she'd think about it, and I want to do it before she thinks too much. Use your credit card and give me the bill."

"Sure, Mom. No prob. Have the delinquent packed and ready when you take her to work Friday."

Julia hung up with a sigh of relief. She was truly blessed to have a daughter like Beth. She tried not to compare her with Courtney, but sometimes it was hard not to.

*Oh, Luke, how I wish you were here to give me words of wisdom.*

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Although it was really make-work, the job at Bright Ideas did seem to give Courtney something to focus on besides her usual rebellion. Claire cautiously praised her work and told Julia she thought this might work out after all.

"If we get the Connell Wilson account, we'll need every pair of hands we can get."

"By the way." Julia paused in the doorway to her office. "Did they send the stuff over for us to look at? And have they given us a date to meet with them?"

"Yes to both things. I had Linda make copies of everything for you so you can study up on the background and get an idea of what they might be looking for. And the appointment is for next Thursday."

Nine days away. Could they get ready in time? "Okay. I'll get on it right away. Are you up for a brainstorm session this weekend?"

"What about Courtney? Are you planning to chain her to her bed?" Claire grinned to take the sting out of her words.

"Actually, Beth has magnanimously invited Court to spend the weekend with her. She's picking her up here Friday."

"God, what a jewel that child is. If I ever had kids, I'd want them all to be just like her. Sure. The weekend sounds like a great idea. Let's do it at my place, though. Sometimes I can't think in the office."

"And by the way," Julia said, "how come the free weekend? You actually going to leave that hot husband of yours all alone?"

"Football weekend," Claire told her. "He and Charlie and Wes are going to College Station for the A&M game and spending the night so they can pretend they're nineteen and party hearty."

Julia laughed. "Maybe next year they'll grow up."

Claire gave her a rueful grin. "Don't hold your breath. Anyway, it frees up Saturday and Sunday."

"All right. Let's do it at your place so Miranda can feed us yummy stuff. Bring home whatever we'll need when you leave here Friday night, and I'll be over bright and early Saturday. I'm going to get one good night's sleep before we get started."

And that was what they did. Courtney was actually pleased to go off with Beth for the weekend, even with a shopping trip on the agenda, and had 'makeover' written all over her sister's face. Julia waved her goodbye and said she'd see her Sunday afternoon.

From early Saturday morning until almost noon on Sunday, she and Claire slept only in snatches, fueled by Diet Coke and popcorn and the occasional pizza. But by the time Julia left for home, they had the outlined plan on paper, one they could flush out in the next two or three days.

Courtney arrived home Sunday afternoon with a new haircut, the smallest amount of makeup Julia had ever seen her wear, and dressed in Gap jeans and a soft pink T-shirt. Julia tried not to giggle.

"Very nice," she told her daughter.

"Beth said if I'm going to work in your office, I might meet some cool people and I'd turn them off if I looked like the Queen of the Trailer Park."

Julia had to swallow a smile, but her eyes sent Beth a silent thank you.

"Can I go upstairs now?" Courtney asked. "I need to make some calls."

"Of course. And I love your new clothes."

Courtney picked up the stack of shopping bags she'd dropped on the floor, her duffel, and clumped up the stairs.

Julia turned to Beth. "I don't know how you did it, but thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Well, it was a struggle, but she finally gave in. I think she actually enjoyed herself." She gave her mother a quick hug and kiss. "Gotta go. Meeting some people for Chinese food. Call me and let me know how it goes. And about the new account, too," she added as she flew out the door.

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday went by like a blur. Julia's intense focus at the office was interrupted only to pick Courtney up from school and deliver her later for dinner. She and Claire and their graphics person worked late every night.

By the time they collapsed over sandwiches late Wednesday evening, they were convinced they had a winning product. The graphics were hot, the names they suggested catchy, the sample press kit complete in its coverage, and the PowerPoint presentation was ready to go. The last thing they rechecked was the proposed budget, but at last they were satisfied it was realistic.

"If this doesn't do it, we don't deserve to get the job," Julia said as they were packing up for the morning.

"Don't jinx us," Claire told her. "We do deserve the job, and I think we'll knock their socks off."

"Well, you can be sure we'll be a big change from what they're used to."

"Sure, but that's why people hire us, because we're different. And that's what they want."

"You still don't know how our name got in the hopper?" Julia asked curiously.

"Not a clue. But I guess we'll find out tomorrow. All the big shots will be sitting in on the meeting."

"Oh, great." Julia groaned. "Still with their grumpy morning faces on, I'll bet."

"Cheer up, sweetie. We'll wow them."

The women knew they were riding a high of success. With a laundry list of successful campaigns, they had carved out a niche for themselves as innovative marketers in the world of athletic gear and sports-related merchandise.

Sixteen years ago, when Bright Ideas had come into being, they'd been happy to get any jobs at all. Today, they were presenting a marketing plan to Connell Wilson, a major corporation, on the rollout of an entirely new line. They had prepared for it well and were confident of what they had to offer.

"Do you have the storyboards?" Julia asked Thursday morning as they prepared to leave the office.

"Right here in the portfolio case, along with the proposed names and art designs."

"Okay. I have everything else in my briefcase, including my laptop." For Christmas, Julia had treated herself to a new, oversized Coach briefcase that could accommodate all her paraphernalia. Now she slipped the final folders inside and zipped it shut.

"You can be sure we'll be a big change from what they're used to," Julia commented.

"Sure," Claire agreed, "but like I said before, it's our very difference that makes people hire us."

Putting everything on her desk chair, Julia took a last look at herself in the mirror in the tiny powder room that was part of their office suite. The woman who looked back at her had aged well, despite everything that had turned her life upside down.

“Julia, let’s get it on.” Claire’s voice was impatient. A blonde collection of high energy molecules, she was a good foil for Julia. They balanced each other in both looks and temperament. “You look terrific. Hardly any grey in that gorgeous dark hair, the night creams have done their job on your skin, and the red plaid power suit is smashing. You’ll knock ’em dead.”

“Coming, Mother,” Julia said with a grin.

The Connell Wilson headquarters took up three floors in the Alamo Bank Building in downtown San Antonio. Both women were slightly on edge as they stepped off the elevator into a large reception area. An earnest young man in a sports jacket, waiting at the security desk, hurried to greet them and take them to sign in.

“Ms. Richmond? Ms. Patterson?”

They both nodded.

“I’m Jeremy.” He held out his hand, which they each shook in turn. “I’m an intern in the marketing department.” He handed them two plastic ID badges. “You’ll need to wear these while you’re on the premises, if you don’t mind. They’re all waiting for you in the boardroom. If you’ll just follow me?”

Claire and Julia followed Jeremy down a carpeted corridor that seemed miles long. At the end of the hall, he opened two mahogany doors to expose a sea of corporate faces gathered around a table nearly as long as the corridor.

Julia and Claire tried to catalogue them quickly. There were at least fifteen people, some dressed in corporate attire, some in athletic gear. They were divided about half and half between male and female. Sometimes that was good, sometimes bad. Women often wanted to flex their muscle in front of their male counterparts, and men often needed to let the women know how much smarter they were.

Out of the corner of her eye, Julia glimpsed one person, a man in a navy sports jacket and grey slacks, standing at the coffee urn with his back turned. Something about him drew her attention, but then an older man in a dark grey suit came forward, distracting her.



"Thank you for coming," he said, holding out her hand. "I'm Alan Wilson, CEO of Connell Wilson. I'll introduce everyone here but please don't think we expect you to remember their names."

"Oh, we'll manage," Claire said, with her usual brashness.

Wilson continued, "So *Hey You* will do all right if you need to speak to someone." He was smiling easily and both Julia and Claire began to relax. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

Wilson went around the table, identifying each person by name and position. Claire had quietly turned on her pocket recorder so she could write everything down later.

"And that gentleman hogging the coffee machine joined us very recently. We were lucky enough to steal him away from his previous position. We call him our senior whiz kid, and he's really the impetus for your invitation." The man turned and Julia nearly fainted. "Let me introduce our new corporate vice president, Luke Buchanan."

Julia felt as if a vacuum had sucked the breath out of her. Her body was icy cold but her face felt hot, flushed. Her heart was thundering and her pulse beat a jungle tattoo. For a desperate moment, she was afraid she was going to throw up. She curled her hands into fists to keep them from shaking, praying that her legs would not collapse under her. Luke! She couldn't tear her eyes away from him. He still had the power to ignite her just with his presence.

All the nights she'd lain in bed keeping his image close to her. Remembering the feel of his hands on her body and the hot press of his mouth. The way he brought her to climax over and over again and made her feel wanted and desirable.

And she'd had to walk away from it, full of despair that she'd never see him again.

He had aged well, his body only slightly thicker, his dark brown hair attractively tinged with grey. His face had acquired a few more lines, and there was a tension in his body she hadn't noticed all those years ago. But he was still wonderful Luke, the man who still owned her heart.

*I love you.* His words were permanently imprinted on her brain. On the really bad nights, she'd hugged them to her like a lifeline.

He came over to her, hand outstretched. "Nice to see you again, Julia." His face was impassive but his eyes were speaking volumes to her.

"Nice to see you again, too, Luke." She didn't know where she found the voice to answer him. At the touch of his hand, her body went on full alert. Oh God, how could she do this?

Beside her, Claire was doing her level best to be unflappable, but Julia knew she was taking in every detail and nuance.

“Alan went along with my suggestion to give you a shot at this before we made a decision on an agency.” His gaze was boring into her. “I explained what a good job you’d done for us at Hot Ticket and how well that turned out.”

“Thank you,” she said faintly. Her hand, when she retrieved it, tingled from his touch, and her whole body was threatening to melt.

“Thanks for asking us in, Luke,” Claire said, extending her hand. “Nice seeing you again after all this time.”

“You too, Claire.” They exchanged grins that were suddenly somehow conspiratorial.

Somehow, Julia pulled herself together and she and Claire set up the materials.

Despite the shock that threatened to immobilize her, regardless of Claire’s burning curiosity that was almost a living thing, they managed to put on a powerful presentation. Each person at the table had specific questions. Claire recorded everything so they could get information later for any questions they couldn’t answer then.

At noon a lunch was brought in from the corporate kitchen and was served at the board table. Julia, like Claire, did her best to chat informally with as many people as possible. She noticed Luke was carefully keeping his distance, letting her do her thing.

At last it was over, and they were packing up their things to leave.

“I have to say I’m impressed,” Alan Wilson told them. “I didn’t know what to expect when Luke recommended you. We’ve pretty much stuck to the same two or three agencies for our work.”

“We appreciate the opportunity,” Claire said.

“Well, like everything else he’s suggested since he came on board, your work is both interesting and exciting. Quite an innovative marketing plan.”

“Thank you,” Julia murmured.

“You came up with terrific suggestions for the product name change, too.” He thought for a minute. “I’ll need to go over this with my executive committee and digest your presentation. And of course, Luke will have the final say. But I think I can safely say you’ll be getting a call for further discussion.”

Tired and tense as she was, Julia still felt excitement surge through her. She and Claire managed to shake everyone’s hand again, express their appreciation for their time, and make a graceful exit to the elevator.

“Wow!” Claire said as they were waiting in the hall.

"Wow? We don't have the account yet."

"I'm not talking about the account, honey. I'm talking about that gorgeous man with the sexy voice. He just gets better-looking with age. I can't believe you've stayed away from him all this time."

"Leaving everything else out," Julia told her, "I walked away from him. Didn't even call him. I thought for sure he'd hate me by now."

"Not even close."

The deep voice still sent shivers up her spine. Julia turned to find Luke standing almost directly behind her. She caught the scent of his spicy aftershave and the memories it conjured up made her weak in the knees. She had to get out of here. Now. But she couldn't make herself move.

"Excuse me?" Well that was a dumb response.

"I said, no, I don't hate you. Although I'd say we have some unfinished business." He looked at Claire. "I'm happy to see you again after all this time, Claire. And to thank you again for jumping in for Julia to finish the Hot Ticket campaign when she was... sick." He looked at Julia and smiled. "I assume you're feeling better these days?"

"Yes," she said, almost in a whisper. "Much better." She clutched her Coach bag in a death grip.

"Good." His eyes had that same heated look she'd remembered all these years, ratcheting up the beat of her pulse. "Then there's no reason you can't join me for a drink and dinner, is there? I'd like to have a chance to catch up on your life."

"Oh, I don't think..." *No, no, no. Alone with Luke? Not possible.*

"That's right. Don't think," Claire said firmly, reading her mind. "You need a night out. And don't worry about the brat. I'll stop by the house and check on her and Miranda."

"The brat?" Luke raised his eyebrows.

"My daughter." Julia wet her lips. *Your daughter.* "I... I have a teenager."

"Oh." A strange look washed over his face. "I wasn't aware you had any children other than the twins. Last time we saw each other I was under the impression..." He let his voice fade.

*That I was all but divorced. Yes, Luke, I was.*

"I'm sorry," she told him, digging deep for the courage to resist. "I really can't take the time for dinner, but thank you anyway." He was so close to her she couldn't breathe.

"Just a simple meal?" he pressed. "For old time's sake?"

"Luke, this isn't a good idea." She felt the butterflies awakening in her stomach and her palms beginning to sweat. No way could she be alone with him for an evening. Yet how could she walk away again? Then Rod McGuire's face swam before her eyes. What if he or someone he knew spotted them at dinner and he made good on his directive to have any man investigated? To pull out those destructive letters? To ruin the fragile life she'd built for Courtney and herself? To ruin the man himself?

But after fourteen years, the chance to spend just a few hours with Luke was so tempting. Maybe she could have just this little bit of pleasure to make up for all the pain she'd suffered.

*Just this one evening. Let me have only this night. Maybe no one will see us. Let me have one more memory to keep me warm.*

She stood there, mind spinning and whirling, unable to make her feet move.

Luke watched her with knowing eyes, and then looked at Claire. "So it's all right if I capture your partner for a few hours?" He asked as if Julia had not said a word. "You can handle things for her?"

"Absolutely." Claire was already moving toward the elevator when Luke put a restraining hand on her arm.

"Claire," he said, "I think we forgot to give you a folder you'll need. Could we go back in the conference room for a minute?" To Julia he said, "I'll be right back."

They were back in seconds. Claire, grinning broadly, kissed Julia lightly on the cheek. "Don't hurry home. I'll clue Miranda in. You deserve a night out. And if Courtney makes a scene, I'll take her home with me and do the school delivery and pickup tomorrow." She stepped into the elevator and was gone.

"What? But... Wait. I don't..." But the elevator doors had already closed. Julia turned back to Luke. "What had you forgotten?" she asked curiously.

"Let's get my car," Luke said, ignoring her. "I know just the place to take you."

"But..."

But he was an unstoppable force, gentle but firm as they took the next elevator down to the parking garage, settling her in his car and with his crooked smile ignoring all her questions.

He made easy small talk as they drove to the restaurant, but Julia was so uptight she was either babbling or saying nothing at all. The electricity in the car sizzled and snapped around them and the sexual tension, zapping back to life, was so thick she was sure she could touch it.

She gasped in surprise when they pulled up in front of Harry's House, a new restaurant that had opened in an old Victorian home. Julia had heard about it from friends and clients, but it wasn't a place she'd been to yet. And not a place she'd expected to see the inside of any time soon. It had developed a reputation as a truly romantic rendezvous. Claire had been dreamily eloquent about it when Brad took her there for their anniversary. Although a couple of the rooms could accommodate parties as large as ten, it was mostly a place for lovers, for romance, for very intimate dining. This wasn't a place for casual conversation.

Oh well, she thought. At least they wouldn't be out in the open for every set of prying eyes in San Antonio.

Julia could feel her heart racing already as Luke helped her from the car.

"I believe this is our evening," he said, his eyes glittering at her.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

Julia had little recollection of entering Harry's House or of Luke speaking to the host in quiet tones. Or of climbing a winding flight of stairs and being ushered into a dining room for two, the table set with exquisite linen, china, and crystal. Her mind simply wouldn't function.

For fourteen years, Luke Buchanan had invaded her dreams, lived in her mind. Her heart. Memories of him had kept her warm through the stressful time with Charles. She had refused any anesthetic when Courtney was born for fear she would shout out his name in her delirium. And each time she looked at the perfect baby, visions of their nights together flashed across her mind.

She had never expected to see him again. Certainly not like this, a bombshell dropped at her feet waiting to explode.

He held her chair for her while she sat. Glancing around, she noticed a long couch and two comfortable chairs against one wall along with interesting Victorian accessories.

Luke grinned at her, noticing her eyes sweep the room. "They actually use that area for serving cocktails. Gives people a more relaxed atmosphere. Don't worry, Julia. I don't plan to ravish you on the couch."

"Oh. I didn't..."

"Yes. You did. But rest assured, for what I have in mind I need something far more comfortable." He reached across the table and took both of her hands in his. "I just wanted someplace very private to talk to you and this seemed the best idea at the time."

"It's fine," she said shakily, still focusing on the words 'what I have in mind.' As his hands touched hers, sparks shot through her, firing every nerve ending. God, fourteen years and he still had the same effect on her.

A knock on the door preceded the waiter's entrance and his quiet request for their drink orders. He stood discreetly to one side, pen and pad poised.

"Canadian and Coke for me," Luke told him, "and amaretto on the rocks for the lady." He looked at Julia who nodded confirmation. "Make them doubles so you won't need to come back quite so soon. And one of those little platters of crackers and cheese."

The waiter bowed, his face a trained, impersonal mask, and left to get their drinks.

"You remembered." Her face heated.

"Of course." The deep timbre of his throat vibrated straight through her.

"But d-doubles?" she stammered.

"They last longer." Luke laughed. "Just sip slowly."

"It's a good thing you ordered some kind of food. I barely ate anything at lunch."

Another knock on the door and the waiter entered with their drinks and the cheese platter. Placing them carefully on the table, he bowed and left the room.

"To you," Luke said, raising his glass in a toast.

Julia saw his eyes watching her intently. "Thank you. To you, too." She took a swallow of the smooth liqueur, hoping to still the trembling in her hands. She was so nervous, she decided to put her drink down on the table.

Luke watched her with his hot, penetrating gaze. "I asked Claire if it would be a problem if you didn't get home tonight. She assured me it wasn't." He winked at her. "I think your friend enjoys a good fairy tale."

"Luke!" She felt the blood leaving her face, and shook her head. "No. I can't do that." She started to push back from the table. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be here. This is all a mistake."

"A mistake?" His hand reached for hers, gripped it, and his eyes bored into hers. "I can't accept that."

