

Romantic Signs

**By
Kathryn Jay**

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Taurus

Taunting the Bull

Memory is funny. The things you remember, the things you forget—sometimes there's no rhyme or reason—and it's something that, as a parent, plagues me. I know that no matter how many times I've done the right thing, the indelible image in my kids' minds when they're forty-five might be of that one awful episode that I regret. Or, more likely, some incident that I'll never remember because it didn't seem important at the time.

When I was about ten, my family went to Orlando, Florida, for about a week. But is it Space Mountain or the Jungle Cruise or Pirates of the Caribbean that I remember? No. Pictures tell me we saw all those things, but what I remember is stopping at a diner with my mom to get dinner one evening. The plan was to pick up chicken to take back to the hotel room for the rest of the family. But despite the "Take-Out Chicken" sign that had given us the idea, the diner seemed ill-prepared for actual take-out customers. They took our order and money readily enough, but then we waited. And waited. I tried to quell childish impatience but was enormously relieved when my mom, the most patient of souls, finally sighed, "What do they have to do? Defrost it?" Over the next fifteen or twenty minutes, we came up with increasingly far-fetched speculations, from predicting that they had forgotten that "carry-out" was on the sign to wondering if, perhaps, there was someone out back

desperately trying to catch an aged rooster. I believe there was even the suggestion that the eggs had not yet hatched. We whispered and giggled and were terribly silly. And that wonderful half-hour is what I remember best from our Disney World trip, though we never talked about it again.

Rituals and traditions are a conscious effort to make sure that at least some of our kids' memories are the right ones. So we use the good china for holidays, and we put out cookies for Santa and carrots for the reindeer on Christmas Eve. We celebrate birthdays with a homemade cake and a dinner of the honoree's choosing. (Some people would consider French toast and onion rings a weird combination, but, well, those're Samuel's favorites.) Spring cleaning and Fall Festivals, back-to-school shopping and walking to McDonald's during the first heavy snow of the year—these are the things I know my kids will remember just from sheer repetition.

It's the other things I wonder about.

"Remember that park we went to, the one with the blue and yellow slides and the high swings?" I have no idea. We've been to a lot of parks.

"Remember that time you said if I didn't finish my book report you were going to string me up by my toes in the back yard until I begged to be allowed to do a dozen book reports?" one son asked with feigned innocence when I was giving parenting advice to a friend. (I don't really, but it sounds like something I would have said. And he'd have laughed, not cringed. Honestly.)

"Remember that time we played Yahtzee for hours and hours when the lights went out?" (I do, though I also remember the disquiet of that

hurricane and the power outage; I'm glad their memories are more positive.)

As they've grown, I've become more aware that that time for making childhood memories is very short compared to the time to reflect on those memories. JD, our oldest, is nineteen now and as I took him back to campus for his sophomore year recently I spent much of the four-hour drive looking back over the years that will be the source of his memories, and my own. There was none of the anxiety of wondering if it was a mistake for him to go so soon, to go so far, to go. In the year since he first went away, we had all made our way forward. And, between vacations and visits, even the long drive itself had settled into something of a routine: listening to music, talking easily.

That first year away from home seemed to have given JD a renewed appreciation for home and family. It was a welcome turnabout from the sometimes-insolent persona he'd adopted at sixteen and seventeen. Then, he'd often distained my company and certainly hadn't wanted my opinion or insights. It was nice to have my son back, even if he was taller and broader and more confident than the little boy he would always be in my mind. There had been a time when it was just the two of us facing the world together. And however moody and irritable—even irritating—he had been at seventeen, I always had that reference point to fall back on, that of a sweet, loving little boy when it was just the two of us. He had given me strength and endurance then. Perhaps it was so that I could get through his teen years when he would test them both.

But those struggles were behind us, apparently. On each visit home during his freshman year I had enjoyed him more. In May he had returned home with a burning ambition to get a summer job and sock away as much money as he could to help pay for tuition. That was a striking improvement from the kid who had once said, with what I dearly hoped was false indifference, "Well, it's not like I *have* to go to college." We hadn't wanted to push him, my husband and I, but of course he had to go. Not everyone did, but for JD it was the straightest, most certain path to the future. He was unquestionably gifted (which made his arguments, when he chose to voice them, disturbingly persuasive), and his gift was in science. And you just don't become a chemist or a physicist or biologist without college. I knew by then not to argue, and JD came to the same conclusion on his own, thank goodness. Applications were filed and decisions made, and ultimately he packed his trunks and we drove the four hours to Bucknell in September.

Here it was another September.

Happier now, more content, and certainly more appreciative, JD sat in the passenger seat telling me stories about the roommates he would be moving in with and fiddling with the radio as we drifted in and out of the signals' reach. Finally, he turned it off as the miles of farmland stretched on and on and all he could get was static.

"There are some CDs in the back seat," I reminded him.

"It's okay. It's just noise. I like to hear the quiet," he said with a smile, and I knew he was quoting me to me.

I smiled. Yes, I like to hear the quiet. It lets my mind drift more freely, sort and analyze, plan without pressure. Like yoga without the stretching. Very calming. Even the changing speed limits—45, 55, then 20 for a half-mile as we drove through another small town—took on a Zen-like quality of inevitability. It picked up to 55 again and we were back among the farms.

"So what are you thinking about, Deep Thinker?" I teased.

"Oh, just stuff. It's funny, is all... how I can think back ten years like it was yesterday. But I can't really imagine what things will be like ten years from now."

"I can go back a lot longer than ten years," I agreed, "but you're right that it's harder to see forward." What would he be in ten years? Happy, accomplished, healthy, settled—those kind of prosaic aims came to mind easily; but the concrete reality was harder to pin down. Where would he be living and with whom? How might the economy or politics or technology alter his world? The past, yes, the past was clearer. "Can you really only remember back ten years?" I asked curiously.

"Not *only*, no," he said thoughtfully. "I remember when Shawn was born. I remember when we moved. I remember little things from earlier, but after about nine or ten it's all pretty clear. I know who I hung out with, who my teachers and coaches were. I remember the trouble I got into," he acknowledged with the mischievous grin that made me smile too. "Before that, though, it's a little murkier."

We fell back into easy silence again, both thinking about the past, I suppose. Corn as tall as

the car blocked the view on both sides for minutes at a stretch. It must be nearly ready to harvest, I thought. When the corn was left behind, the farms were dairy or beef. There were clusters of cows grouped around feeding stations.

Then, as though somehow anticipating my thoughts, JD said suddenly, "Remember that time the bull chased us across the field?"

Oh, God, did I!

Christmas Day the year JD was four. It had been a hard day in a series of hard days, but I was determined to salvage it, if only for the little boy in the seat beside me. Trying to be all things to everyone had left me ragged as usual. I had worked a double shift the night before, needing every cent I could eke out in tips, even on Christmas Eve. Childish enthusiasm got me through the few presents that Santa had left, and for a brief couple of hours all the sacrifices and make-do efforts seemed worthwhile. There were no video game consoles or pricey ride-on cars, but the things I *could* manage were a hit. We had to leave behind his favorite—a cardboard fort—but he took his new harmonica and his superhero cape with him to my parents' house where I spent several strained hours watching them dote on their grandson and shoot absent waves of disapproval in my direction.

I steeled myself against even more of it when JD asked innocently, "Are we going to see my other grandma and grandpa tonight too?"

I hadn't told him it was a secret, but I had certainly hoped he wouldn't mention it. "Yes, sweetheart. We'll be leaving right after dinner.

Christmas dinner was usually an early-afternoon affair and I expected to be on the interstate by four o'clock. Somehow it was almost seven before we were pulling out of the driveway, a dozen subtle rebukes still ricocheting in my mind. *Do you really think it's wise to maintain contact with those people? What kind of influence do you think they'll be? And on Christmas? You should stay here. Wouldn't it be better to leave the past in the past?* I had finally snapped at that. "Should I leave you in the past, too? Don't you want to see JD? Don't you think that's your right? Well, so do they!"

Happy goddamn holidays. Why I should have expected things to be different, I don't know. We headed north on a gloomy winter night into the damp, cool air of a threatening storm.