"Please." She tried to pull her hand away. "You don't understand. Among other things, I have a daughter to think of. She'll ask more questions than I'll want to answer."

"Got it covered. Claire's definitely taking her out to eat—someplace she's all hot to go to—and back to her house for the night. Apparently this is some kind of special treat for your daughter. Claire said they were going to have a girls' makeup night?" He looked at Julia questioningly.

Julia bit her lip. "Courtney does idolize Claire. So, yes, this will be extra special for her. B-But—"

"Julia." His voice held her as if she was glued in place. "Whatever it is, don't run away from it. We have so much unfinished business. Please. Just sit down."

She slowly lowered herself to the chair again, picked up her drink then swallowed some of it. "Well," she said in a shaky voice, "maybe Claire can pick up where Beth left off and keep it toned down from four layers to two."

"Sounds like she's going through typical teenage rebellion," he commented. "I had similar challenges with my boys, only theirs didn't include makeup."

"I was surprised to hear that you and your husband had reconciled." Luke's voice was even. Uninflected. But beneath it a wave of emotion was cresting.

"How did you know about that?" His comment took her by surprise. *And what on earth did you think?*

"Claire kept me pretty well informed," he said seriously. "You were never out of my mind. Just because I didn't see you, didn't mean I wasn't thinking about you." He reached across the table to touch her hand again. "And you? Did you ever spare a thought for me?"

*If he only knew. What can I tell him? What shall I say?*

"Charles was sick for a long time," she said, waffling. "When he was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and given only months to give, I felt I owed it to the children to give them a family structure for as long as possible."

"Even one that was a lie?" His words burned into her.

"I did what I had to do." She raised her eyes to his. "Can't you understand that?"

"And afterwards?" he pushed.

"Afterwards there were still the twins to raise. And then Courtney."

"Of course." He said it so tonelessly she couldn't stand it.

"I never forgot about you for one single minute," she blurted, then wished the words back. She was opening a door that needed to stay closed.

"Good. I was hoping that was the case." His voice was sharp with pain. "I went to sleep with your face in my mind every night."

Dangerous subject. Julia fiddled with a cracker and a slice of cheese. "How are your boys?"

"Changing the subject?" he took a healthy sip of his drink. "Okay. I'll play. For now. They're doing okay. Jared is twenty-five and Mark is thirty. Our relationships have been badly strained since the divorce." He shook his head. "Their mother did a good job of painting me the bad guy there."



Julia didn't know what to say. It wasn't fair for him to shoulder all the blame, in a situation where he was the victim.

"Don't look so upset," he told her. "It's all right. I mean that."

"Do you see them?"

He fiddled with the silverware, occupying his hands while he chose his words. "Now and then. They both live in Boston. Jared's a software specialist, has a great job, and is a dedicated ladies' man. Michael is a cop, married, with two children."

"So you're a grandpa." She grinned at him. "You don't look old enough. Do you at least get to see the grandchildren?"

"I fly into Boston about one weekend a month and do a fast family visit. I think that's as much as any of us can handle." He shook his head. "I kept a shaky marriage together for the sake of the kids, as they say in dime novels, and ended up somewhat estranged from them anyway. I guess I flunked parenthood big time."

Julia was swept with an incredible sadness. For a brief moment, she was ready to tell him about Courtney, but she forced herself to hold back. She had no idea if he even wanted another child. What if it made him feel trapped, buried beneath an unwanted obligation? What if he hated her for keeping the secret all these years? If he decided he never wanted to see her again, then telling him would be a big mistake.

"That must be some heavy thinking you're doing," Luke said, breaking her train of thought. "You're making your forehead look permanently wrinkled."

"A fast forward of my life in review." She grinned. "Shouldn't we be discussing pleasant things?"

Luke reached across the table for her hand. "I'll tell you what would be pleasant for me, Julia. Spending the night with you."

Common sense told her to pull her hand back, pull herself back, tell him this was impossible and she needed to go home. But sensibility warred with the physical reaction to his touch. The tiniest contact still set her nerve endings dancing, bringing back erotic memories and fanning the banked flames of desire. Fourteen years and the intensity of her need for him ignited in only seconds.

"Say something, Julia." He grinned ruefully. "Even if it's just to tell me to go away."

"If I were smart," she told him, wetting her lips with her tongue, "that's exactly what I would do. We can't go back, Luke. We're two different people now."

"Tell me you don't want me right now," he prodded. "Say it, we'll finish our drinks, and I'll drive you home."

"I can't do that," she whispered, as all rational thought fled from her brain. "I have to be honest. I want your arms around me right now. I want you to hold me and never let me go."

"Julia. . ."

She wet her lips. "This is so wrong. We can't get involved. There are too many complications."

Luke stared at her for a long time. "We already are involved, whether you admit it or not." He got up from his chair and she thought he was going to reach for her. Instead, he walked to the door and pressed a tiny button in the framing she hadn't seen before. Then he came to her and pulled her from her chair. Kissing her lightly, he reached for her coat.

"Let's get the check and get out of here. What I'm hungry for is something other than food."

## *Chapter Seventeen*

A light rain had started to fall as Luke maneuvered carefully through the streets. Julia paid little attention to where they were going, wrapped heavily in her own thoughts. If this was a mistake, then so be it. She had been a good and committed wife during the balance of Charles's illness, a condition that had made him even more difficult to deal with. But she had gritted her teeth and handled it all with as much grace as she could muster. Andy and Beth had turned into amazing young adults. She had done her best with Courtney, although at the moment she felt like a terrible failure in that department.

But tonight was going to be for her. One last night with Luke, she told herself. She wanted it and she would have it. One last stolen moment. Whatever happened next would happen.

She roused herself from her reverie when they turned into the garage of a new all suites hotel.

"My temporary home," he explained, helping her from the car and leading her to the elevator. "I haven't taken the time yet to look for something more permanent. Most of my time's been occupied with learning about the company and getting ready for this new product line."

They said little as the car ascended smoothly.

*Go home, Julia.* One last little bit of sanity jabbing at her brain. But her heart thudded with mixed anxiety and anticipation. It had been fourteen years since she'd last felt Luke's hands on her body, his mouth on hers, his hard erection entering her and joining their bodies. The images took possession of her brain and buried all the reasonable objections she could think of.

*Go home, Julia, while there's still time.*

But her feet were rooted to the floor.

Luke put his arm around her and leaned his cheek against her hair, sensing her anxiety and offering her reassurance. Then the doors slid open and they walked silently down the thickly-carpeted hall to a door that Luke unlocked.

"A little ostentatious," he said, ushering her into a large suite furnished in what Julia could only call stark opulence.

"How nice," she said softly, walking into the living room. "Certainly not your average hotel suite." The carpet was thick under her feet and a wall of windows opened to a spectacular view of downtown San Antonio. Couches in butter-soft leather were grouped for conversation, and against one wall a fireplace was surrounded by an entertainment center.

"But no television," she commented, surprised. Luke was a huge sports fan. Where did he watch his games?

"In the bedroom," he answered, knowing the question before she spoke it aloud. "Also in the den. I often work at home on the weekends."

"This place has a den, too?" She was amazed. The so-called suite was beyond any accommodation of this type she'd ever seen.

"The place was built for corporations that like to have a residential facility available at all times." He waved his hand at the space. "A little much for me, but Connell Wilson has a permanent lease on it and at least it's comfortable."

"It's certainly luxurious." She was making idle conversation, hugging her coat to chest, stalling to give her nerves time to settle.

"But not very homelike," he said quietly. "Right now I'm not too interested in discussing accommodations, though."

Standing behind her, he reached around and undid the buttons on her coat, slipping it off her shoulders. Almost casually he turned her to face him. "God, Julia, I have missed you so much."

*Don't admit anything.* The little voice was still busy in her head.

"I... I've missed you, too, Luke."

He cupped her face with his hands, his eyes searching hers. "I have so much I want to say to you, so many questions to ask." He rubbed his thumb gently over her lower lip.

Butterfly wings were beating in her stomach. She knew where this was going and she was far from ready for that discussion. Maybe she'd never be ready.

"Can't we just enjoy tonight? Can't this be enough?" She didn't know if she had the strength to take him into her life, to deal with the complexities of this relationship and the inevitable fallout. Especially with Courtney hovering over everything like the Sword of Damocles.

"No, Julia. Not anymore." His face was inches from hers. "I let you walk out of my life once. I can't do it again. I want a lot more than this one night."

"You do?" She could hardly breathe. Her lungs felt as if all the air had been sucked out.

"Yes. I want it all. But if one night is all you can give me right now, I'll start there." The tips of his fingers brushed her cheek.

Her skin tingled beneath the feathery caress and her heart, which had yet to settle down, now pounded so thunderously she thought it would burst from her chest. She could feel herself trembling.

*Walk away. Last chance.*

But if she did, could she ever again see him in a public arena, as she knew she would, and not want him? Not crave the feel of his body against hers?

"I don't know what's wrong here, Julia," he persisted, his lips almost touching hers. "I only know that right now I have to have you, have to make up for all the lost years."

His nearness was overpowering her, drowning her. Making her forget about everything else. The rush of need and desire that consumed her melted her body.

"All right" she whispered. She'd worry about tomorrow later.

His mouth came down on hers, fierce and hard, claiming it. Claiming her. His tongue pressed against her lips until she opened them, his tongue thrusting to mate with hers. And all the yesterdays began to fade away. She was transported back to the cabin in the snow, bathed in the heat of the fireplace. For a minute she even thought she smelled the heady scent of pine.

"I love you," he said into her open mouth. "I never stopped."

*Last chance, Julia.* But she was already lost.

She hesitated for just the briefest second, then the words escaped from her mouth with a life of their own. "I love you, too, Luke." And she did. Body and soul. Why try to deny it?

He took a step back from her, his hands still holding her face. "I have a great bedroom," he said. "You really ought to see it."

"Of course," she told him breathlessly.

He took her hand and led her to a door at one end of the living room. It opened into the largest bedroom Julia had ever seen. To one side was another wall of windows facing downtown,

the lights of the city twinkling like a myriad candles against the black night sky. Across from the bed that looked large enough for a family of four was a brick fireplace. Luke picked up a small remote control from the night stand, pressed a button on it, and the fireplace leaped into flame.

"You light my fire, sweet Julia." He began unfastening and removing her clothes, letting them drop one piece at a time, his eyes eating her as more and more of her was revealed.

"Luke?" She stilled his hand, suddenly both shy and nervous.

"Mmmh?"

"I'm... I'm not a kid anymore." *Far from it*, she thought. *My body is fourteen years older and showing every one of those years.*

"Thank God. Neither am I." He chuckled. "Wait. Haven't we had this conversation before?"

She remembered their first time in the hotel, her nervousness then. "I'm. . ." She wasn't sure quite how to say it. "I don't look like I did last time we were together."

"Nor do I. But to me, you're more beautiful than ever." He stopped her when she tried to turn away from him. "No. Please let me look at you. I've had your image in my mind all these years."

He held her by the arms while his eyes roamed over her body, taking in every inch of the ripe, mature curves, the fullness of her breasts, the slight swell of her tummy. In his eyes, she could see he was awed by what he saw and it humbled her.

"You are more than I ever thought to ask for." His voice was not quite steady.

He ran the tip of a finger over the upper swell of her breasts, tracing the frothy lace of her bra. Thumbs brushed her nipples, igniting the fire smoldering in her veins.

Julia wet her lips nervously, suddenly self-conscious under his probing stare. She knew the changes in her body that marked the years. And she was not just older, she was long out of practice. For years sex had not even been a factor in her life.

"I'm almost middle-aged, Luke." She could feel herself blushing in embarrassment, trying to sound matter of fact. "Not the younger woman you took to bed all those years ago. And I haven't... I mean, I didn't..."

*God, I'm making a mess out of this.*

"It's all right." Luke kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, the corners of her mouth. "You are exactly the woman I want." He chuckled. "And I understand sex is like riding a bicycle. You never forget."

Then in an instant he was out of his own clothes, and she looked at his body, aware that the years had been good to him. The crisp hair on his chest was spattered with grey, but it was just as rich and tantalizing. He was thicker with age, but not heavier, and the thickness was more appealing than the younger, thinner Luke had ever been. And his erection. Oh, yes. There was definitely nothing wrong with that.

It rose, full and proud, from the nest of curls at his groin. It was still thick and swollen, still with the darkened head, the cock of a much younger man. And immediately her pussy wept for it. The scent of her musk was so strong she could smell it herself.

He trailed his fingers over her arms, his lips tracing a path along her collarbone. His tongue licked here and there, tasting, tasting. And every place he touched her sparked with need, with desire. He pressed close to her and the heated thickness of his cock branded itself against her flesh.

His mouth found hers again, feeding from it as his hands moved to her bra, tossing it aside, and taking the weight of her breasts in his warm palms. His thumbs found her nipples again, pressing lightly before rubbing gently back and forth. Desire exploded within her, hot and wild. She met his tongue with her own and followed him in the steps of the seductive dance.

His hands were everywhere now; her back, her waist, her hips, the curve of her ass. He slid his fingers into the scrap of silk that passed for a thong and sank them into the cleft in her buttocks. The tip of one finger found the tight ring of her anus. Julia clenched, frightened of the intrusion, but Luke continued to kiss her as if he wanted nothing more than to keep his mouth fused to hers, and on an exhalation of breath she relaxed her muscles.

He had taken her this way only the one time, but the memory of it always shot a bolt of lust through her. Wherever she was, whatever she was doing when she thought of it, her cream immediately soaked her panties and the walls of her pussy would quiver with need. As his finger circled the tight opening, she moaned and pressed herself against him.

"I need you in bed," he gasped, tearing his mouth from hers.

Releasing her for a moment, he deftly stripped back the covers on the bed, then guided Julia to its soft embrace. He followed her down, stretching out next to her, cradling her in one arm while the other hand explored her. His fingers touched her reverently, relearning every inch of her body.

Slowly he circled her nipples, feeling the tips harden at once and her breasts swell. He ran his hands over her skin, his cock flexing against her thigh as he touched each hot, secret place.

“You are so much better now,” he whispered, his mouth at her ear, his teeth nipping the soft flesh of the lobe. “You intoxicate me.”

Julia lay with her eyes closed, reveling in the feel of his hands on her. She didn’t know what she had expected. Maybe a paler, weaker version of the nights they’d once had together. But she could feel heat building in her with a greater intensity than she’d ever known. As Luke’s hand drifted lower, her thighs parted automatically, giving him greater access.

And the years rolled away. The remembered feel of his hands on her, in her, came surging back. Her nerve endings were rioting, her hips thrusting against his fingers that were touching her so intimately, rasping the inner wall of her sheath. His thumb homed unerringly on the nub of her sex. Just the touch of the calloused skin sent skyrockets through her body.

She forgot to be self-conscious, forgot to be nervous, forgot everything except the sensations rocketing through her. Fourteen years of separation, of denial, made her almost frantic to feel him inside her.

His fingers probed the slippery flesh of her cunt, brushing the bundle of nerves that was her swollen slit before slipping two fingers deep inside her. She clenched around them, trying to pull him in deeper, wanting that hot shaft rather than his educated fingers. And educated they were, scraping the sweet spot just so to bring a fresh flood of her cream and drawing tiny sounds of pleasure from her.

She slipped her hand down to close her fingers over his thick shaft, feeling the drop of fluid at the slit, rubbing it over the velvety flesh with her thumb.

“Your cunt is just as hot and tight and sweet as I remembered.” His voice was rough with desire, his breath a heated breeze against her ear. “God, Julia. The minute I saw you again I wanted to lay you down and fuck you until neither of us had breath left.”

The erotic words were like flames licking at her, driving her arousal higher and higher. When he moved his mouth to hers again, she nipped at his bottom lip and was rewarded by the flexing of his cock in her grip. More fluid seeped from the slit, and again she rubbed it over the smooth head. Luke groaned and moved his fingers faster in and out of her, his thumb busy at her clit.

“I’m sorry,” he groaned. “I wanted to take longer. Make it last. The next one will be better, but right now I have to be inside you.”

“Yes,” she gasped. “Please.”



When Luke rose over her, positioning himself at the entrance to her body, she opened her legs to embrace him. Slowly she felt his shaft, like a thick rod, easing into her. And then he was seated to the hilt and they were joined. He filled her, stretching her, rubbing at every tiny nerve in the walls of her cunt. His hands slid beneath her ass and lifted her to him.

And then they began moving together in a rhythm that the years hadn't washed away. Luke pulled her tighter to him, sweat beading his forehead as he fought to control himself as long as possible.

She met him stroke for stroke, lifting her hips, urging him deeper. She wrapped her legs around him to hold him in place, her heels digging into the small of his back while her nails raked his skin.

"Open your eyes," he commanded. "Look at me."

*I'll be lost.*

But she opened her eyes to stare into his own and what she saw there nearly undid her. Lust. Fire. Passion. And love.

The sheer emotion drove her up and up, carrying her to a plane of sensation that threatened to consume her. Deep inside her, that coil of desire unwound like a spring held too tight for too long. Julia felt Luke's muscles tighten, felt the tension growing, saw the muscles cord in his neck.

And then they were there, both of them, cresting at the peak. Luke drove into her hard, hammering her, and she flew, fracturing into tiny crystalline pieces. Rockets exploded around her as her pussy convulsed over and over while Luke came inside her as if he'd been saving it all this time. Her vaginal muscles gripped his cock and squeezed it and milked it as she exploded around him. Their bodies slammed into each other, shaking with the force of their passion.

In the aftermath they lay twined together, trying to drag air into their lungs. Luke was still inside her, connected to her, and she could feel his heart hammering against her ribs in cadence with her own. It was a long time before either of them spoke. He finally slid very slowly from her body and padded to the bathroom. When he returned, he had a warm washcloth that he used to clean her very gently, bending now and then to place an open-mouthed kiss on her very sensitive clit. Then he tossed the washcloth on the carpet and climbed back into bed beside her. Sliding his arm beneath her, he cradled her against his body.

"I guess that answers the question of whether the spark is still there." His voice was tinged with amusement.

“No kidding.” She smiled, drained and energized at the same time. “If it sparked any more, I think I’d be dead.”

Luke raised himself on one elbow and leaned over her, placing the palm of his hand against her cheek and searching her eyes. “Here’s a question that still needs answering, though,” he said. “Where do we go from here?”

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Julia sighed, closing her eyes. "That is definitely the question of the night."

"More for you than me," Luke told her. "I know what I want and there's nothing holding me back. But I know you have obligations you need to consider." He rolled to the side and off the bed. "Don't say a word yet. I'll be right back."