"Merry Christmas!" JD piped up from the seat beside me and pointed. There, dangling from an outstretched construction crane was a Christmas tree outlined in lights. So. His grin always undoes me and I found it easy to bury my anger and fears. Merry Christmas. We sang "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Joy to the World" and "Silent Night," and I felt better than I had all day. He was a sweet and wonderful boy, and I sure as hell wasn't letting anything destroy the one pleasure I had left in life, time with my son. Working two jobs, trying to make ends meet, and dealing with the conflicting demands of everyone else slipped to the edges of my mind for a while, and JD and I were happy.

Then the engine sputtered.

It was just a momentary loss of power, and I hoped for an instant that I had imagined it. But no, it hesitated again with an audible drop in the

engine's sound. When the motor stopped a second later, I bowed to the inevitable and pulled onto the shoulder.

Ten minutes of futile troubleshooting and consulting the ragged owner's manual finally led me to the realization that it was not some inconvenient but inevitable failure of a critical belt. It was not the cumulative strain of 120,000 miles on an economy car. No, it was something far more basic than that. We were out of gas.

How could I have let that happen? I had set aside gas money; it was in my pocket. I had meant to fill the tank on the way to my parents, but the station closest to our apartment was closed for the holiday; I told myself I'd stop the first chance on the interstate. Then forgot. It took a mental effort to silence the disparaging voices that told me what a stupid, irresponsible thing that was to do. It was too late to prevent the problem, but I could still cope, I told myself. If there was one parental lesson I had taken to heart it was that mood was contagious. Fears and anxieties were best kept to myself. In fact, I had discovered that simply adopting a façade—of someone happy, brave, or friendly—often made me feel that way. That night we needed patience and confidence so I played patient and confident.

"Well, JD, it looks like we'll be stuck here for a little bit. But that's okay because I'm sure a policeman will be by soon. He'll help us." With the flashers on and the car pushed all the way to the edge of the shoulder, I still felt uncomfortably close to the traffic lanes. Every time someone sped by in the right lane, our little Honda Civic pitched slightly

in its wake. How long could it be before a patrol car happened by?

I tried to remember how far we were from the last exit but really couldn't. As many times as I'd driven this route (and that was more than my parents were aware), it just wouldn't click. Looking around gave no clues. It was just an anonymous patch of blacktop and concrete that dropped off quickly in the dark. I didn't know how far I was from the last exit or how far I was from the next. On my own, I might have just picked a direction and started walking, maybe even hitchhiked to the next exit, but, my mother's opinion to the contrary, I had become much more responsible with JD in my life. We would wait for the police.

Two hours later I wasn't quite so sanguine. The highway was practically deserted. The rain had subsided to drizzle, but fog moved in and I became increasingly afraid that someone would crash into us just trying to find lane markings in the poor visibility. Abandoning my earlier resolve, I tried to flag someone down, but either they didn't see me or they were so startled by the apparition that they didn't know what to do. No one stopped. Which was almost a relief because I didn't relish the idea of explaining my problem if someone did. *Hello, stranger. I'm stranded out here and no one knows where we are—including me. We're completely at your mercy.* Logic tells me that there are more good people out there than bad, that someone who stopped would likely be trying to help... but the cynical part of me wondered who would be out on a night like this and why would they stop on this

deserted stretch of highway to help a stranger. Where the hell were the state troopers? I climbed back in the car.

JD had stopped seeing it as an adventure and begun to show signs of fear. I wasn't sure how much longer my own bravado would hold up.

We were equipped more for cold than for rain, but we bundled up as best we could and gathered the essentials. In my case that meant my ID and forty dollars in cash in my pocket and a small flashlight in my hand. For JD, it apparently meant his superhero cape and harmonica. Thus provisioned and standing in the drizzle, I tried again to decide whether north or south would be a better bet. An eighteen-wheeler made the decision easier for me by flying by at probably eighty miles an hour, inches away from the car. I had visions of being run over, squished like a squirrel before the driver even knew we were there. Screw that. We were not going either north or south. No, we would not walk along the highway to be hit, and we would not sit in the car and wait to get rear-ended.

We would go east. There was light in the distance, though it was hard to tell how far. It vanished and reappeared with the shifting fog. The wise men had followed a light, right? And I didn't need a king or even a savior. Just a gas station, or maybe shopping center. Anything with a phone. That light had to represent some sort of civilization. People, telephones, relief.