He returned carrying a bottle of cognac and two brandy snifters. "Remy Martin," he told her. "The night calls for something special." He poured a drink for each of them, handed her a glass, and raised his own in a toast. "To you, my wonderful, very special Julia. And to our future?"

It was a question more than a statement, and Julia wasn't sure at the moment how she wanted to answer it. She had never expected Luke to walk back into her life again. In the intervening years, while she had dealt with Charles's illness and his death and the all-consuming task of raising Courtney, he had been a secret memory that she hugged close to her in darkest night. The images had carried her through the long years of stress and anxiety.

Now, here he was in the flesh. More than anything, she wanted to shut out the rest of the world and cocoon herself with him, but that wasn't possible. How could she find a way to introduce him into her life? To her children? And most of all, to Courtney? Could she ever tell him the truth about her?

Luke's sons were grown, his responsibilities minimal, his life belonging only to him. A rebellious teenager wasn't exactly an "I love you" present to drop into that smoothly sailing boat.

Walking away wasn't an option, either. If she'd never seen him again, maybe. But to be working with him on a project, seeing him, close to him, and not be with him? Also unthinkable. She groaned softly.

"Are you all right?" Luke asked, concern in his voice.

"Yes." She smiled at him. "More than all right." She clinked her snifter against his and said, with her heart in her mouth, "To the future."

"Tell me what's going on with you?" Luke asked, leaning back against the pillows.

*God, where to begin.* "I guess my life's pretty ordinary. The twins graduated college and are gainfully employed, thank heavens. And doing well, I might add." She couldn't help the touch of pride in her voice. "We see each other as often as possible, but we all have busy lives."

"But they're still in the area?"

"Oh, yes. I've been lucky that way." She sipped at the brandy. "And the business has done very well. I feel good about that."

"I know." He winked at her. "I've followed your progress."

"You have?" She was startled that he would keep such close tabs on her.

"Of course. You didn't think you were really out of my life, did you?" He turned his head to look at her. "Julia, you haven't been out of my thoughts for a single minute since that last time together. I see your face in my mind the last thing at night and first thing in the morning."

Her throat tightened and her hands began to tremble. She clutched the brandy snifter to still them.

"If you tell me you haven't thought of me at all, my heart will be broken."

He said it lightly, but she knew what he wanted to hear. She swallowed hard. "Of course I've thought of you, Luke. Did you think I wouldn't?"

He bent his head to hers and kissed her, a kiss full of meaning she wasn't sure she was ready for. His tongue dusted across her lips and when she opened for him, he plunged inside as if about to swallow her whole. Instant fire blazed through her, waking up the tiny nerves in the walls of her pussy, nerves she'd thought a moment ago were sleeping after the crashing orgasm. The familiar flutter in her vaginal walls was an erotic signal that she wanted Luke badly. Again. And so quickly.

Leaning to the side, she placed the brandy snifter carefully on the nightstand. Then she reached her hand down, trailing her fingers across his stomach until they found his cock and gripped it lightly. Luke swallowed a moan, and clamped his hand on her wrist.

"Give me a minute," he huffed. "Okay? Remember we aren't teenagers."

Julia laughed with delight, forgetting everything in this moment of voluptuous bliss, at the knowledge that he could respond to her so fast.

"What about your younger daughter?" Luke changed the subject abruptly, his fingers still holding her wrist. "The one Claire has with her tonight?"

"Yes." *Oh, yes, Luke, what about her?* "Courtney."

"Tell me about her. What's she like?"

Where to begin.

"She's a typical teenager, I'm afraid. Full of angst and rebellion. I'd either forgotten what the teen years are like or Courtney's taking it to greater extremes than Beth or Andy."

"Teenagers can be pistols," he agreed. "I've heard girls are much worse than boys."

"Only because the pitfalls for them are so much more complex."

"You have your hands full," he mused.

"That's an understatement." She sighed and pressed closer to him. "Some days I'd like to take a pill and wake up when she's married with a family of her own."

"Things around the house couldn't have been much fun for her, what with Charles's illness and then his death." Luke's tone was a mixture of concern and latent resentment. And why shouldn't it be? She'd led him to believe her life was about to be her own, that she was finally finding herself. Then, like slamming a door, she'd walked away without a word.

"You're right." Julia lifted her hand from his erection and tangled her fingers through the crisp curls surrounding it. "I felt stretched so thin all those years. Maybe I just didn't give her what she needed and this is payback."

"No." Luke shook his head. "That's not what I meant. I can't see you as anything but a good mother, Julia. But kids react differently to stressful situations. That's all I'm saying."

"Well, this too shall pass." She ran his hands over the familiar lines of his body. "But I think I'm through talking for a while."

Luke pulled her into his arms, holding her close to him while his hands explored her. He cupped each breast in turn, lightly kneading the flesh, bending his head to take each nipple into his mouth. He nipped lightly, soothed with his tongue, then nipped again. The dual sensations of pain and pleasure sent her pulse rocketing again and the insistent throb in her cunt vibrating through her body.

She reached for his cock again, gripping it firmly this time and sliding her hand up and down, feeling the hot, rigid shaft beneath the soft skin covering it, and the thrum of the blood pulsing through its veins. Luke moaned against her flesh as his mouth continued to work magic on her nipples. The harder he sucked, the more she pumped, feeling him flex in her fingers.

His tongue traced a wet line between her breasts down to her navel, licking the tiny whorls of flesh. Julia tightened her fingers around him, then slipped her hand between his thighs to cup his sac. The fine hair covering the skin was baby-soft to her touch and she feathered her fingers back and forth over its surface. She was rewarded with the hot press of the swollen cock against her thigh and the dampness that was the tiny pearlescent drop seeping from the slit.

She wanted to concentrate on giving him pleasure, but he nudged her thighs apart and cupped her mound with his hand, his thumb pressing against her clit, and concentration fled.

"You're soaking wet again," he whispered, easily sliding two fingers inside her and lazily pumping them. "Let's do this."

He slid his fingers out and flipped her over to her stomach, one hand beneath her working her clit, the other gathering her cream and spreading her pussy wide, around her opening and on to the tight muscle of her anus. Julia gasped and flinched at the expected intrusion, but Luke simply continued manipulating her sensitive erogenous knot and spreading the liquid around and around.

"Relax." His voice was rough with anticipated pleasure. "You liked it when we did this before, Julia. Remember?" He shifted so he could place his mouth at her ear again. "Remember how hot it made you? You came like a maniac."

Julia shivered. Every sensation came roaring back and her body became one throbbing pulse of insistent need. She had the sensation of being wrapped in black velvet, everything falling away except her and Luke. When he pushed one finger through that tight opening, she started to tense, but Luke kept up his steady massage on her clit. The sensations grabbing her were so intense, she forgot to be afraid.

When he had worked one finger completely into her hot, dark tunnel, he paused, then began to rhythmically stroke the dark tissues. Her breath hitched as he moved his finger, spreading her cream, rubbing it into the tissue. Then it was gone and she felt suddenly empty.

But in a moment, he'd gathered more of her liquid and now he was pressing two fingers inside her, scissoring them, turning them, stretching her.

He moved then, pulling her to her knees, still working her with his fingers. She felt hot, wet kisses on the cheeks of her ass and warm breath blowing over them. She let herself be moved this way and that, Luke arranging her for his intrusion into her body. Pillows were plumped beneath her stomach. Fingers stroked the length of her spine. Then the ones in her rectum

slipped out and Luke was kneeling behind her, palms pressed to her buttocks spreading the cheeks wide.

“Take a deep breath.” His voice was deep and thick like melted chocolate.

Julia pulled air into her lungs as she felt the head of his shaft probe her opening.

“Another one,” Luke prompted, and pushed.

More deep breaths. More pushing. The remembered burn. And then the exquisitely arousing pleasure just riding the edge of pain. One last thrust and he was completely inside her, muscles clenching around his cock. Luke's hands were on her hips now, steadying her, guiding her, his voice murmuring, rolling over her like the slow sweep of thick molasses.

Then he moved, pumping steadily in and out of her dark tunnel, the friction stimulating every nerve, sensations cascading through her one after the other, stealing her breath. Her skin felt icy hot and her heart raced madly. She caught Luke's rhythm and rocked her hips with him, taking him as deep as she could. His fingers tightened on her and a low growl rumbled up from his throat. Julia knew he was nearing his release and pushed back against him even harder.

She was rising, rising, rising, the black velvet swirling, the sound of flesh on flesh a punctuation to their accelerated rhythm. Julia gripped the bedding as the tide of lust rose up within her.

In a moment the passion exploded, Luke shouted her name and emptied himself into her in thick, hot spurts. And everything else was forgotten.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

"I noticed how neatly you avoided my question last night."

They were in the kitchen. Julia was sitting at the raised counter, drinking coffee and thinking about how pleasantly sore she was in so many places. Luke was buttering toast for them.

"What question was that?" she asked carefully.

"Don't play games, Julia." He looked up, his eyes dark. "The one about where we go from here."

He wouldn't be put off. She knew that. And in her heart she didn't want him to be. Not after last night. She'd dipped her toe into the shallow end of the pool again and immediately found herself over her head.

*See, Julia? See why you should have just gone home?*

She just had so many problems to work out, problems she couldn't share with him. How would Andy and Beth react to a new man in her life? And Courtney, who seemed thrown for a loop by everything these days? And who had Luke's eyes and full mouth, which was a dead giveaway. One look at her and it would be all over.

But more than that, what were her chances of pulling this off without Rod McGuire sticking his nose into it and suspecting who Luke really was? Invading Luke's life? Maybe screwing up his new job? Laying out all the nastiness for Andy and Beth? For Courtney? At this point she knew it was more about revenge than anything else. Over the years, whenever she'd run into him, he'd always taken the opportunity to let her know he still held her secrets in his hands, just waiting for the right opportunity to toss them out into the open.

"I'm still watching you, Julia," he said one time recently, when they happened to find themselves at the same art show.



"Charles is long gone and the twins are adults," she'd told him, jutting out her chin. "They're earning their own money and so am I. You can shut off the financial spigot any time you want."

His eyes had glittered with dislike. "I promised Charles you'd never have peace after what you put him through." His voice was like harsh metal grating on metal. "I intend to keep my word."

"To what end?" She'd been proud of herself, not giving any indication of how much he rattled her.

"To carry out the wishes of a dying man. A man you destroyed. You weren't worth half of him."

"You can do what you want." She was disgusted with the whole thing and tired of his games. "My 'situation,' as you call it, isn't so unusual or scandalous anymore, Rod. Do whatever you want. We'll survive."

He'd eyed her from head to toe. "You had your moment of happiness, Julia, for what it was worth. That's all you'll ever get. Take up with anyone, especially your *lover*"—he nearly spat the word—"and I'll destroy him in a minute."

He'd walked away, leaving her shaken and ill.

*Asshole!* she thought now, but she felt sick again at the memory of his words.

She wished time were elastic and she could stretch this moment with Luke over the years to come, just the two of them, secluded from the world. But it wasn't and she knew the safe solution for everyone was just to walk away. Except giving Luke up after finding him again all these years later would be more painful than she could contemplate. Last night had proven that to her.

*Oh God, what can I do?*

"I didn't think that was such a hard question," Luke said testily when she was silent for so long. He handed her a plate of toast. "Did I mistake last night for something else?"

"No." She was emphatic. Despite the devil waiting to destroy her, there was no question about what last night really was. "You didn't make a mistake at all." She picked up a piece of toast, nibbling at it for something to do. "I just have to figure out how to do this."

"Are you worried about your kids?" he asked, his shrewd eyes on her. "I'd think they'd be glad for you to have a little happiness after all this time."

*If only that were all it was.*

"For one thing, I've never brought another man into the house, or even dated one," she told him. "This would be a whole new experience for them. Exactly how do I explain you to them? Hi kids, here's the man I slept with fourteen years ago and gave my heart to?"

"Did you?" he asked softly. "Give your heart to me?"

She should have kept her mouth shut but it was too late. The words were out.

"Yes," she whispered, and in an instant he had his arms around her and was kissing her forehead.

"Then we'll work this out." He sat down on the bar stool next to her. "This doesn't have to be complicated, you know. I'm someone you did business with a long time ago. Now I find myself in the same city as you, I asked you to bid on our account and we went to dinner to renew our acquaintance. What's wrong with that?"

*What's wrong is Rod McGuire and his malicious scrutiny. What on earth am I going to do about that anyway? If I tell Luke the story, he'll go ballistic. I have to protect him.*

And she suddenly realized this could never happen again. That she had to break this off even before they could resume what they'd had.

"Julia." He took one of her hands in his. "Beth and Andy are out on their own. They're young adults. I can't see them as a problem."

"Maybe. But Courtney is another matter altogether." *Especially once you get a good look at her.*

"Let's try this." He brushed his knuckles against her cheek. "Go home. Change clothes. Go to work. I'll call you at your office on Monday and ask you out to dinner for next Friday night. That puts enough space between last night and our next. . . date. How does that sound?"

"You make it sound so easy." She gave him a tremulous smile. If only.

"It *will* be easy. This is our dance but you have to let me lead. Okay?"

"Please give me a little space to think about this," she begged.

For a moment his face tightened with suppressed emotion. Then he forced a smile. "All right." He kissed her again, this time molding his mouth to hers, his tongue hot and searching. When he sat back he said, "You've got the weekend to mull it over. But I'm giving you fair warning. I'm not letting you get away this time." He brushed his knuckles lightly over her cheek. "It's still there, Julia. I don't know why you shut me out all these years, but I'm not going to let you do it again. We're both single adults. I want to spend the rest of my life with you and I'm going to find a way to make it happen."

Her heart skipped and stuttered. "Oh, Luke. If only that could happen."

He hugged her, hard. "It could, if you'd just say yes."

She shook her head. That was impossible. Impossible. "There are... complications."

Suddenly she needed to get away. Catch her breath. Think without his mesmerizing presence surrounding her. "I have to go, Luke. I'll catch a cab." She picked up her purse and suit jacket.

"Julia, wait. What's wrong?" He reached for her but she eluded him, nearly racing for the door.

"Please. Just... I need to leave."

With that she was out the door and racing down the hall to the elevator. He followed her into the hall.

"Julia, we're still having dinner next Friday night. If you don't call me with a time and place, I'm showing up on your doorstep, so you'd better be ready."

"Luke, listen..."

He took her by the arms, his eyes boring into hers like twin lasers. "Whatever the problem is, we'll fix it. But there's no way I'm letting you walk out of my life a second time. Count on it."

*Oh, if only that could be true.*

"Friday night," he repeated, his words underscored with determination.

The last thing she saw as the elevator doors closed with Luke in the hallway, the expression on his face a combination of love and resolution.

*Please let it be all right. Please.*

\* \* \* \*

Miranda started to ask her a question when she walked into the house, but one look at Julia's face and she just said, "We're having chicken for dinner," and walked back into the kitchen.

Standing in the shower, every moment of the previous night replayed itself in Julia's mind. Her body stirred just remembering the touch of Luke's hands, the passion of his kisses, the incredible sense of him inside her, filling her. In fourteen years the magic had only increased.

*I would have been better off not going at all.*

But she could no more have walked away at the Connell Wilson offices than she could have jumped out a window. The tug, the lure, had not diminished. Oh, she'd go to hell for this. She was sure of that.

If she was lucky, no one had recognized them last night. Harry's House had been an excellent choice of restaurants with its private, secluded rooms. But what if something got back to Rod? How far back would he track Luke? Would he confront her then humiliate her by giving out the letters secreted away all these years in his safe?

For one brief moment this morning, she'd actually thought she could make this work. Then reality had smacked her in the face. She had to protect her children. That was at the top of her list.

She turned off the shower, tenser than when she'd stepped into it. God, what a mess. And if Bright Ideas got this contract, how would she be able to avoid Luke? Or worse yet, work with him?

Maybe she could go to Rod and tell him this was just a business acquaintance. She'd had very public dinners with other male clients over the years, none of whom had produced any information for Rod's detectives. Maybe by this time he was tired of the whole thing.

No, not Rod. She rubbed herself viciously with the towel. The man was a bulldog, a barnacle. He hung on and never let go for a minute. He would consider it his sole duty to Charles to make sure the rest of her life was as miserable as possible.

Yet as sure as she knew her name, she was certain Luke would not be put off. His intentions had been crystal clear. He was not a man to be deterred by flimsy excuses. And once he got a good look at Courtney, he'd have even more questions and would be even more determined.

Julia sighed. That was a problem she hadn't even wanted to look at. Courtney had Luke's dark brown eyes and his distinctive eyebrows. She wondered what other physical traits of the Buchanan family her daughter also carried. She could just imagine the shock when he saw the daughter he didn't even know he had.

Popping two acetaminophen to dull the headache bullying its way up from behind her eyes, she dressed quickly, brushed her hair, and made do with blush and lip gloss for makeup. No clients today so she didn't need a full-court press. She just needed to get herself together before facing Claire.

Claire!

Now there was one person she could barely keep anything from. How she'd kept her secret all these years, she still didn't know.

Claire had never been privy to the vicious bargain Charles had exacted from her. Even if he hadn't sworn her to secrecy, she was too humiliated to share it with anyone, even her best friend. Besides, knowing Claire, she'd have marched into Charles's hospital room and, heart attack or not, given him a scathing piece of her mind.

"See you later," she called to Miranda as she hurried out to her car.

\* \* \* \*

"Well?" Claire was on the phone but hung up as soon as Julia walked into the office.

"Well, what?" Julia deliberately kept her face blank.

"Come on, give." Claire grinned. "Was it wonderful?"

Julia dropped into the chair in front of Claire's desk, ran her fingers through her hair, and leaned her head back. "Yes, unfortunately."

"Julia?" Claire leaned forward. "What's going on here? I thought you'd tell me you'd died and gone to heaven."

"I wish." She closed her eyes, willing herself under control.

"What's that supposed to mean? My God, Charles is long out of the picture, you've lived like a nun since his death, and Andy and Beth are out on their own. There might even be hope for Courtney. Why isn't it time for Julia?"

"I don't want to discuss it right now, okay?" Julia sat up, rotating her neck to relieve the tension.

"No, not okay. If I weren't married and that man walked back into my life, I'd chain him to the bed. God, Julia. What is wrong with you?"

More than I can tell you, she wanted to say.

"There are just... complications." The same excuse she'd used with Luke

"Nothing can be that complicated."

"How was Courtney?" Julia segued into a new topic.