"We're going there," I declared with considerably more enthusiasm than I felt, and pointed into the darkness.

"Cool!" he answered and darted off, his cape peeking incongruously beneath his jacket.

The first discouraging sign that my new plan might be lacking some of the key elements for success was that less than fifty yards from the road we encountered a fence. Probably put there by the state to limit access to the highway, I decided. The single strand of barbed wire across the top didn't seem too threatening and the fence was only about four feet high. Not much of an obstacle. JD scrambled up and over in a matter of seconds. I was a little slower and clumsier—and I lost a glove in the process—but hit the ground in one piece with a slight feeling of triumph. I look back to my little Civic. I couldn't really see the car but the amber pulse of the flashers marked its location. The flashing red-and-blue of a police car, however, was still missing.

I wondered if I should have left a note in case the police finally came. Maybe one of the cars that didn't stop still called for help. Wouldn't that have been nice of someone? Well, I wasn't going back over the barbed wire to leave a note for an imaginary cop, I told myself. I was committed. Or should be.

We walked for several minutes through tall, wet grass, then hit another fence. The field was rough and scraggy and smelled strongly of fresh fertilizer. Who, I wondered, would be fool enough to fertilized farmland in December? "Try breathing through your mouth," I advised JD when I saw in his face the same wrinkled-nose revulsion that I felt. We pressed on.

"How much further?" he whined, as we wriggled through the rails of a third fence. Damn good question, and given the hour and the cold dampness, I couldn't even fault the tone.

"Not much further, kiddo." I tugged him for a few steps into the field. Bits of the buildings were coming into focus. I'd accepted that we weren't going to find a gas station. It looked, instead, like a farm, with its patchwork of fences and sheds sprinkled about. Finally we were close enough to see that the light we had been following was a porch light. "See, there's a house," I pointed out.

A split second later, all hell broke loose.

The cacophony seemed to come from several directions at once and it was a moment before I could identify the sound as dogs—several dogs. I snatched up JD and held him close, waiting for the pack to close in. Visions of pit bulls tearing us apart flashed through my mind, but I stood, stupid with fear, unable to see an out. We were in the middle of a large field. The only fence I could see was a split-rail construction that would offer no protection, and the normal place of safety—the house—seemed to be where most of the barking was coming from.

JD began to cry and despite the temptation to join him, I said with what sounded like confidence. "It's all right; they're just coming out to meet us." Or eat us, or something. While I hadn't exactly expected a warm welcome, this was worse than I had imagined. Lights began to go on all over the house, and still the barking reverberated in the night. When a door swung open, I felt an odd mix of relief and dread. Whoever it was wasn't likely to be too pleased to have us show up, uninvited, at nearly midnight on Christmas Day. Why I thought we'd be any safer approaching a strange house than accepting help from a stranger on the road I couldn't tell.

When a man stepped out the door carrying a shotgun, I realized that my worst fears showed a definite lack of imagination.

He was dragging on a jacket as more lights went on, illuminating the dooryard and a teeming pack of dogs. Several flew off into the dark at an imperious gesture from their master. Two others kept pace with him as he set off toward us at a half-run, still struggling into one sleeve, the gun seesawing in his other hand.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he bellowed as he raced toward us. "You damn fool! Get out of there!"

It was in my mind to turn tail and run, scale the fences, and return the comparative safety of my broken-down car. It was in my mind but not in my legs, which had somehow turned to jelly.

This was it. I was going to be shot for trespassing in some deserted field. They'd probably never even find the body.

"Mommy?" in the anxious, wavering alto of a four-year-old shook me out of my stupor.

I set him on his feet and ordered "Run!" with a slight shove to send him on his way. I intended to get his out of harm's way and lead the nut with a shotgun off in a different direction. To my horror, JD spun away and headed directly for the house. "No!" I started out after him, but a four-year-old is a wily lot. He was nearly to the fence line when the gun-toting man vaulted over it. He grabbed JD as though he were a sack of meal, hefted him over the fence, and dropped him to the ground, all while glaring angrily at me. I veered off as he headed directly for me.

Sheer pandemonium. The barking of the dogs, the man's shouting, and JD's crying all reverberated off a huge barn wall, making it hard to understand anything other than noise and fear. By force of effort I could make out two things he'd been saying since the beginning: "Get out!"