"She was fine," Claire snapped. "She behaved decently, showed me what Beth told her about makeup, and actually looked decent when I dropped her off at school today."

"Thank you so much. It was wonderful of you to do that."

"If I'm so wonderful, then tell me what's wrong."

Julia stood up. "Not now. Please? I want to check my messages and then we can debrief yesterday's presentation, okay?"

Claire simply sat there, studying her. "Fine," she said at last. "And *then* we're going to talk about whatever is holding you back."

\* \* \* \*

Luke had closed the door to his office, telling Ellen, his secretary, he didn't want to be disturbed for a while. He had a meeting in an hour and he needed to straighten out his head before he got to it.

What the hell had been wrong with Julia this morning? Last night he'd thought what they felt for each other had slammed back at them stronger than ever. All the years of missing her, of wanting her, and finally he could touch her again and hold her in his arms. When his lips had touched hers, the electricity between them could have lit up the room. Maybe even did.

He could almost taste that kiss now, thinking about it. So many years, so much misery since he'd left her at the airport that snowy day. He'd called and called to talk to her, but she never took his calls and never returned them. Claire had been his lifeline, keeping him informed. But even she couldn't tell him why Julia wouldn't at least speak to him or what was happening that was so wrong?

He'd known it was something, just by her tone of voice. But it was hard to fight what he didn't know. For one impulsive moment, he'd been tempted to get on a plane, fly to San Antonio, and confront Julia; but he was afraid he'd only worsen whatever the hell was going on.

He'd have certainly understood if Charles's heat attack had created problems for her. He was, after all, still the father of her children. Jealousy stabbed at him. *He* wanted to be the father of her children, but the opportunity for that was long past. Now he'd settle for just being her husband. That is, if he could ever get her to realize what they had went far beyond the little time they'd had together. If he could just get her to talk to him. One minute this morning she'd been fine, then it was if a door had suddenly closed.

Yesterday he'd sensed that he had an ally in Claire. He'd have to explore that possibility. He had to do something because Julia was well and truly spooked. Feeling despair settle over him, he turned and opened the folder for his meeting.

\* \* \* \*

Julia managed to avoid the confrontation with Claire for the moment by pleading a headache at the end of the day. And that was no cheap lie. But she knew her friend wasn't going to be put off any longer.

She'd come home from the office, made a pretense of eating with Courtney, then gone to her room, put on her favorite robe, and lie down on the bed. She needed to think but her head still ached from the day's tension.

"Mom?" There was a soft tap on the bedroom door.

"Yes?" Julia roused herself.

"Hi." The door swung open and Beth hurried over to hug her. "Are you okay? I called earlier and Miranda said you didn't seem yourself. I thought I'd stop by and check it out for myself." She looked at her mother carefully, searching for telltale signs of whatever was wrong.

"I'm fine, sweetie. Really. But I'm glad you came over. You know I always love seeing you."

And she did. At twenty-two Beth was a lovely young woman, slender, with her father's fine brown hair and her mother's sapphire blue eyes. She looked so gentle, but Julia knew that under that translucent skin, Beth was tough as nails. She and Andy had been her rock and salvation after Charles died.

It was as if they'd been born two mature people, always sensing when she needed extra love from them, always working harder than their friends to make her proud of them. And she was proud. They'd graduated from college a year early, with honors, and found excellent jobs before their diplomas were even framed: Beth in a financial consulting firm and Andy with a top engineering firm.

Beth had been the one to help Miranda keep the household organized while Julia worked and had whipped her brother into shape when he faltered in a short teen rebellion in high school. She was the one who rode herd on Courtney, backing Julia up on all the rules, not afraid to be the strict older sister when necessary.

Julia had hated it when the twins moved into their own apartments after graduation, but she knew they needed to leave the nest sometime. They still stopped by frequently and the family made an effort to have one meal together each week.

She had always considered herself a strong person. Her marriage had not destroyed her self-confidence, despite Charles's best efforts. She was a respected businesswoman and well regarded in the community. Even though she'd lost herself for a long time, the real Julia was still in there somewhere. One of these days, she might even get to see the light of day.

*With Luke. Oh, Luke, I need you so badly.*

She wished she could find the strength she needed now when life seemed determined to club her into submission. As hard as the conflict with Courtney was, Julia still loved her to distraction. She was all there would ever be of Luke. But now Courtney seemed intent on destroying both Julia and herself, and Luke had strolled back into her life determined to find out what went wrong with them.

"You don't look so fine," Beth said now, eyeing her mother critically. "Are you coming down with something? You don't take half enough care of yourself."

"I'm fine. Truly." She took one of Beth's hands in both of hers.

*How can I tell her my heart is what's sick and broken?*

Beth narrowed her eyes. "Is it Courtney again?" She smiled, flashing a dimple. "Do I need to take her over my knee again?"

"Courtney is still... Courtney. But at least thanks to you she's dressing better and doesn't look like she's wearing an entire makeup counter when she goes out." She shook her head.

"Where do thirteen-year-old girls get their ideas, anyway? You were never like that."

Beth laughed. "I was the perfect child, remember?" She hugged Julia. "I'm calling you Monday. If I don't like the way you sound, I'm taking you out to dinner for some Mom therapy."

*Monday that seemed to be the day for phone calls.*

"Mom?" Beth's voice held an edge of concern. "What's wrong? You just turned white as a sheet. Okay. That does it. Monday for sure I'm calling the doctor and making an appointment for you."

"No, don't. Please." Julia let out a long, slow breath. "I'm fine. Just tired. You're right. I need to eat better and get more sleep." She forced a smile. "And I promise to do that."

"You know, Mom, it wouldn't kill you to go out on a date once in a while."

"Date?" She wanted to laugh hysterically. "Honey, I'm doing just fine. I have the business and Claire and you guys."

Beth frowned. "But—"

Julia reached out her fingers and pressed them to Beth's lips. "It's okay, baby. I'm fine. I'll do a better job of eating and sleeping. I promise."

If only, she thought, everything else was that simple.

"Anyway, it's Friday night." She made herself dredge up a smile. "What are you doing at your mother's on a Friday night? I can't believe that's what your social life is reduced to."



Beth laughed. "Actually, I'm meeting some friends at *La Marguerita* but not until much later. They went to a movie first but I'd already seen it." She hugged her mother. "I'm going now, but I'm keeping my eye on you."

*Not too closely, I hope.*

## *Chapter Nineteen*

The weekend dragged endlessly. Julia's sleep was disturbed by dreams of Luke, erotic dreams that left her waking in a sweat, panting, her arousal wetting her thighs and her breasts aching for the touch of his hands or his mouth. But the sexual haze was later disrupted by endless arguments with Courtney.

"Why can't I go to the party?" the teenager raged Saturday morning.

"We've been over all of this." Julia did her best to keep her voice level and calm, even as her stomach cramped and acid burned through her. "Those kids are all older than you are and not the right group for you to be hanging out with. Anyway, you're just a novelty to them."

"They *like* me," Courtney insisted. "They wouldn't ask me if they didn't." She clenched her hands into fists. "Don't you think people can like me?"

"Courtney." Julia reached out to her daughter, only to have the girl turn away from her. "Of course I think people can like you. I know they do, as a matter of fact. But you aren't old enough yet to have the judgment to know when to say no to things that can harm you. I'm just looking out for your best interests. You're welfare."

"You're just jealous," Courtney sneered, her tone hateful. "Just because you don't have any friends, you don't want me to have them."

"Honey, that's not true. I *do* want you to have friends. Just the right ones. When you spend time with this group, your grades go straight into the toilet and you start dressing like a night person."

"You hate me," Courtney spat out. "Admit it. You wish you'd never had me."

"Oh, sweetheart." Julia reached for her daughter again. "That is so not true."

"Yes. It is. And Grandma and Grandpa Patterson feel the same way. They never come to see me or ask about me. And when they came to take Andy and Beth, I never got to go with them. There must be something really wrong with me."

*Oh, my God!*

"Courtney, no. You're getting this all wrong."

But Courtney whirled away, storming down the hallway. "Just leave me alone."

She slammed the door to her room, leaving Julia staring after her, fear stabbing at her heart. Was that what Courtney really thought? That Julia wished she'd never been born? How on earth had they come to this point? She'd never realized, either, how much her daughter resented being shut out by Charles's parents. She'd tried to do her best to make it up to her, but she had to admit none of the explanations she'd come up with really held water.

And was Courtney right that she, Julia, had no friends? She had Claire. Of course. But who else had she ever let into her life? No one in Charles's circle had ever given her the time of day. Including his parents. Somehow it had just been easier with the mess she'd made of her life to focus on the kids, Claire, and the business.

Was it all coming back to haunt her now? And what the hell could she do?

Sunday, she coaxed Courtney into lunch on the Riverwalk. The drive downtown was filled with a sullen silence, but by the time they'd finished lunch and Julia had tempted her with a shopping trip to some of the boutiques that lined the waterway, the atmosphere had lightened a little.

But not much.

Sunday night, Courtney closeted herself in her room again and when she left for the school bus Monday morning, it was without a word of goodbye.

Julia was left with an aching, uneasy feeling and anger at the unfairness of life. She couldn't seem to find answers to problems she was sure were insurmountable.

She almost dreaded going to the office Monday morning. When she walked in, Claire was already there, waiting for her with a full pot of coffee and questions in her eyes.

"You're not getting away from me this time," she warned.

But before they could get into anything, the phone rang and Margot, the receptionist, told Julia that a Mr. Buchanan was on the phone for her.

"Take it," Claire said. "Right now. And then we're going to talk. Margot, tell Mr. Buchanan Julia will be right with him, then bring her a cup of tea."

Julia stowed her purse in her office and nodded at Margot who set a filled mug on her desk. Then she picked up the phone, her hand trembling slightly.

"Hello?"

"Good morning."

The deep timbre and molasses-thick warmth of his voice sent shivers along her spine and made her pulse throb. Images of Thursday night flashed through her mind like a video rerun, only with these images came sensations and responses. Julia drew in a deep breath to steady herself and slowly released it. She could do this. Somehow.

"Good morning." She couldn't help smiling. "Did you have a good weekend?"

"It would have been much better with you." There was no mistaking the intimacy of the tone.

"Luke..."

"We'll get back to that in a minute. Business first."

Julia wasn't sure if she waited eagerly or with dread for his announcement. "You've made a decision already?"

"At this morning's executive staff meeting, after we all took the weekend to review everything. The contract is yours. The selection of Bright Ideas for the campaign was unanimous. My secretary's going to call your office later to set up a planning meeting."

*Yes!*

For one exhilarating moment, all her personal issues were forgotten in the thrill of success. This would lift the agency to a whole new category. She wanted to punch the air in a gesture of victory. Then reality returned. Everything else aside, she'd now be working closely for with Luke Buchanan. Keeping him out of her life—and her heart—was going to be next to impossible.

"Julia?" Luke's voice held a mixture of curiosity and amusement. "You still there?"

She forced herself back to earth. "Yes. Yes, I am. I can tell you that we're thrilled you've chosen us and assure you we will work very hard to implement a successful campaign."

"I know you will. So does everyone else. My secretary is faxing over the contracts as we speak." He paused, and when he spoke again there was a different tenor to his voice. "On another note, I don't want you to forget about Friday night."

"Friday night." She repeated the words, suddenly stiff and edgy.

"Dinner. Remember? Name the place or I'll be at your door."

"Luke, listen..."

"No." She felt the authority in the word all the way through the connection. "We *will* be having dinner, Julia. The location and manner of meeting is up to you. I'll call you Friday morning." Another pause. "Just keep remembering that I love you. That I never stopped." And then he broke the connection.

"Time to celebrate." Claire was standing in the doorway, holding a stack of papers in her hand and grinning, her eyes alight with excitement. She waved the papers in the air. "Contracts just came in."

For a brief moment, Julia remembered when the Hot Ticket contracts had been faxed to them. The scene was almost the same. Who knew what that would set in motion? She tamped down her anxiety and grinned back at Claire. She owed it to her partner and friend to celebrate this very big break for them.

"That was fast. I just got off the phone with Luke, getting the official word. He said they just made the decision this morning."

"And of course he wanted to tell you himself." Claire grinned. "And so?"

Julia tried to keep her features carefully arranged. "And so what?"

"God, Julia." Claire dropped into the big client chair opposite the desk. "Anyone with half an eye could see the man is still head over heels in love with you. I'm surprised the conference room didn't go up in flames when we were doing our presentation."

Julia's eyes dropped, staring at her hands. "I hardly think that's true."

"I think it's time we had that talk, honey," Claire insisted. "Really."

"Give it a rest, Claire. Nothing's going to happen."

"I know you didn't come home Thursday night and you haven't said a word about what happened. And you had a strange look on your face when you hung up the phone. So give." She stacked the papers on the desk. "We have a huge contract here, sweetie. This will more than put us on the map. You owe it to the business to let me know what's happening."

Julia sighed, leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes for a moment. "He wants us to have dinner Friday night."

"What? But that's wonderful. Oh, honey, I'm so glad for you. You deserve some happiness."

Julia opened her eyes and looked at her friend. "You know that's not possible. I can be professional and do the work on the account, but there can never be anything personal between Luke and me. Never again."

"Please tell me you aren't going to pull out that lame story about Rod McGuire and Charles's dying wishes again." Claire's voice was laced with anger. She had been over the top when Julia finally unloaded all the ugly details on her, including the ugly letters. "You're being manipulated from the grave. That's sick. It's time to put that to bed."

"I can't." Julia blinked back the tears burning her eyelids. "I know custody hasn't been an issue for a long time. The twins are over twenty-one and the Pattersons certainly never wanted anything to do with Courtney. But he could decide to block the twins' trust funds. Or haul out those blasted letters he always refers to and give them to Andy and Beth. Or worse yet, Courtney."

"Julia," Claire started.

But Julia was already worked up, the inflexibility of her situation again slamming her in the face. "But worst of all, he could damage Luke. Rod McGuire is a very powerful man and he can wreck Luke's career if he chooses to."

Claire slammed her hand down on the desk. "That is so much bullshit. I mean it. You've lived in fear of that man long enough. Charles is dead and buried. The twins are grown. Courtney is... Courtney. And who knows? Maybe having a father might make a world of difference in the way she is. Maybe she needs that steady guidance. That presence."

"But Rod could—"

"Luke is a big boy, and every bit as powerful in his own right." A corner of her mouth tipped up in a smile. "I'll bet he could give Rod McGuire a run for his money any day of the week. He doesn't impress me as a man who runs away from things."

Julia shook her head. "I can't take that chance. And what if I tell him the truth? What if he's so furious that he pulls the Connell Wilson account?"

"He wouldn't do that. He's too ethical." Claire rose and shoved the stack of papers at Julia. "Look these over, make a note of any questions, you have and we'll go over them at lunch. That good with you?"

"Yes. Fine."

"And Julia? If he wants to see you again, do it. You've lived in the worst kind of purgatory for fourteen years. It's time to unlock the jail cell."

The week alternately sped and crawled by. Julia and Claire finalized the Connell Wilson contract and made plans to meet with Luke and two others the following Monday to get into the specifics of the campaign. The rest of the week was spent making sure other clients would be

taken care of while they were immersed in the first monster campaign of their career, and fleshing out the campaign itself with information they knew would be requested.

Courtney continued to enjoy working with Claire, but at night the battle continued to rage, sometimes loudly, sometimes silently. Was it the absence of a father all these years that had turned her sweet child into a stormy teenager? If only Courtney would open up and talk to her.

"Does she ever say anything to you?" she asked Beth one night on the phone.

"About what, Mom?"

"You know, whatever's bothering her."

"Mom, everything's bothering her right now." Beth laughed. "She's thirteen."

"No. I think there's really something going on with her. I just wish I knew what it was."

Every day she braced herself for Luke's call, but her phone was strangely silent where he was concerned. And that made her even edgier. She had nightmares about him showing up at her house, taking one look at Courtney and it would be all over. Finito. She was jumpy and edgy, snapping Claire's head off, then apologizing for it. Claire just watched her carefully and said nothing.

Thursday afternoon Beth called.

"I'm taking the brat for the weekend again," she told her mother. "I'm calling her tonight so she can pack a bag. Tomorrow I can cut out early, so I'm picking her up right from school. That will give you some relief and maybe I can get her to open up a little to me. If it's more than pubescent angst, we need to know."

"Honey, did Claire put you up to this?" Julia had stomach-clenching visions of Claire spilling everything to Beth and enlisting her to clear the decks for Friday evening.

"Nope. I have no special plans and I thought it would do both of you some good to have some breathing room. Especially after our last conversation." Silence hummed along the connection. "Why? Is something special going on?"

"No." Julia nearly shouted the word, then swallowed and dialed it back. "Nothing at all. But maybe I'll have dinner with some... friends."

"Mom." Beth's voice was chiding. "You should find yourself a hunk and go out on a date. You're practically a nun."

"Beth!" Julia's hand twitched on the phone, because her daughter was so close to what had been on her mind all week.

"I mean it. Dad's been gone for years and Andy and I are good to go. It's just you and the brat." She paused. "It might do her some good to see you with some male company."

"Are you sure you haven't been talking to Claire?"

"Uh uh. But if she's singing the same song, good for her. It means you have to listen. Bye. Gotta run."

She still had her hand on the phone when it rang again, the sound making her jump.

"You have a call holding for you, Mrs. Patterson." Margot, their receptionist, refused to call them by their first names, even though she'd been with them for five years now. It always made both Claire and Julia smile.

"Okay. Put it through." She was flipping through the stack of messages Margot had brought in a few minutes before when, paying little attention, the voice at her ear jerked her upright.

"So. We're on for tomorrow night, right?"

Julia swore the deep timbre of Luke's voice vibrated through the connection. It certainly pulsed through her. She nearly dropped the receiver. For a long moment, she couldn't make her mouth work to say anything.

"Julia? You there?"

"Uh... um... yes." She exhaled slowly. In for a penny, she thought. "Hi."

*God. How lame can I get? I sound like I'm eighteen.*

Her palms were sweating and her heart was thudding against her ribs.

"Tomorrow night," he prompted.

"Yes. Tomorrow night." She thought for a moment. "There's a really great little restaurant just at the north edge of the city that I've been dying to try." She gave him the name and location. "Sound good to you? I can meet you there."

"Julia." His voice was very quiet. "I thought maybe we'd go to someplace on the Riverwalk. Are you trying to hide me away?"

"N-No. Not at all. I... just like to be... away from people. I'm with them all week."

More silence.

"All right. I'll take you at your word. This time. Is there some reason why I can't pick you up at the house?"

*Yes. A very live one.*

"I just think it would be better if we met there."



"All right." Then he repeated, "This time. Is eight o'clock good for you?"

"That'll be fine. See you then." She hung up before her discipline broke down and she blurted everything out to him.

Something caught her eye and she looked up to see Claire leaning in the doorway.

"Please tell me you're going out with him again."

Julia shrugged. "I guess. Beth is taking Courtney and Luke threatened to show up on my doorstep if I didn't."

"And you're not letting him pick you up," Claire guessed. "Even without Courtney there."

"I think it's best." She pushed her chair back from her desk. "And I'm not ready to put him in that environment."

"Will you ever be?"

"I don't know." Julia rubbed her forehead as she stood up. "I just don't know."

\* \* \* \*

By Friday, Julia was a nervous wreck. It had taken every bit of personal discipline to get through the week dealing with Courtney at home and the Connell Wilson contract at work, not to mention overseeing the projects for other clients. And always there as Claire, quietly watching. Saying nothing. But her silence was louder than any words.

*If I go out with Luke tonight, he'll push for more, and I don't have more to give him. I'll have to tell him the problem and that will open a can of worms.*

*If I don't see him I'll regret it forever.*

*If I don't stop having these conversations with myself, I'll really think I'm crazy.*

She'd called Luke at his office that morning, hands trembling as she punched in his private number.

"I hope this isn't a call trying to cancel tonight," were his first words.

As always, the deep voice rumbled across the connection and sent shivers skittering along her spine.

"No. Not at all." She wet her lips. "I realized I forgot to tell you this place is very casual. In case you wanted to stop at home and change first, I mean."

"Julia." She could almost see the half-smile on his face. "What I wear isn't as important as who I'll be with. But thanks for the heads-up." He paused. "Eight o'clock, right?"

"Yes. If that's okay. It'll give me a chance to go home myself and change."

"See you then."

He clicked off and she sat there, holding the receiver for a long moment. A sound made her look up to see Claire standing in the doorway.

"I'm going to charge you with lurking," she said, half teasing. "You're always hanging out in my doorway."

"It's the only way I find anything out," Claire laughed. She walked in and sat down in one of the client chairs. "Don't screw this up, Julia. You've worn a hair shirt long enough. Give yourself a break. Luke's a good man. Hang onto him."

"My situation hasn't changed. You know that."

"If you're so determined for nothing to happen, why are you having dinner with him tonight?"

Julia held out her hands, palms upward. "It was better than having him show up on my front doorstep."

"All you're doing is delaying the inevitable," Claire pointed out. "If Luke's living and working in San Antonio now, you can't hide Courtney away forever."

"Maybe." She sighed a long breath. "But I can delay it as long as possible. And maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Claire leaned forward. "Maybe Rod Maguire will drop dead? Not that it wouldn't make my day. But you are going to have to face this head on, sooner rather than later."

"But just not today, okay?"

"All right." Claire stood up. "But you'd better pick your time before it picks you."

Claire's words echoed in her brain while she finished her work and closed up for the day. They kept repeating over and over like a mantra while she showered, dressed, and applied her makeup. Images slammed into her of Luke unexpectedly meeting Courtney and the shock on his face. Of Andy and Beth looking at her as if they'd never seen her. Of Rod Maguire as he was each time she ran into him, intense dislike blazing in his eyes.

She sprayed herself with perfume, applied lip gloss, and stared at herself in the mirror.

*Who am I? Who is the real Julia? Mother? Widow? Business executive? Where is the person who came into marriage with such expectations and lost herself in the ensuing years?*

She sighed. No time for mind-bending ruminating now. She needed to steel herself to resist Luke Buchanan—an almost impossible task.

Mardi's was a fairly new, upscale casual restaurant that Claire had raved about.

"Great steaks and great drinks," she had enthused. "And as many people in jeans as anything else."

The restaurant, on the far north side of the city, was filled on Friday night. Thick carpet muted footfalls and dark paneling halfway up the walls absorbed sound, muting the buzz of conversation. Waiters and waitresses moved deftly among the tables balancing large trays, and glasses clinked as people kept the bartender busy.

Eyes scanning the room for Luke, Julia gave her name to the hostess and tried to still her nervousness.

The woman smiled at her. "Right this way, please."

She led Julia to a table in the far corner, almost tucked out of sight from the rest of the room. Luke rose to meet her as she approached. He reached for her hand and squeezed it gently, then held her chair for her.

"How much did it cost you to get this much privacy in a public room?" she teased.

"I'd have paid any price to make you comfortable," he smiled. "Crowds seem to make you nervous, so I figured this was a good compromise." He looked across the table at her. "Or is it me you're afraid of, Julia?"

She was saved from an immediate answer by the arrival of their waiter with her drink.

"Been watching for you," he told her. "The gentleman ordered and said to bring it as soon as you got here."

The aroma and color told her it was her favorite amaretto. She smiled her thanks, picked up the glass, and sipped, hoping the liqueur would sedate the butterflies that had suddenly woken up in her stomach.

"Okay, then." The waiter placed menus in front of them. "I'll give you some time to decide on your choices." He melted himself away into the crowd.

"I hope it was okay for me to order for you?" Luke was studying her with eyes that saw far too much.

"Absolutely. Thank you." She sipped again, then carefully placed the glass on the table.

Her eyes drank him in. She hadn't seen him for a week but it seemed more like a year. He wore a long-sleeved sports shirt, but the sleeves were rolled back to reveal the soft dark hair on his arms.

*I love a man with hair on his body.*

Heat surged through her and she squeezed her legs at the throbbing in her cunt that just his presence seemed to ignite. His slow, sexy smile did nothing to calm her racing pulse or ease

the sudden need that gripped her. How on earth was she supposed to be sensible when her overwhelming desire apparently hadn't cooled one bit in fourteen years?

Luke reached across the table and took the fingers of one hand. "I see such heavy thoughts weighing down your mind. How about if we just have drinks, dinner, and a nice evening and take it from there?"

The touch of his hand sent sparks shooting through her. Julia nibbled at her bottom lip. "That certainly sounds nice," she said slowly.

"And it will be. No protests, no arguments. Okay? Sound good to you?"

She couldn't help smiling at him. It seemed even the most insurmountable problems didn't quench her desire for him. Maybe she was the one who was a fool and had been for all these years. Maybe Claire was right. Trouble was probably going to find her no matter what. Advanced damage control could be a big help. Sometimes, she thought, you just had to take a chance and hoped it turned out right. She'd lived a half-life for so many years. Hadn't she more than paid her penance? But if she chose that path, she'd have to pick the right time and the right words, or she'd lose Luke permanently.

"Enough thinking," he said. "Let's just enjoy each other tonight."

The conversation got easier after that. Luke talked about his life during the intervening years, his continued uneven relationship with his sons, his progress through the industry to reach his position at Connell Wilson.

The food was as good as Claire has promised, the conversation strangely muted for such a casual place, the atmosphere relaxing. Little by little, Julia felt her nerves and muscles relaxing and the tension easing from her neck.

"I have to admit," Luke said, pushing his plate away at last, "the fact that you live here had a lot to do with my taking the job."

"Luke," she began.

"Don't say it, okay." He picked up the fresh drink the waiter had brought and took a healthy swallow. "I don't know what's holding you back, Julia. Or what's kept us apart all these years. But I'm not going to stop until I find out. Until I get answers. Until I can push aside whatever obstacles you think are keeping us apart." He set his glass down and leaned forward. "I love you. That hasn't changed. And whether you admit it or not, you love me. So what we have to do next is find a solution to whatever the problem is that's got you stuck."

"I know, I know." She fiddled with her dessert fork. "It's just... there's so much you don't understand. So much I don't know how to tell you."

His voiced wrapped around her like a warm blanket. "How about if we just take it one thing at a time? For right now, let's just take tonight." His eyes caressed her face. "How late can you stay out?"

She could lie to him and tell him she had to be home, but Julia wanted this night as much as he did. If she finally blurted out the truth, this might be the last time they were together.

"I'm good until noon tomorrow."

He visibly relaxed. "Good. Then how about coming home with me. If you promise not to change your mind, you can follow me in your car and park in one of the guest spots."

Julia took a last sip of her drink and looked across at him. "All right. And I won't change my mind."

Although in the drive across town, she was tempted to several times.

*How can I change my mind when it's clear that I've lost it?*

She followed Luke into the underground parking and into the parking place he indicated. Taking a deep breath, she got out of her car and let him lead her to the elevator.

## *Chapter Twenty*

Julia had declined a drink. Even wine. She'd had three with dinner and her senses were already on high alert, her brain fuzzy, except for registering the man standing in front of her in his big bedroom. Facing each other, inches apart, the heat that crackled between them seemed to fill the room.

Luke took a step closer, placed his palms on her cheeks, and proceeded to seduce her with his mouth. His lips whispered back and forth against hers. That's all it was, the merest touch of mouth on mouth, but it cloaked her in the voluptuous feeling of black velvet. She wrapped her fingers around his wrists, not to push him away but to hold him in place. Every nerve in her body seemed to be centered on her lips, the throbbing in her cunt a metronomic beat in time with the movement of his mouth.

She was so wet she could feel moisture on the inside of her thighs. What was it about Luke Buchanan that just a touch carried her to a plane of sexual arousal that demanded more? Much more. Breathing in through her nose, she inhaled the wonderful scent of him, the scent that was pure Luke.

Almost tentatively, his tongue traced the seam of her lips, a back and forth motion that demanded she part for him. When she did, the sweep of his tongue was light and graceful, not demanding. It flicked and danced, tasting first here, then there, leaving tiny bonfires every place it touched. Automatically, she tried to suck him deeper into her mouth, but he was too quick for her, following his own choreographed path. When she met his tongue with her own he nipped at it lightly with his teeth, and the throbbing in her pussy, the ache in her breasts, grew even more intense.

She wanted to cry out in protest when he lifted his mouth from hers, but in a moment she felt his hot lips working their way slowly along her jawline and beneath her ear, where he

paused to bite gently on the soft lobe. Julia moaned, a tony little sound vibrating at the back of her throat that increased when he trailed his mouth down her neck. One hand moved to slide back the collar of her sweater and gave him access to that erogenous zone where her neck and shoulder joined. She still clung to his wrists, balancing herself as the floor seemed to fade away beneath her feet, leaving her floating in space.

Luke seemed to spend long moments paying homage to her neck, moving his mouth to the hollow of her throat and the evidence of the erratic pounding of her pulse. Then at last—at last!—he shifted his hands to tug at the bottom of the sweater and break contact with her long enough to pull it over her head and toss it to the side.

Now she was frenzied for skin to skin contact. Her fingers trembled as she fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, finally pulling it open, buttons flying to the floor. She pushed it down his arms and he obligingly shrugged the rest of the way out of it. Julia ran her hands almost frantically over his thick pelt of soft hair, fingernails raking his flat nipples, drawing a sound from deep in his throat.

He placed a trail of kisses from her throat down between the valley of her breasts while his fingers tweaked her nipples through the flimsy silk of her bra. He drew his tongue across the upper swell of her breasts before moving his head to pull one distended nipple into his mouth, fabric and all. Julia sucked in her breath, squeezing her thighs together in an effort to control her growing need, but it simply surged through her with the speed and force of a lightning bolt.

Somehow her bra disappeared and she was skin to skin with Luke, her sensitized breasts pressed against the wall of his chest, the fine matte of hair abrading her nipples like tiny branding irons. She was hot all over, her skin too tight, her body somehow not even her own any more. And still Luke continued his slow, seductive torment, tasting here, nibbling there.

“Oh, please,” she breathed, a small sound of satisfaction bubbling from her as his fingers moved over the button and zipper of her slacks.

Moving the material out of the way, he slid one hand inside her panties and cupped one cheek of her ass with his long, hot fingers. They strolled over the surface, waking up more nerves, while his mouth continued its assault on her breasts. His mouth was everywhere, touching every surface of her skin, while his hand danced across her ass. When he slid his fingers into the hot cleft between the cheeks of her buttocks, she gasped at the jab of lust that speared her. She remembered the erotic burn of his cock inside her there and wanted it—*craved it*—again.

When she pressed herself back against his touch, she could feel the curve of his smile against her skin.

She shivered, wanting him everywhere in and out of her body, but still he took his time, touching, caressing, licking, nipping, until she was half out of her mind with a need rising so fast it threatened to engulf her. She pressed herself against his body, smiling at the thick feel of his hard cock, evidence of his own arousal. She slipped one hand between them and closed her fingers around his shaft, fabric and all. His strangled moan was her reward.

Lifting his head, he brushed his mouth over hers again. Against her lips, he whispered, "I'm going to fuck you, Julia. In more ways than you can imagine. And when I'm through, the last thing you'll think about is walking away from me."

He broke their contact long enough to rid them of the rest of their clothes and rip the covers back on the bed. Then she was lying on the cool crisp sheets, her legs over his shoulders, and his tongue was lapping at her slit, licking her labia, probing into the entrance of her pussy. His strong fingers opened her to his invasion, and he ate her like a starving man. The flick of his tongue was like an electric torch wherever he touched her, blazing through her bloodstream. Her hands clenched at the sheets as he worked her, not missing one inch of her slick tunnel.

When his thumb found her clit and rubbed it gently, she was done. The orgasm ripped through her like a cyclone, shaking her until she thought her bones had disintegrated. Luke kept her in that erotic whirlpool, body convulsing, until the spasms weakened into aftershocks. But instead of taking her down gently, he rose to his knees, positioned his cock against her still throbbing flesh, and entered her with one stunning thrust of his hips. And just like that she felt the need growing again. The hot spiral of need was low in her belly, unwinding and rippling through her.

His movements were steady but hard, each forward movement bumping the head of his cock against the mouth of her womb. Her hands scrabbled to hold him and her nails raked across his back. He pounded her with a steady rhythm and strength that would have done a younger man proud. He rode her, pushed her, until the next climax grabbed her like a fist and she quaked with the incredible power of it. The walls of her pussy clenched around his hot erection, gripping it as he rode her to completion.

When she laid, sweaty and panting, head tossed back against the pillow, it suddenly occurred to her that Luke had not found his own release. How in the world had he held back? She opened her eyes and looked at him.



“You didn’t—“

“No.” He smiled. “But I’m going to now.”

He flipped her over to her stomach and pulled her to her knees, bracing her with pillows beneath her stomach. His lean fingers scooped her cream from her dripping cunt and used it as lube on her anus. Her body wanted him, softened for him. Eagerly accepted the fingers as they spread the lube into her hot, dark tissues.

“Breathe deep, Julia.”

But she didn’t need him to tell her. All this years and she still remembered. She arched her back to thrust her buttocks out at him, pulled in a breath and readied herself for his penetration. When it came, the same mixture of ice and heat fractured through her. Her blood drummed in her ears and her heartbeat sped up. Luke’s fingers dug into the soft skin of her ass and he began the ride.

In and out. Deeper, deeper. Harder, harder. And incredibly her body was aroused again. She matched his tempo, rocking with him, until she felt him spurting inside her and one more orgasm overtook her. She hadn’t thought her body could stand one more onslaught, but Luke had dragged it out of her and this one was more powerful than the others.

“I’m dead,” she murmured, when he finally let her collapse.

“No, just satisfied.” She heard the satisfied smile in his voice. “Come on. Shower.”

“Nooo,” she whined, “it is impossible for me to move. Go ’way.”

He laughed, that throaty delicious sound she loved. “I’ll help. You’ll sleep better, I promise.”

“I’ll sleep in the shower,” she protested.

But he dragged her unwilling body from the bed into the huge shower, adjusted the spray so it was almost a fine mist, and bathed her like a baby, kissing her now and then.

And finally he crawled into bed with her, pulled her up against him, and she fell asleep, hoping tomorrow wouldn’t come crashing down on her head.

\*\*\*\*

“We’re going out to brunch,” Luke announced when he brought her coffee in bed. “I’d cook, but you wore me out.”

“Oh?” She sipped at the hot liquid. “Exactly who did the wearing out?”

“No matter. We’re still going out to eat before you disappear for the day.”

Julia set the coffee mug on the nightstand. “I don’t know. I have to—“

“Get home,” he finished for her. “I know. But you have a perfectly reliable housekeeper, and anyway, you told me Courtney is with Beth. So breakfast.” He traced his knuckles along the line of her cheek. “Indulge me, okay?”

“All right. If we take both cars so I can leave from the restaurant.”

“I’d argue with you but I’m sure I’d lose, so okay. Let’s do it.”

He took her to Paul’s Pancakes, a place he’d discovered that served the best restaurant breakfast he’d eaten in ages. At first she balked at getting out of the car. Too many people she knew ate here. The chances of running into any of them were too great. But then Luke was pulling her car door open and Claire’s words were echoing in her head. She took a deep breath, let it out slowly and got out of the car.

Luke linked his fingers through hers. “You can’t hide me forever, Julia. I won’t let you. And whatever problems you think you’ve got, we’ll face them together. I’m not an unreasonable man. Or a weak one. I can face your problems with you.”

“You may be asking for more than you know,” she warned.

He opened the restaurant door for her to walk through. “I can handle it.” He held her hand until they were seated in a booth against the window wall, releasing it only with obvious reluctance. “I’m afraid if I let you go, you might disappear.”

Julia picked up the coffee the waitress had brought to give herself something to do with her hands. “When we have our ‘talk’, you might wish you had.”

“Does this mean you’re finally going to lay everything out on the table? Tell me what’s so terrible that it’s kept us apart all this time?”

She placed the cup slowly back in the saucer, careful not to slosh any of the hot liquid, trying to decide if this was the place for the shattering revelations or should she wait until they were someplace more private. But whatever she might have said caught in her throat when she saw the door to the restaurant open again and two people stepped through it. She’d been on the alert on the very off chance Rod Maguire decided to have breakfast here, but this was going to be even worse.

Beth and Courtney were laughing at something one of them had said, giggling as if they were both thirteen. Julia felt the blood drain from her face. Of course. Beth had decided to take her sister out to breakfast. How had she been so stupid as not to think of that? And the very thing she’d fought so hard to prevent, the knowledge she’d sacrificed her life to keep hidden, was going to come out and in a way she couldn’t control.

*Maybe they'll just think he's a client.*

But that would be so unlike her. Weekends were sacred. No business. A standing rule. All she needed now was Rod Maguire laughing at her with dislike blazing in his eyes.

"Julia?" She heard the concern in Luke's voice. "What's wrong? You look like you're about to pass out."