Would that I could. "Not without my son!"

"Bull!" he shouted, rather nonsensically to my mind.

One of the dogs came racing toward me and I braced for attack—then stumbled in confusion as it shot past me, still barking furiously. Anticipating attack from behind, I spun to fend the dog off again. But what I saw wiped all thought of dogs and shotguns and, God help me, JD completely from my mind. There was a huge, hulking mass emerging from the misting fog, and I could hear with sudden clarity the deep raspy breath of it. The stunned realization—*oh, a bull*—came an instant before a hard hand clamped down on my arm and began to drag me to the fence. Or at least I assumed it was the fence as my view was fixated on the bull. It stood still, one hoof pawing at the ground. My knowledge of bulls being limited to Bugs Bunny and the good folks at Looney Tunes, even I knew that wasn't a good sign. So I did the only thing I could think of to do.

I screamed.

That didn't sit too well with ole-gun-totin'-maniac, who tried to cover my mouth but only succeed in banging the rifle into my face and making me see stars. With little grace and less courtesy, he shoved me through a narrow gap in the fence that I had not even seen.

"We've never been back to that park, have we?" JD asked.

"What park?"

"The one with the bull. I can remember going to petting zoos and naturalist parks when we were little. There's the one with an elephant Shawn liked to ride near Leesburg, but that's not it. And a safari park we went to once, but that wouldn't have had cattle, would it? And it couldn't have been a school field trip because I'm almost certain it was night. Did we take a trip out west? Maybe a dude ranch?"

I'm not sure whether I was more surprised he remembered it at all or that he didn't remember in more detail.

"Do you know how old you were?" I asked, bargaining for time.

"No. Little. Four, five, six, something like that. You don't remember? Shoot. I'll ask Dad. I bet he does."

"Oh, no, I know what you're talking about," I corrected. Did I remember the time the bull chased us across the field? God, yes! I'd never been so scared or so furious in all my life. "That's the night we met your dad."

I don't think I passed out—I prefer to think of it as being numb with fear and exhaustion—but some time elapsed before I could focus on what was going on around me. When I could, it was the concerned and sympathetic face of four-year-old JD that I saw first.

"It'll be okay. You're fine. You're okay," he was saying, in unconscious imitation of me when he'd taken a tumble or scraped his knee.

I forced a smile. "That's right, pal. I'm fine."

"You're bleeding," he pointed out, clearly hovering between the reassurance I offered and the evidence he could see.

He was right. A hand to my head came away sticky with blood. There was more blood on my leg that I didn't notice until I tried to stand. A slash in my jeans matched the still-seeping cut beneath.

"Well?" came the gruff demand from above.

"Well, what?"

"A thank you would be nice."

"You're welcome," I shot back bitterly and saw the first twitch of his lips in what might have been a smile. It might also have been a sneer. Whichever it was, it barely softened the thunder that had defined his features since he stepped out of the house.

"Farley," came a call from the house, "is everything all right?"

"Yes, Mama," he hollered back. "It's fine. It's just some idiot woman who decided to go for a stroll in the bull pasture." At JD's wide-eyed look he added, "And a tired little boy who was smart enough to run away from the damn thing." JD grinned at the compliment, completely missing its implications for me. "Maybe you could put on some hot chocolate for him. We're coming in."

Of all the high-handed, egotistical pronouncements! "Look, we just need some gas. That's all. We got stuck on the highway and I need to get some gas. I can pay you for it." I reached

for the money in my pocket, straining the cut on my leg.

He responded to my grimace of pain with all the warmth and compassion I had come to expect on our short acquaintance: "Well, you can sit out here in the rain if you want. We're going in for hot chocolate."

And my son, traitorous in a way I had never seen before (or, to be fair, since) took his hand and went into the house. It was the evil oaf's mother who crossed the dooryard to fret over my bumps and bruises and soothe my ruffled feathers. She kept up a running monologue, offering advice and asking questions without waiting for the answers. A recurring theme seemed to be *Don't mind Farley; he's harmless*, but as that seemed patently false, I didn't put too much stock in anything else she said. Still, it was nice to have someone fuss over me, someone who didn't automatically assume I was in the wrong. When I finally managed to say get a word in, I tried to apologize for intruding, for causing such a ruckus, but she pooh-poohed that too.

"Don't be silly. It gives us a chance for a little Christmas company, that's all."

"Sure." This sham agreement came from her surly son. "All we were going to do is sleep. You saved us the trouble of getting up in—what?—another four hours. I should be thanking you. Oh, but you already told me I was welcome. My, what a gracious guest."

"I—I—I thought you were going to shoot me," I stammered.

"Might have," he grumbled, "if you'd cost me that bull."

"Farley!" his mother reprimanded in an undertone.

"The gun was in case the bull needed more discouragement than the dogs could manage," he said wearily. "He's young yet and still feeling his place."

I shot a look at JD to see whether he was following the nettled exchange, but despite the excitement just fifteen minutes past, he was glassy-eyed with lack of sleep and threatening to fall face-first into the plate of pumpkin pie that sat beside his mug of hot chocolate.

"He's so tired," I said almost under my breath. "We have to get back to the car while he can still walk. Now, can I use your phone to call a tow truck or something?" Even as I asked, I was tugging JD out of his chair. I wanted to be rid of this place and this man as quickly as I could.

"No."

"What?"

"I said no," he repeated with perfect equanimity.

"Farley, you stop deviling that little girl," his mother said sharply.

"Yes, Mama," he agreed in a tone that made it clear, at least to me, that he had no intention of stopping anything. Oblivious, she stooped and kissed him on the crown of his head and smiled at me. "I told you he's harmless. I'll just put the little one on the couch while you two get things straightened out." And with that she guided a drowsy JD into the other room, his homemade cape still around his shoulders.

I watched him leave with a vague sense of unease. I did not want to stay in that house. I just wanted to call a service station and leave. He

wouldn't let me call the service station; what if he wouldn't let me leave? The fear and panic that I had suppressed automatically for JD's benefit began to bubble up as soon as he'd left the room.

"You can't keep us here, you know. There are people waiting for us. They'll come looking for us very soon. And I left a note in the car telling the police we were going to the nearest farm in search of gas. They'll be looking for us, too."

He eyed me speculatively. "No, I don't think they will," he said quietly. "Let me give you a piece of unsolicited advice," he offered, and his lips barely quirked in amusement. "If you ever break down again, don't do it between the last exit in one state and the first exit in another. You could go weeks without seeing a cruiser."

Shit. Well, that certainly explained a lot. "I just need to call a service station. Please." I shot a look at the phone on the kitchen wall, while I tried to figure how far my forty dollars would go.

"You're not going to find a service station open at midnight on Christmas. Closest gas station I know of is twelve miles up the highway."

"Perfect. What's the number?"

"Not perfect," he answered crossly. "They sell gas. They sell sandwiches and coffee and cigarettes. They do not sell service. And they do not deliver."

Suddenly, everything that had happened over the past several hours began to close in on me. My parents, running out of gas, waiting to get creamed by a tractor-trailer, fences, barbed wire, the dogs, the bull, the shotgun—everything. And now I couldn't even get gas. Being trapped with a psycho in a remote farmhouse was not the worst thing that

had happened to me that day... and wasn't that just too damn bad!

"Hey, don't cry!" The first note of alarm crept into his face. It might have been funny if I hadn't been well on my way to falling apart. Suddenly his sneer and mockery were gone. I covered my face in a futile effort to retain some shred of privacy.

His mother—Harriet, as it turned out (and a more fitting, old-fashioned name I couldn't imagine)—was far less troubled by tears than was her son and wise enough not to try to reason with someone in the throes of a meltdown.

I was all cried out and barely sniffing by the time she asked, "Well, now, what's all the fuss about? Nothing that can't be fixed right up, I'm sure." She touched the dressings on my head and thigh to reinforce the point.

"No. No, it can't. I ran out of gas out on the highway, and I need to get out of here tonight, and there's no way to get gas until morning. And it's Christmas." Somehow that was just the final insult.

"Gasoline? Is that all? Haven't we got some gas out in the barn, Farley?"

"Yeah."

What was this? He'd been torturing me all along? The bastard. At least he looked chagrined at the admission.

"You have gas *here*?"