"I have to go." She bent her head low over her coffee cup, hoping her daughters would take a booth at the far side of the restaurant.

"What?" He reached across the table and closed his fingers around her wrist. "What's going on here?"

"I—I..."

But she never had a chance to get any more words out.

"Mom?" Beth's voice was astonished. "Mom, what are you doing here?"

"Why are you here with a man?" Courtney's voice was harsh and defensive. "On a Saturday? Who is he?"

Julia finally found her voice. "Beth, Courtney. I'd like you to meet Luke Buchanan."

She twisted her hands together in her lap to keep them from trembling and looked across the table at Luke. But he was staring at Courtney with an expression that was half shock and half anger, his face taut, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

"Um, Luke? These are my daughters, Beth and Courtney." Oh God, it was all going to hell.

The girls and Luke just continued staring at each other, no one saying a word.

"Mr. Buchanan is with Connell Wilson." Julia tried to make her voice as bright as possible. "A new client. We were just discussing the new campaign Bright Ideas is rolling out for them."

"Hello." Beth's voice had the strangest sound to it.

Luke couldn't seem to drag his eyes away from Courtney. "Hello, girls. Nice to meet you."

An uncomfortable silence draped itself over them.

*Should I ask them to join us? Oh, God, no.*

"Well, we're just going to have some breakfast," Beth said after the silence had dragged on. "I told the brat she could have peach pancakes since she behaved herself last night."

"Do not keep calling me that." Courtney turned away. "Let's eat. I'm hungry."

"Mom?" Beth again. "Are you going home from here? I'll see you there."

"Yes. Fine, honey. Enjoy your meal."

They found a corner booth and slid into it. Luke's eyes were glued to them as they walked away. When he turned to Julia, the look in his eyes made her want to crawl under the table.

"How old is Courtney?"

Julia wet her lips with her tongue and wished she could transport herself to another planet.

"Julia?" Luke's voice was insistent. "Did you hear me? How old is your daughter?"

"Th-thirteen."

*He knows. Oh God, he knows.*

"Were you ever planning to tell me, or were you just going to shut me out of her life forever?" The rage in his voice was barely controlled, but underneath it was a lot of pain. "There's no way you could know this, but she looks exactly like my mother did at that age."

Nausea rose up in her throat. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, unable to look at him anymore.

"Sorry doesn't begin to cut it. Look, I don't intend to make a scene in public so we're going to get up and walk out of here quietly. Wave to your daughters and go back to my place where you're going to give me some answers."

"I can't," she could barely speak. "Not now. Not now."

She grabbed her purse and ran from the restaurant. By the time Luke had dropped some bills on the table and followed her, she was already pulling out of the parking lot, praying that he didn't follow her back to the house.

\* \* \* \*

"Who is he?" Courtney demanded.

She and Beth had walked in the door loaded for bear, each in her own way, Courtney ferocious and angry, Beth confused and uncertain. None of her children had ever seen Julia in the company of a man except during business hours or at an appropriate hour for client dinners, and always dressed in her executive best. Today the atmosphere as well as the clothing had been blatantly casual. And she wondered if either of them had caught the edge of sexual tension knifing between Luke and her.

"He's a... client," Julia said, waiting for the tea to brew. Soothing tea. Her answer to everything.

“Baloney. You’re lying to me. Something else is going on. You were so nervous I thought you were going to throw up.” Her smile was anything but pleasant. “You sounded like me when I’m trying to get away with something.

“Courtney’s right,” Beth said. “Besides, I don’t ever remember you having breakfast on a Saturday with a client. Not once. And he didn’t look at you like he was a client. So what gives?”

*Children are too damn observant.*

Julia stirred sweetener into her tea with a steadied motion, carried it to the kitchen table, and placed it carefully in front of her as she sat down. How to do this? Where to start? Well, Claire had warned her and she’d waited too long to listen.

“Courtney, I’d like to talk to Beth alone for a few minutes, if you don’t mind?”

What Julia called her daughter’s black look descended on her face. “What’s so weird that you can’t tell *me*? Some dark, terrible secret that only Beth is old enough to know?” She folded her arms defiantly across her chest and refused to move.

Beth was studying her sister’s face. She looked at her mother, then back at Courtney. “Go on upstairs, brat. I promise that whatever it is, either I’ll tell you or Mom will. Go on.”

“No. I told you not to call me that,” Courtney glowered. The only word for it.

Beth wrapped an arm around her sister’s stiff body. “Okay. If I promise not to call you brat any more, will you just give Mom and me a few minutes? You have my word that I’ll be sure you know everything.”

“So why can’t I know it now?” Courtney whined. “I’m not a baby anymore.”

“No, you’re not. And because you are turning into a mature young lady, a sister I’m proud of, you’re going to do this one thing for me. Right?”

Finally Courtney uncrossed her arms. “Fine. Fine, fine, fine.” She stomped out of the room. Julia flinched.

Beth sat down in the chair next to her. “Okay, truth or consequences, Mom. I’m over twenty-one, on my own, and whether you want to hear it or not, I’ve had sex already.”

Julia looked at her with a pained expression. “I already figured that but you didn’t actually have to tell me.”

Beth put her hand on her mother’s arm. “I say that only because it gave me the experience to know immediately that the atmosphere between you and Luke Buchanan was definitely not of a business nature. I don’t want any details, and to tell you the truth, I’m glad to find out my

mother might be finally coming out of the deep freeze.” She smiled. “A very unhealthy place you’ve kept yourself in ever since Dad passed away.”

“Would that be so bad?” Julia asked anxiously. “Does that bother you?”

“No.” Beth shook her head. “What bothers me first is that you think you have to hide it for some unknown reason.”

Julia started to answer her but Beth held up a hand.

“Not finished here. I’m going to stick my neck out here and guess the reason you’re all scrunched up in a ball is the fact that my sister bears a striking resemblance to that man. Am I right?”

Julia felt a pressure on her chest so great she thought her heart would stop beating. She lifted her cup with shaking hands, nearly spilling the tea, and took a sip, trying to give herself time to organize her thoughts. She opened her mouth to answer Beth but nothing would come out. Everything she wanted to say was stuck in her throat, and even her favorite tea couldn’t loosen the log jam.

“Mom? Please answer me. You’re scaring me.”

Julia looked at her daughter, concern in her eyes and a hint of panic.

*I guess it's now or never.*

She took another sip of the tea and dredged up some measure of calm.

“I have a story to tell you, Bethie. It’s very complex and there are parts of it you aren’t going to like at all. I just want you to remember that, no matter what I say and no matter what happened, your father loved you very much. And I have always loved you. All of you. My children have always come first with me.”

“I know that. You’re a great mother.” Beth leaned forward. “And nothing’s ever going to change how much all of us love you, okay? So whatever it is, just... say it. Unless you murdered someone, I don’t think there’s anything we can’t get through.” Her lips curved in a weak smile. “And depending on who it is, maybe we could even handle that.”

“Hold onto that thought, will you? Let me fix myself another cup of tea first, and then I’ll tell you everything. And you have to promise not to say anything until I’m finished. Then I’ll answer whatever questions you ask.”

It took her two more cups of tea and a glass of wine to get the entire story out, the pain as she dredged it up consuming her. She spared herself nothing, doing her best to paint herself as the villain in the breakup of her marriage, to leave her children a good memory of their father.

Beth sat quietly, getting up only once to fix a cup of coffee from the new Keurig machine, and then to pour some wine for herself. When Julia was finished, an eerie quiet spread through the kitchen, almost as if someone had died.

"I know I can't expect you to understand," Julia began, but Beth interrupted her.

"Now there's where you're wrong." She got up from her chair and went to stand at the sink, looking out the window to the view in the huge back yard. "Andy and I were just little kids when Daddy passed away, but even little kids know when their father can't connect with them, when he thinks they're a nuisance. When he... doesn't know how to love. We've talked about it a lot over the years and wanted to ask you if there was something we'd done wrong, but you seemed intent on putting him on a pedestal and we were afraid to say anything."

"Oh, sweetheart, no." Julia went to stand by her daughter. "You and your brother were—and are—terrific kids. The very best. I just wanted you to have memories to cherish."

Beth made a sound that was half snort and half cry. "You have no idea what our memories of him are. We always hoped after he died you'd meet someone who could really love all of us."

"Beth..."

"I'm not through. We have friends whose parents got divorced, or in a couple of cases one parent died. They always seemed to move on, have full, rich lives. Meet other people. Find good relationships. We never knew why you chose not to do this." She turned to face Julia. "If you and Daddy were all but divorced when you met Mr. Buchanan, why did you walk away from him? And if you felt you owed it to Daddy to nurse him those last few months, why didn't you call him after... after the funeral?"

Pain lanced through Julia. Why, indeed. She could never, ever tell her children about their father's deal with his friend and partner, or Rod's hatred for her.

"There were... reasons," was all she could find to say.

Beth shook her head. "That's not good enough. If there were reasons, tell me about them. Tell *us*. Didn't you think Courtney deserved to know who her real father was? Maybe to have him as an influence in her life while she was growing up?"

"Yes, didn't you?"

The words were almost a shout. Julia and Beth turned to see Courtney standing at the entrance to the kitchen, the expression on her face an emotional cocktail of so much pain, Julia rushed to her to put her arms around her.

"You heard?"

"Of course I heard. I sat on the stairs listening. How else am I supposed to find out anything?" She pushed her mother away. "Don't. Don't touch me. How could you? How could you never tell me I had a father somewhere who might have loved me? Wanted to be with me. Just... wanted me."

"Courtney. Honey." Julia tried to reach for her again but the girl stepped away.

"Stay away from me. My whole life has been a lie. I thought my grandparents—no, *Charles's* parents—hated me because of something I'd done. But it wasn't me. It was you. They hated *you*, and punished me because of it."

Beth rushed to her sister, grabbed one of her hands. "Trust me, Court. You would never have wanted to suffer through those damned visits the way Andy and I did. It was worse than the tortures of the damned."

"But I had no one," Courtney cried. "No one at all."

"Ssh, ssh." Beth tried to hug her. "You always had Andy and me. And Mom. Look at her, kiddo. See how much pain she's in? She loves you very, very much."

"No." Courtney wrenched herself away. "She only loves herself. And her secrets. All those secrets." She ran from the room. In a moment they heard the slam of her bedroom door.

Julia looked at Beth. "Well, that went really well." She felt as if she were crumbling into a million pieces.

And at that moment the phone rang. And continued to ring.

"Are you going to get that?" Beth asked when Julia didn't move.

But then the ringing stopped, only to start up again a moment later. With an exasperated sigh, Beth reached for the receiver.

"Hello? Yes, she's right here. Oh, and it was nice meeting you this morning. Maybe you can persuade my mother to let us say more than two words to you."

Julia backed away from the phone, shaking her head. "No," she whispered. "I can't talk to him now."

Beth watched her. "Mr. Buchanan? She'll be right with you." She covered with mouthpiece with her hand. "Today is the day you stop running away from things, Mom. Talk to him. I don't think he's planning to shoot you."

She grabbed her mother and literally shoved the phone into her hands.

Julia had to swallow twice before she was sure she could say a word.

"Luke?"



"I think we need to sit down and have a talk."

There was pain in his deep voice and her heart pinched at the knowledge she'd caused it.

"Luke, I..."

Beth was standing next to her, mouthing "Go and see him."

"No more running away, Julia," Luke said.

That seemed to be everyone's order to her lately.

She swallowed again. "All right. But I need a little time. I have to talk to Courtney before I do anything else."

Silence. Then, "Fine. I agree that's important. Very important. I'll pick you up at six for dinner. At your house," he emphasized. "No more excuses."

"A-All right. Six o'clock." She was shaking when she hung up the telephone and turned to Beth. "I have to talk to your sister. Can you stay here for a while?"

"Of course. No problem." She enfolded Julia in a warm hug. "Mom, I really know a lot more than you think. And so does Andy. Who, by the way, should also be included in this."

Julia raked her fingers through her hair. "I know, I know. And I should be the one to tell him, but..."

"I can do it. No sweat. I'll call him while you go up and talk to the brat." She kissed Julia's cheek. "I take it you and the sexy Mr. Buchanan are having dinner tonight?"

"Beth! He's..."

"Very sexy," Beth grinned. "I can see why any woman would fall for him like crazy."

She pulled her mother into another embrace and Julia melted into her warmth.

"What did I ever do to deserve kids like you?"

"You were a damned good mom. But now it's time to do something for yourself, too. Anyway, I'll see if Andy can shake loose of whatever he's doing and we'll hang with Courtney tonight."

"I'll be here, too." Miranda came into the kitchen from wherever she'd been and gave Julia another hug. "It'll be all right. You'll see. It's time for all this to come out, anyway."

Beth looked at her. "You knew? About Courtney?"

"Honey, I live in this house, remember? I know exactly when your father moved out and when he moved back in."

"Then—"

“It wasn’t my secret to tell.” She nudged Julia. “Go on. Go upstairs to her. She’s probably a mess, but we’ll all work through it.”

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

"So, is he living here now?" Courtney asked. "In San Antonio?"

Julia nodded. The past few hours had been among the most painful she could remember in a long time. Nothing she said seemed to reach the troubled teenager. Courtney had swung back and forth between anger and tears. It had not been an easy time for either of them, but now, both emotionally exhausted, they'd achieved a measure of calm. Julia just hoped it wasn't the eye of the hurricane.

"Yes. He has a very good job here."

"Where does he live?" Courtney demanded. "Can I go there? Does he want to see me?"

Julia named the all suites hotel where Luke was staying for the time being. "But he'll be looking for something more permanent."

"Are the two of you going to get married?" Courtney wasn't pulling any punches now.

*Are we? That's was a good question. We have so many obstacles to climb first.*

"I think we're going to take this one step at a time, honey."

"What if he doesn't like me?" she scowled. "What if I don't like him?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." They were sitting on Courtney's bed and she tried to reach for her daughter, but the girl scrabbled away from her. Julia sighed. Such a long way to go yet. "I'm going to have dinner with him tonight. And then we'll arrange for the two of you to get together. But honey, I know he'll love you. Why wouldn't he?"

"Maybe I'm unlovable," Courtney mumbled.

"Oh, Court."

"Why can't I have dinner with you tonight? Why can't I come, too?"

"Because he and I have things to discuss. This has been a shock to him, too."

"How come you never told him about me?" Courtney asked the same question for what was probably the twentieth time. "Are you ashamed of me?"

"Oh, Courtney, that is so far from the truth. I love you." She tried to hug her, but her daughter wrenched away from her. "Honey, there were things going on that no one knows about but me. Things that..." she bit her lip, "things I have to straighten out with Luke before I do anything else."

"He didn't want children."

"Courtney." Julia was on her last nerve and trying to hold it together. "We've been over that and over that. It has nothing to do with that. It's just very... complicated."

"That's what everyone says when they don't want to tell you the truth." Courtney spat.

Julia rubbed her forehead, trying to beat back the headache that was building, and looked at her watch. "I'd like to take a shower before Luke picks me up. Will you come downstairs to say hello to him when he gets here?"

"I'll see."

Julia rose from the bed, heartsick and aching.

"I'll let you know when he gets here."

But Courtney had already withdrawn into herself.

Andy had apparently arrived while she was in the shower. He was hanging out in the kitchen with Beth, drinking coffee, when she walked in.

She looked at them, twins yet such opposites. The six foot two young man, muscular with sandy hair. He had the kind of almost-rugged good looks women seemed to fall all over themselves for these days. Charles's good looks but with a lot more warmth. And beside him, petite like Julia, Beth with dark eyes and hair and a curvy body that even sloppy jeans and a sweatshirt couldn't disguise.

*I have such beautiful children.*

"Why aren't you hanging out with some woman?" she joked.

"I am. My two sisters." He grinned. "They don't get any better than that."

"You know what I mean. What did Beth pull you away from?"

"Nothing." He kissed her cheek. "Besides, there's nothing more important than being here right now." He looked upward. "How's the kiddo doing?"

Julia sighed. "Not so good, I'm afraid. I think we have a lot of stormy days ahead of us."

"We'll get through it," he assured her. "Together. Beth told me everything she said to you, and that goes for me, too." He set his mug down. "And also about Dad. Look." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "We've never talked about it and maybe we should have. But Beth and I knew what Dad was like, even as young as we were. He never played with us, never enjoyed us, and never wanted to take us anywhere. If it was bad for us, it must have been hell for you. Deciding on the divorce couldn't have been easy. And bringing Dad back here for those last months was no cakewalk either, I'm sure."

"But we both want to know why you walked away from Luke and never got in touch with him again," Beth broke in. "We're done with questions and answers for the moment, and Luke will be here any minute. I'm sure you've got a tough evening ahead of you. But we want answers, Mom. And we deserve to have them. Courtney, too."

"I know, I know. And thank you for not ripping my head off, which you have every right to do."

They squeezed her between them in a warm hug.

"We're spending the night," Beth told her, "so we'll be here with the brat and available to talk when you get home, if you want."

"Thank you." She gave each one of them a quick kiss and hurried upstairs to change, her stomach in knots and every muscle in her body tighter than a high wire.

But she had barely reached her bedroom before the phone rang.

*Is it Luke? Has he changed his mind? Does he want nothing to do with any of us?*

She picked up the receiver almost reluctantly.

"Hello?"

"That's him, isn't it, you slut."

The rage in Rod Maguire's voice was so violent, she almost dropped the phone.

"Rod?"

"I know it's him. The father of your bastard. The man you betrayed Charles with." He bit off each word.

Julia took a deep breath, doing her best to steady herself.

"I think that's no longer your business." Why couldn't he just go away and leave her alone?

"On the contrary. You betrayed Charles, one of the best men I've ever know, in the worst way possible. How he even wanted to be in the same house with you after that is beyond me. But

he left me specific instructions, Julia. Very specific. And as his executor, I feel duty-bound to carry them out.”

“Rod. Listen to me.” She tried to think what to say. “A lot of time has passed. The twins have grown. We all have a life. Just... let us go on.”

“I’ll ruin him.” The words were virulent. “I’ll find his name and I’ll ruin him. And you and that bastard brat along with him. Be warned.”

The phone disconnected with a slam on the other end. Julia replaced hers with a hand that shook so badly she had to make two tries.

*I have to find a way out of this. He’s doing this for spite, and that’s the most unmanageable motivator. But I can’t let him destroy Luke or Courtney. I can’t.*

Her mind was scattered, and while she changed, she tried to find answers to this mess. There just didn’t seem to be any. She’d fallen in love with a man who could mean everything to her, and fourteen years later she was still being punished for it.

Luke arrived promptly at six. Julia hurried to let him in, but Beth and Andy were ahead of her.

She braced herself for an uncomfortable few moments, but she had obviously way underestimated her older children. Andy pulled the door open to give Luke room to enter and held out his hand.

“Andrew Patterson. I’m very pleased to meet you.”

They shook hands and Andy drew Beth forward.

“I’m Elizabeth,” she said. “Beth.” She studied Luke’s face. “Please take good care of our mother. She’s really been through a lot.”

Luke was startled. Julia knew this wasn’t at all the kind of reception he’d been prepared for. Nor had she. It seemed all these years, when she’d been so frightened of how the twins would react to her situation, might just possibly have been wasted. But apparently she’d also lived in a fool’s paradise where their opinion of Charles was concerned. What if she’d just told Rod Maguire to go to hell once the twins turned twenty-one? At least they’d have arrived at this moment a few years earlier.

She was suddenly aware that everyone was staring at her. Waiting for her to do or say something. She forced a smile.

“I’m ready,” she said to Luke. Then she kissed each of the twins. “Thanks for everything.”

“No sweat,” Andy told her.

Luke looked up the stairs. "Where's Courtney?"

"In her room." Julia wondered if she'd have to explain the agony of the afternoon to him right now.

Finally, Luke shifted his gaze back to her. "All right, then. I guess we're ready to go."

"You raised some really great kids," he said when they were in the car.

"Better than even I imagined."

And those were the last words they exchanged during the tense ride to the restaurant.

\* \* \* \*

"I have a lot of questions for you."

Luke had just given his drink order to the waiter. Julia asked for hot tea. She didn't need alcohol to dull her wits that were already pretty scrambled.

"I'm sure you have. And I'll give you the best answers I can. I promise."

His eyes narrowed. "No sidestepping," he warned. "All the cards on the table."

"Yes. I owe you that."

"Why don't we eat first? You look about the way I feel. Some nourishment might do you some good."

But she barely ate any of her meal. She simply couldn't swallow anything but the tea, which the waiter kept refilling.

He'd managed to find an out of the way place to take her, and she was so grateful he was sensitive to the need for them not to be disturbed. Julia didn't think she'd see anyone she knew, but you never could tell. She was always expecting Rod to pop up like some jack-in-the-box.

"Julia." Luke put his coffee cup down and looked across the table at her. "I think it's time to talk."

"Yes." She closed her eyes and prayed for strength and guidance to get through this. To make him see things from her point of view. For him to forgive her. He might not want either her or Courtney in his life now, but she couldn't stand it if he hated either one of them.

She started with the reason for her divorce and it just all came rolling out. She was totally honest with him. Well, almost. She gave him every detail of Charles's illness, unloaded her guilty feelings about his heart attack, and even confessed the one time she'd called Hot Ticket trying to get in touch with him.

"I understand the pressure you were under, believe me." He paused. "But I think we still have a lot of unanswered questions on the table here. We haven't gotten to the reason you

couldn't let me know what was going on." His voice was calm and even, but there was strain and even anger behind it. "I know Claire told you how many times I called, but you couldn't take a minute to contact me at all. Not once."

"No," she said, her voice so low she almost didn't hear it herself. "I didn't."

"I have a daughter I didn't know about and I've missed thirteen years of her life. You tell me she's going through a very rough patch, not unusual for teenagers, but maybe I could have helped." He signaled the waiter and ordered another drink before continuing. "So let's agree that you were behind the eight ball while Charles was dying at the home you so graciously accepted him back into. But what about after the funeral? What then, Julia?"

"I didn't want you hurt." She was almost whispering now, afraid to get the words out.

"Hurt?" He picked up the drink the waiter placed in front of him, took a healthy swallow and reached across the table for her hand. It was the first intimate contact he'd made with her since picking her up. "How on earth could I be more hurt than to be shut completely out of your life after what we had building between us?"

And then, like a bad dream, a shadow fell over the table and she looked up to see Rod Maguire standing there.

*I should probably stop going to restaurants.*

Hysteria threatened to bubble up inside her, and she had to forcefully tamp it down.

"Hello, Julia. How about introducing me to your... companion?"

*Choose your time or it will make the choice for you.*

She could hear Claire's words very clearly. Somewhere deep inside her, she found the remains of her courage and pulled herself together.

"Hello, Rod." She congratulated herself on her composure. "This doesn't seem like your usual place to hang out."

"The owners are new clients. Sharon and I are having dinner with them." He looked pointedly at Luke. "And you are?"

"Luke Buchanan. And you?"

"This is Rod Maguire," Julia said, hands folded in front of her so neither man could see how they trembled. "He was a friend of Charles's and one of his law partners."

"Yes." It was difficult for anyone to miss the distaste in his voice. "Charles Patterson and I were childhood friends. He was a great man and an excellent attorney."



"I'm sure he was." Luke's voice was mild. "How fortunate for him, then, to find a woman of such quality as Julia for his wife."

"Fortunate. Really. An interesting word. Well. I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again." He looked at Julia. "Right, Julia?"

"Nice of you to stop by, Rod." She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing he rattled her. "Don't let us keep you from your clients."

He gave her one last scathing look before walking away.

Julia slumped in her chair, wondering how long she could remain upright. Wondering if this day was ever going to end. Wondering if dying would be easier than this. She was still looking down at her hands when the waiter placed a glass in front of her.

"Drink it." Luke's voice, penetrating the fog. "Come on, Julia. You're white as a sheet and look like you're about to faint."

When she made no move to do anything, Luke reached across the table and placed her fingers around the glass.

"Drink it, honey. Then we'll talk."

Honey. She hadn't thought she'd ever hear any term of endearment from him ever again. It gave her enough strength to lift her drink and take a swallow. The amaretto burned its way down her throat and into her bloodstream and shook her out of the well of defeat she'd fallen into.

"Good." Luke tipped the glass toward her. "A little more. Then we're getting out of here. I'm guessing that asshole we just saw has something to do with all of this and I want to leave before I'm tempted to kill him."

Somehow she managed to sit there while he paid the check, then let him help her out of the chair and lead her from the restaurant. When they got into his car, her reserve snapped and the tears she'd been holding back for fourteen years came flooding out.

"I'm glad I have a car with a bench seat," Luke told her, pulling her close to him and cradling her against his chest.

She cried until she was sure all her tears were gone and then she cried some more. A storm of such violence when it subsided, she had no strength left. So when Luke tightened his arms around her and said, "I'd prefer not to do this in a car, but I think if you don't get it out now you'll strangle on it. So let's have it. All of it."

She shook her head. "I can't. It's so... I can't."

“Julia.” He tipped her face up so she had to look in his eyes. “There’s no place to hide any more. Whatever it is, I want to hear it all. Okay? Please?”

She had to search for a place to start, but once she started it seemed she couldn’t stop. It came out, all of it. Charles’s explicit terms, her promise to agree to them to protect her children, the letters still in Rod Maguire’s safe. Maguire himself, who’d always hated her and took great pleasure in controlling her life. All of it. Her pitiable miserable existence. And the guilt she’d lived with all these years.

Luke stroked her face and she was so pathetically gratefully for just that little bit of tenderness, she almost began crying again. He heaved a great sigh and brushed a kiss against her forehead.

“Julia. My God.”

“I’m so sorry, Luke. Everything is my fault. All of it. And now the children know anyway. Oh, hell.” She burrowed against his chest, trying to hide from whatever she might see in his eyes.

He cupped her chin and forced her to look at him. She tried to read him, but there was so much going on in her own mind.

“Listen to me. I’m a lot of things right now. Pissed off. Murderous. Sad. Hurt. The list is endless. But most of all I’m upset that you let a man bully you into sacrificing your life because you wanted to protect me. Julia, I’m a grown man who’s not without resources, and Rod Maguire sounds like nothing but a big bully. Most likely just as Charles was.”

“But—”

“No buts. Okay?” His breath was a warm breeze against her chilled skin. “I had a lot of emotions to deal with today, not the least of which was anger. I won’t lie to you about that. But there’s a lot to sort out here, and now I’m thinking about the kind of hell you’ve lived in for the past fourteen years. This won’t be easy but we’ll sort it out, honey. I promise you.”

She pressed her face against his chest. “I love you, Luke. I’ve never stopped. I have to make you believe that.”

He sighed. “I know that. Same goes here. I guess that’s what made it hurt so much. But we’ll get past it.”

“I thought you’d hate me,” she said in a small voice.

“I tried to,” he confessed. “It would make things a lot easier for me. But I guess loving you is just too strong for me to walk away from.” He slid her back into her seat again. “Meanwhile, we

have a lot of damage control to do. Have you told the kids why you've never said anything about this?"

"You're kidding, right? How can I possibly tell them that story?" She shook her head. "It was enough of a shock tonight for you to find out about Courtney. And for me to learn how my kids really felt about their father."

"We need to make some plans," he pointed out. "Your friend Maguire will be looking to do his worst."

"I can't let him near the kids," she whispered.

"He won't." He took one of her hands in his. "We have a lot to sort out, including what's between us. But I think we've had enough for tonight. Tomorrow is Sunday. Let's have a civilized brunch while we figure out where the two of us are going. Then we can figure out what we're going to say to Courtney. Together. Okay?"

She gave him a weak smile. "Okay."

\* \* \* \*

It was raining lightly when they left the restaurant, but by the time they turned onto Julia's street, it was a full blown storm whipped up by a capricious wind. But even through the rain, Julia saw Claire's car in the driveway behind Andy's and Beth's. And apparently every light in the house had been turned on. Her stomach clenched and a sick feeling rushed through her.

"Something's wrong," she said, fighting to keep herself together. What else could possibly happen tonight?

"Don't borrow trouble yet," he told her. "Let's see what's up first."

"But there's no reason for Claire to be here tonight. She and Brad had plans."

"Let's get inside first before we panic. It may be nothing."

Apparently someone had been watching for them, because the front door opened and Andy hurried out with a big umbrella. Luke hunched his shoulders against the rain as he went to open Julia's door, then squeezed her between Andy and himself as they ran into the house. Miranda, a strained look on her face, was waiting for them in the foyer with towels to blot themselves dry.

Julia looked around the foyer. Claire and Beth were seated on the stairs. Brad leaned against the wall, his hands in his pockets. No one was smiling. Julia unconsciously reached for Luke's hand, shaking off the five pairs of eyes that followed the movement.

"All right. What's wrong? Is it Courtney? Where is she?"

"First of all, don't get too excited." Claire rose and came over to her, giving her a hug. "I'm sure everything's going to be fine."

"My God." Julia trembled. "Is she sick? Did you take her to the hospital? What is it?"

"Mom?" Andy was next to her now. "Don't freak, but she's gone."

"Gone?" Julia thought her heart had stopped beating. She squeezed Luke's hand as hard as she could to keep herself together. "What do you mean, gone?"

"I checked on her right after you left," Beth said. "Andy and I thought we'd take her out to eat, but she wouldn't open her door. Wouldn't say anything except tell us to go away."

Andy picked up the thread. "We waited about a half hour and then I went up. I was ready to break the door down if I had to, but it was unlocked. Her window was open and she was gone."

"B-But how? How did she get out?"

"Over the garage roof, I think," Andy told her. "It's right out her window. Then she can shimmy down the drainpipe."

"They called me," Claire said, "because they didn't want to disturb the two of you until they had to."

Brad uncorked himself from the wall and held out his hand to Luke. "Brad Westbrook. Sorry we had to meet like this." He turned to Julia. "I went out looking in my car. Figured a kid her age couldn't get too far. And we're not exactly on a bus line here. Claire and the twins started calling all her friends."

"Mom, she hardly sees any of them anymore," Beth said, her face filled with distress. "They said she hangs out with a weird group."

"I know. We've had huge fights about it."

Luke seemed to rouse himself from whatever shock he was in. "Julia, you need to put on something warm and dry. Why don't you go change and we'll go into the family room and see where we're at. I promise you she's not far away. She's just trying to scare you. Us."

"I can't—"

He touched a finger to her lips. "Yes. You won't be any good if you get sick." He looked at Beth. "Why don't you help your mother? Andy, is there any brandy around here?"

"She likes hot tea," Miranda put in.

"Dump some brandy in it," Luke told her. He took Julia's hand again. "Go on. Put on something comfortable while we work on this."

"Luke, she's been gone a long time."

"I know, honey. But it will be all right. Okay?"

She finally let Beth lead her upstairs and obediently changed into the sweats her daughter dug out of the closet for her. She was startled when Beth drew her into a fierce hug and began to cry.

"It's my fault," she sobbed. "I should have kept a closer eye on her. I knew she was upset. I should have made her open the door to me."

"Hush." Julia stroked her daughter's hair. "If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I tried to protect everyone and just ended up making a mess of things."

"I'm so sorry, Mom. I'm just so sorry."

Julia tipped Beth's face up so she could look at it. "I don't want to hear you say that again. I should have done something about this situation a long time ago. I was a coward and now we're all paying for it."

"D-Does he want to see her?" Beth asked in a small voice.

"Oh, honey, of course he does. He's furious with me that I kept her from him for so long." She released Beth and stepped back, running her fingers through her hair. "Another problem I'll have to deal with."

"Do you... do you think you guys can work it out?"

From somewhere, Julia found a smile. "I hope so. Right now we're taking things one at a time. And the first thing is to find Courtney."

Luke was standing in the foyer when they came back downstairs, everyone else hovering in the background.

"The security guard in my building just called me on my cell," he said. "Apparently Courtney's there asking for me."

"Oh, my God." Julia dug her fingernails into her palms to steady herself. "How did she get there? Is she okay? Wait. I'll get my coat and we can go down there right away."

"Hold it." Luke held up a hand. "I'm doing this one solo."

"But—"

"She came to see *me*. Made it her business to find a way to get there. I think I should talk to her alone first. Julia, if she sees you, she'll think I sold her out and she'll clam up."

"But I'm her mother," she protested.

"Of course you are." He gave her a steady look. "And I'm her father. It's time I stepped up to the plate in that role."

"He's right." Claire hugged Julia. "Maybe things were just supposed to happen this way. Maybe it's the stick of dynamite needed to blow it apart so you guys can put it back together."

"Come on, Mom." Andy tugged her toward the kitchen. "I've got tea and brandy for you, and Luke's cell phone number. Let him do this. Okay?"

Julia stood rooted to the floor for a long moment, filled with indecision and panic, and the sense that she was losing everything. But then Luke stepped over to her and pressed a brief kiss to her lips. The five people watching didn't seem to phase him and gave her the first real flame of hope.

"I promise I'll call you. I'll let you know when I get there and then I'll call again after she and I talk. Now go let your friends and family take care of you."

And then he was gone, out into the night and the rain and whatever disaster awaited him with the daughter he'd just discovered he had.

\* \* \* \*

Luke sat across the kitchen table from his daughter, marveling at once that such a wondrous creature had come into his life and at the same time dreading all the angst he knew was yet to come. In some ways, teenage girls weren't much different than teenage boys—they were both rebellious, angry, and uncertain. He just hoped he had the sense and strength to get a handle on things before she became a teenager in earnest.

She looked much different than the sodden mess waiting for him in the lobby with the guard when he'd arrived.

"I hope it was okay to call you, Mr. Buchanan." He looked at Courtney. "She said she's your daughter and wanted me to let her into your place. Is that true?"

"Yes, she's my daughter."

"Well, I hadn't seen her before and I thought I ought to check with you first."

"You did the right thing. Thanks." He tucked a folded bill into the guard's hand, then nodded to Courtney. "How about we go upstairs? You look too damn wet to be comfortable."

She'd been a combination of surly and scared when he got her upstairs. He managed to convince her she needed to get out of her wet clothes and bully her into a shower. While she was under the hot spray he'd called Julia to tell her Courtney was safe, that she'd walked in the rain to the gas station a mile away and called a taxi, using her birthday money to pay for it. And he'd call

again after a while, but she was not to rush right down there. He'd had her put Claire on the phone to make sure she and Brad took care of that.

He obviously had no clothes for a thirteen-year-old girl, so he did the best he could—a pair of shorts, and a T-shirt, and a couple of safety pins. He'd poured hot tea into her and sat in silence, waiting for her to say whatever she'd come to tell him. He hoped he'd given her the answers she was looking for.

*God, Julia, what a mess you made of things.*

But it was his fault, too. He could have pushed harder. Tried harder. Used Claire as an ally. Somehow bullied her into telling him the hellish situation she'd trapped herself in. Well, all so much water under the bridge now. It was what it was, and they could only move forward.

He'd fixed her something to eat, but she let it sit in front of her while everything rolled out of her. All the questions. All the pain. Everything. Thirteen years worth of it. She'd bombarded him with questions, sulked and then shouted at him, and cried her way through half a box of tissues before finally settling down. Now she finished the last of the sandwich he'd fixed for her and drained her glass of milk. She wiped her mouth with the paper napkin, crumpled it into a ball, and dropped it on the empty plate.

"So are you gonna hang around or what?"

Her air of false bravado stabbed at him. She wanted so badly to have a father, to have a place in his life, but she'd been flailing at the wind for so long she didn't know quite how to settle down.

"That's my plan," he told her calmly. "Would you like that?"

"I guess. That is, if you'd like it too."

Her defenses were so sharp they pierced his heart. He and Julia had a lot of fence mending to do. Not the least of which was between the two of them.

"I'd like that very much." He took a swallow of his coffee.

"Will you move into our house? Live with us?" She didn't look at him while she talked, as if fearing what she might see on his face.

"That's up to your mother and me. But wherever I live, Courtney, you will be a very important part of my life. I promise you that."

Silence.

"Is she mad at me?"

He didn't have to ask who *she* was. "I think scared and worried is more like it."

"Are *you* mad at me?"

"There's plenty of time for me to get mad at you when we sort all this out. I think all parents get mad at their kids at some time or other." He smiled. "How often I get mad and how much will depend on you."

More silence.

"Do you *want* to live with us?"

Did he? Could he forgive Julia that easily? More than his anger was a fierce sense of protectiveness, and a different kind of rage, this one aimed at Charles Patterson and Rod Maguire. He'd take care of that situation in his own way. And if he put everything else aside, he'd never stopped loving Julia. Not even his anger and pain now could disguise that or displace it. So yes, he wanted to live with Julia and Courtney. As a family.

"Yes," he told her. "I do. As soon as your mother and I... fix some things."

"Are you as mad at her for not telling you as I am?"

Luke knew this was an important question. "I don't think mad is the word. Hurt, maybe. And sorry that I've missed out on so much of your life. But we have plenty of time now to make up for it."

It took the better part of another hour before Courtney finally ran down and exhaustion grabbed her.

"How about if you bunk in the guest room?" he asked gently. "I'll call your mother and work it out with her. That okay with you?"

Her eyelids were already drooping. "Yeah. If you want me to, that is."

"I want you to very much," he told her in a soft voice.

"All right, then."

She was asleep seconds after her head hit the pillow. Luke left the door cracked open in case she had a nightmare or got scared in the middle of the night. Then he called Julia.

"She's fine," he assured her when she insisted she was coming right down there. "Go to bed, Julia. And have someone bring you here in the morning. Let me talk to Claire."

But it was Andy who came on the phone. "We'll make sure she gets to bed," he told Luke. "I know you and Mom have a lot to talk about, but Beth and I would like to bring her to your place in the morning and take everyone out to breakfast." He hesitated. "If that's okay."

*How many times have I heard that phrase already tonight?*



“Yes. That will be good. Then you can take Courtney home while your mother and I take care of business.”

“Thank you, sir. We’ll see you about nine o’clock. I don’t think we can keep her away longer than that.”

Luke actually found himself laughing. “No, I guess you’re right. Nine o’clock it is. And bring some clothes for your sister.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

"Luke, could you zip up my dress, please?" Julia called.

The dress was a pain in the rear, and expensive as hell to boot. But the moment she'd tried it on, both her husband and her daughter had insisted that was the one. And for such a special day as Courtney's graduation, she was willing to indulge them. Now she stood in the big walk-in closet struggling to reach behind her.

"Here. I'll do it."

Luke's warm hands brushed hers away and before he tugged on the metal tab, he took a moment to kiss the nape of her neck.

"You smell great," he murmured. "Too bad we're on a time table here, or I'd yank this dress off, toss you on the bed, and ravish you."

"Could you hold that thought until later?" she teased.

"You bet. Then I'll be holding something else." He nipped the lobe of her ear, then pulled the zipper into place.

"We have to leave in ten minutes," Courtney called from the hall.

"We'll be ready," Luke answered. "Come on in and let us see you."

Julia, Courtney, and Beth had done the salon thing that morning while Andy and Luke caught breakfast. Julia never stopped being amazed at how the twins had bonded with Luke so easily after such a disastrous beginning. Their wedding had been a quiet one, taking place two months after what she'd taken to calling "the disaster weekend". They were married at the house, with only the children, Claire, Brad, and Miranda in attendance, and Miranda had cooked a feast for them in celebration. And somehow the family structure had developed from that.

Not without its hurdles, however.

Luke's wedding gift to her had been more than she could ever have asked for.

A week after their “disaster,” on Saturday morning, they were finishing a family breakfast, all of them together including Andy and Beth when Rod Maguire showed up at their door unannounced. Andy happened to be the one who opened the door for him, and from her seat at the kitchen table Julia saw his body tighten with anger.

“We’re busy,” he said.

“I came to see your mother, so just get out of my way and let me take care of business.”

He rudely pushed Andy aside and strode into the kitchen. But Andy was beside him in a second.

“If you came to expose what you think is some big secret, we all know everything.” His voice sounded so deep and mature Julia had wanted to cry.

“Is that so?” Rod’s voice had its usual nasty edge she’d gotten used to. “Including the fact that she’s a whore and your so-called sister is a bastard?”

Courtney’s face turned chalk white, but Beth reached over and took her hand, smiling encouragement at her.

Luke rose from his chair, his face dark with rage, and stood so close to Maguire the other man had to take a step back.

“Here’s a couple of things for you, asshole. One. Do not ever speak of this woman or our child in that manner again. And I mean never.” He held up two fingers. “Two. Do not ever, and I mean, never, come to this house again under any circumstances. Or approach any member of this family.”

“You can’t stop me,” Maguire sneered. “I’ll ruin you. By the time I’m finished, you won’t be able to get a job selling T-shirts at the county fair.”

“Three.” Luke reached into his pants pocket, pulled out his money clip, and extracted a business card he’d stuck in there. He held out the card to Maguire. “This is my attorney. Eugene Walsh. I believe you’re familiar with him. Alan Wilson assures me he has more clout than anyone else I can retain. He said he’d be delighted to face you in court over a suit for libel or slander, whichever method you choose.” He tucked the card in Rod’s pocket. “Oh, and by the way. He’ll be calling you about the trusts you’re managing for this family. Looking out for our interests, so to speak.”

“I see. You think you’ve fallen into a pot of gold and you plan to protect it.”

Julia started to say something but Luke held up a hand to stop her. "I don't need Julia's money, or that of the children. But they deserve it and I won't let you screw them out of it." He clamped his hand on the other man's elbow. "And now, I think you were just leaving."

Julia was half laughing, half crying when he came back to the table. "I should have had a camera to take a picture of his face," she told him.

"He's a bully," Luke said. "I know why you didn't fight back when the kids were younger, but it's time to get the monkey off our backs."

Courtney was still pale and shaking. Luke pulled her up from the chair and wrapped his arms around her. "It's okay, kitten. All taken care of. Nobody—and nothing—is going to hurt you. I promise you that."

There were still legal strings entangling them. Julia wanted the fund her money came from liquidated and distributed among the three children, and she was still worried Rod might pull funny stuff with the trusts for the twins. But apparently one meeting was all it had taken to get things straight. Somehow Gene even got Rod to hand over the letters Charles had left. Luke gave them to Julia and they had a little ceremony out on the patio when she burned them.

Building trust with Courtney had taken some time, but Luke was patient and eventually she began to respond. Even more amazing was how quickly something special grew between him and the twins. And watching Luke with her children had given her an idea. A month after they were married, when Luke was in Los Angeles at a conference, and swearing everyone to secrecy, Julia flew to Boston to meet with Michael and Jared Buchanan. She hadn't even been sure they'd accept her phone calls, but with her children gathered around her for courage, she'd dialed the numbers. She was sure it was only curiosity that made them take her calls and agree to meet with her, but she took whatever she could get.

They all met in a restaurant at the Boston airport, a meeting that began in hostility but ended with a hint of conciliation. She'd brought pictures, not only of Luke and Courtney but of the twins, of Luke speaking at events, and of their family gatherings. Although they called her separately a few times after that, each time cautiously and with more questions, she wasn't sure she'd actually be able to heal the breach. But their relationship with their mother was fractured and she sensed they were looking for some kind of familial anchor.

Holding her breath, she extended the invitation to Luke's birthday dinner at one of their favorite restaurants. Not only did his sons come, but also their wives and children. She was sure it was the first time she'd ever seen Luke Buchanan speechless. The evening had many moments of

strain and unease, but it was a good beginning. Now at least Luke and his sons kept in touch with each other and she and Luke had made two trips to Boston.

So many changes, Julia mused, as she searched for her shoes. Among them had been what everyone referred to as “the move”. Luke had insisted she sell the house.

“It’s diseased,” he told her. “No wonder no one’s happy in it. No way can we make a fresh start in this place.”

Even in a slow market it sold quickly, along with most of the furniture. They’d all camped out at Luke’s suite at the hotel while the new house was being built at the northwest tip of the city. Luke had insisted Courtney be included in every decision, including all the shopping, and she bloomed under his love and care. Maybe Beth had been right and what her child lacked the most was a father. Or maybe it was just *this* father.

The Connell Wilson launch had gone so well that Bright Ideas had picked up more clients. Bigger ones. That meant more staff and bigger offices. But at the end of the day, she always came home to Luke and the comfort of his body in bed.

Now, on the very special day, Courtney burst into the room, breathless. “How do I look?”

And Julia’s own breath caught in her throat. Her sullen, angry, rebellious child had grown into a beautiful teenager, with acceptable grades and a blossoming personality. The result of Luke’s work, she knew, and it hadn’t been an easy task for him. Courtney twirled around, the skirt of her soft blue dress spinning with her like a cloud, her shining black hair hanging in waves to her shoulders.

“Gorgeous,” Luke said and kissed her on the cheek. “I’d hug you but I don’t want to disturb such beauty.”

Courtney laughed. “Daddy, you crack me up. I guess I’ll just have to hug you.”

And she did, bringing tears to Julia’s eyes.

Dimly, she heard the front door open and close, and Miranda hollered up the stairs, “Beth and Andy are here. Y’all comin’ down or not?”

Luke smiled at her. “I guess we’d better go.”

Miranda was waiting in the foyer with a camera. “I want plenty of shots to post on my Facebook page.”

Courtney’s jaw dropped. “*You* have a Facebook page?”

Miranda cocked an eyebrow. “Any reason why I shouldn’t? Now everyone get together. That’s right. Boy, don’t you just look like a fine family.”

*Yes, we do.*

And as they stood together while Miranda snapped away, Julia realized that at long last, after so many years of incredible misery, she had not only found the love she'd been missing, she'd found herself.

## *About the Author*

Desiree Holt has lived a life of excitement that brings the color to her writing. She was a summer fishing guide, a summer field hand where she was one of only three women working, and a member of a beginning ski team that skied in competition (and no, no broken bones!). She spent several years in the music business representing every kind of artist from country singer to heavy metal rock bands. For several years she also ran her own public relations agency handling any client that interested her. She is twice a finalist for an EPIC E-Book Award, a nominee for a Romantic Times Reviewers Choice Award, winner of the first 5 Heart Sweetheart of the Year Award at The Romance Studio as well as a CAPA Award, winner of two Holt Medallion Awards of Merit, and is published by four different houses. *Romance Junkies* said of her work: "Desiree Holt is the most amazing erotica author of our time and each story is more fulfilling than the last."

Desiree loves to talk to her readers. She can be found at [www.desireeholt.com](http://www.desireeholt.com) and [www.desireeholttellsall.com](http://www.desireeholttellsall.com)

## *Handcuffs and Lace*

### Resplendence Publishing's Erotic Romance Line of Law Enforcement Themed Stories

#### *Handcuffs and Lies* by Bronwyn Green

Sometimes promises to friends are the hardest to keep. Undercover police officer, Michael Tanner, promised his dying partner that he'd take care of the man's little sister. Trouble is, after her brother's death, Doctor Tori Spinelli wants nothing to do with Michael—or any other cop for that matter.

Tori has always fought against overprotective men and deception. Forced into protective custody with Michael, she's now faced with both in the same package. Despite their differences, Tori falls in love with him, but how can she trust a man who lies for a living?

#### *Shadow Hunter* by Aurora Rose Lynn

A menacing shadow lies over Evan Fox, a NYPD detective. Months earlier, he believed his job was done. The terrorist who almost took countless lives on a subway train is searching for the beautiful woman who foiled his attack. Evan needs to get into her apartment to protect her, but will his actions be seen as simply a way to get her into bed?

Although she's moved on with her life, Grace Baxter, a former FBI agent, endures life under the shadow of her troubled past. Once she opens the door to the handsome police officer who stood by her when she needed someone to care, there is no turning back. She thought she knew him, but she was wrong. The shadows of the past merge with those of the present. Who is the hunted and who is the hunter?

#### *Cuffed Again* by Mia Jae

The Chief Financial Officer of the non-profit Cerise Thacker runs has been cooking her books. The DA fears the CFO's deep family roots will come after Cerise, particularly after the CFO states he will "fucking see to her death." So she's whisked away in a Yellow Cab into a short-term police protection program to keep her safe. The cabbie? Isaac Walker, undercover cop. For the duration, Isaac will be her protector, even though she doesn't want protection.

Thing is Cerise and Isaac are not strangers. They'd shared a role-play domme/sub encounter about a year earlier—neither of them revealing who they really were. Now they are thrust together in a situation of extreme danger and passion where Isaac must remain in control of the



situation at all costs, even though he so very much wants to give it up to Cerise. And Cerise must do everything that Isaac says to the letter, even if she doesn't want to.

That is, if they want to get out of this thing alive.

### ***Handcuffs and Leather* by Kim Dare**

All Constable Hadley wants to do is put the last few weeks behind him. As if being taken hostage wasn't bad enough, he's had to deal with all the stupid publicity that's surrounded him ever since. And the fact that he hasn't slept since that night isn't helping him feel any better about the world, either.

The last thing Hadley needs is a shrink wandering around inside his head trying to dig up all his dirty little secrets. When he finds out he's being sent to Dr. Rawlings—the man he's had a crush on for months—Hadley knows his life has finally hit rock bottom.

The only thing that could make things worse for Hadley would be Dr. Rawlings finding out how he feels about him. But fate wouldn't be that cruel to him—would it?

### ***Stripped* by Celia Kyle**

Sometimes life just required tequila...and vodka...and a shot or two of whiskey for good measure. Jasmine Wright, Jazz to her friends, has reached that point. And now all that liquor is making her clothes fall off—in the middle of the street. Good thing a friendly neighborhood police officer stops to help.

Sheriff Ian Blackwell has loved Jazz since high school and then some. When their relationship burned out so many years ago, he wasn't sure he would recover. Now he's getting a second chance, and he won't Jazz slip away from him this time. He has her naked and at his mercy, and he's going to keep her that way. Forever.

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***The Bargain* by Desiree Holt**

Lara McKee's life came to a crashing halt the night her husband was killed in a carjacking and she lost their unborn child. Now she channels all her energy into her job as assistant to Cole Cassidy, sexy CEO of Alamo Construction. Cole's own life is a mess. A shotgun marriage based on a lie and the fiery death of his wife on the highway have left him with a child to raise that's a constant reminder of his first wife's lies and deceit. Both of them have written marriage out of their future.

But Cole desperately needs someone to mother the child and take charge of his personal life. When he proposes a marriage of convenience to Lara, who still yearns for motherhood, she shocks herself by accepting. And so these two people, carrying a van load of emotional baggage, begin to build a life together under almost impossible circumstances. Conflict builds over the child, whom Lara falls in love with at once and Cole ignores.

Beneath the daily conflict, love unexpectedly begins to grow. But at the moment they dare to explore their feelings, anger over the child erupts and the night turns into a disaster that nearly destroys the marriage. Slowly, bit by bit, they begin to re build their relationship, carefully nurturing these new feelings. But it takes another near-tragedy before they can finally get past the hurdles to complete happiness and truly become a family.

***Checkmate* by Kris Norris**

*For years he's hidden in the shadows...watching...hunting. His attempts have never been successful, until now. And his game is just beginning.*

Kendall Walker and her brother, Trace, share a passion for adventure racing. But when Trace is kidnapped by a psychotic figure from their past, Kendall finds herself immersed in an adventure race beyond anything she's ever known. And if she doesn't reach each checkpoint in time, Trace will die. She'll do anything to get her brother back, even surrendering to a man intent on becoming her lover. Luckily for her, Dawson has other plans.

Special Agent Dawson Cade doesn't know how his life went from complacent to complicated in what feels like a heartbeat. He has absolutely no leads on the bastard terrorizing Kendall, and he can't stop himself from wanting to take her into his bed. He knows he needs to keep distant, but when circumstances force him to succumb to the desires of a man intent on possessing Kendall, Dawson must face the truth. He's going to be Kendall's next lover, even if she doesn't know it yet.

And as the race begins, he can only hope he's able to save Trace, and keep Kendall from sacrificing herself, in a game where even victory has a price.

### ***Harvest Moon* by Janet Eaves**

After her sadistic husband is dead, Winifred Butler believes herself finally free of his horror. But he continues to torment her from the grave as his secrets and lies, treason and terror, bring Agent Tom Green to her door. She is as determined to keep her past a secret as Tom is committed to bringing her secrets to light. Only one of them can win. So both must fight the attraction to the other, knowing they have everything to lose...

### ***A Perfect Escape* by Maddie James**

*A changed identity. A secluded beach. A sniper.*

Megan Thomas is running for her life. From Chicago, from the mob, from her husband. She runs to the only place she feels safe—a secluded cottage on an east coast barrier island.

Smyth Parker is running from life. From work, from society, from a jealous ex-wife—his only consolation the solitude of Newport Island. He doesn't need to anyone to screw up that plan. And he sure as hell doesn't need to complicate it with Megan Thomas.

But when Megan fears she's been found, she runs to the only safe place she knows, and straight into the arms of the one person who might be able to help, Smyth. Her escape might yet still be perfect. Or is it?

### ***Rough Edges* by Jannifer Hoffman**

When Julia Morgan M.D. miscarries twin girls, she divorces her husband, believing he is to blame. He forces her out of her position at the hospital and threatens her credibility as a doctor if she attempts to practice medicine. Without mentioning her medical degree, Julia accepts a position as nanny on a Colorado ranch 900 miles away.

Dirk Travis is in trouble. His wife has gone missing, and his housekeeper is threatening to quit. He is in desperate need of a reliable person to look after his four-year-old twins. Even though Julia appears to be the answer to his prayers, he can't help but think she's a bit too perfect.

Both insist their relationship will be business only. While those plans start to go awry, other things begin to happen. People are getting killed and Dirk is the prime suspect, but that doesn't stop the heat index from rising between Dirk and Julia, even as she appears to be the next target.

### ***Brilliant Disguise* by JL Wilson**

*An undercover FBI agent in a tiny Iowa town finds you can't hide anything from a woman who's determined to find out the truth...*

Nick Baxter, an undercover FBI agent, thinks his *brilliant disguise* will fool the hicks in New Providence, Iowa. They won't suspect he's there investigating widow Shannon Delgardie, under suspicion of treason. What Nick doesn't know is that everybody in town is conspiring to protect her and investigate him in return.

Shannon needs help. The men her late husband blackmailed are closing in and the FBI might be involved. When Nick approaches her, can she trust him? With the aid of computer hackers and hair stylists, she uncovers the truth, finding a love she never expected in a tiny Iowa town.

### ***Worlds Apart* by Kris Norris**

Two cultures—one dusty planet. Intergalactic relations have never been so hot.

Starship Captain Samantha Grier has only two options—crash land her warship on an unknown planet inhabited by God knows what, or drift through space. She never counted on becoming part of a colony of barbarians, or becoming the center of attention for their illustrious leader...a man more than capable of claiming both her heart and her body. Too bad not everyone is thrilled by the new sleeping arrangements.

Griffin can't believe his good fortune. Not only did the humans arrive just as their power grid was failing, but their Captain is a vision of beauty. With blue eyes and fair skin, he knows instantly that she's his intended mate. But claiming her is the easy part. When brutal attacks bring the two cultures to the brink of war, will he be able to keep the colony together, while maintaining his role as her mate? Or will the tension leave them worlds apart?

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