His panic at my tears was gone, the mask of barely-concealed contempt back in place. "It's not like we've got a tank on site—unless your car runs on propane. But I guess I could siphon some gas

out of the tractor, least enough to get you to a gas station."

"See, there," Harriet said with a pat to my shoulder. "It'll all work out. You two get the car sorted out then come back and for the little one."

"No, he's coming with me."

"Oh, dear, do you think that's wise?" was Harriet's worried question. Her son's reaction, offered at the same time, was far less tactful: "Don't be stupid." Harriet shushed him with a pat and said earnestly to me, "He's dead tired and you're not looking too chipper yourself. I think it would be best if you just waited out the night and you both got some sleep. But," she continued, seeing my objection, "if that's not possible, then give little JD the hour or so to sleep while you get everything under control, then he can sleep in the car."

"I'll carry him."

"Oh, dear," she said again, fretfully, and cast a look at her son.

He sighed but his tone was milder than it had been toward me. "How many fences you cross between the highway and here?" Three, no, four, I recalled, touching the wound from the last one on my leg. Without forcing the admission from me, he went on. "The first couple are easy. How do you figure to get him over the highway's chain link one though?"

"You could help."

"I am helping. I'm bringing the gas." Before I could mount another argument he grabbed his still-wet jacket off its peg and opened the front door, clearly leaving the next move up to me. I dragged my own coat back on.

"Thank you." That was aimed at Harriet as she was certainly the more helpful of the two, but I couldn't help catching the smirk on Farley's face out of the corner of my eye, so, knowing I still needed his help, I tried to include him in the general thanks. "You've both been very kind."

"Too little, too late," he muttered into my ear as we headed back down the steps.

The barn was big and cluttered. It took some searching to find a length of hose and a container to drain the gas into. By the time he had the meager flow of amber liquid draining into a gallon milk jug, I was feeling far less demanding. I suppose I had imagined picking up the extra two-gallon can my dad keeps in the garage for the gas lawn mower. But watching him grimace and spit, trying to clear the taste of the gas or the fumes or whatever, I was suddenly more empathetic. I had trespassed on his property, barged into his house well past farmers' hours, and then tried to dictate the ways in which I would accept help. If he hadn't been gracious, he, at least, had an excuse. I, on the other hand....

"I'm sorry." It was, I realized uncomfortably, the first genuine apology I had offered him. And it was accepted somewhat warily.

"For what?"

"For— For all the disruption I have visited upon you." It sounded formal and stilted, even to my ears.

"It's all right," he muttered.

"No, I mean it. You didn't ask for me to come bursting into your yard late at night, riling up your dogs, dragging you out of bed."

"Antagonizing the bull," he added, and I suddenly felt less sorry.

"That wasn't my fault. I didn't know. You should put up signs or something." The words were out before I could stop them, and from the grim amusement on Farley's face he'd known exactly what he was doing. I took a breath, determined to get through this. "I am sorry that I upset your house and I appreciate that you're trying to help." *Finally*, I added in a mental footnote. From the smirk on his face it seemed like he heard it, but he just leaned down to crimp the hose before it overflowed the milk jug.

"This ought to do you," he answered, and I decided I liked the uneasy truce better than disdain at least.

The walk back to the car was more circuitous but less hazardous than the walk in had been. The rain had let up but the fog was still heavy. If Farley hadn't been there to lead the way, I'm not sure I'd have found the road, much less the car, so when, ten minutes into our trek, he waited for me to catch up and see what he was shining his flashlight at, I followed without comment. It was a sign with six-inch letters: "Caution—Dangerous Farm Animals."

"Oh," I said brightly, "I see you've taken my advice."

There was a pause, but then he laughed. Not the mocking smirk I had seen a few times, not the derision I had expected. It was genuine amusement and I found myself softening again. How accommodating would I be, dragged out of a sound sleep and criticized by a stranger for nearly

everything I did in that irritable state? He'd certainly treated me with more courtesy than the hundreds of people who drove by my dead car on the highway.

"You're not a bad sort, Farley," I volunteered as we resumed the journey.

He laughed again. "A strong endorsement, that. I'll have to tell my mother I've got your seal of approval."

"She already gave you hers. You're 'harmless'; did you know that?"

He chuckled again. "No, that I'm not."

"I'd already figured that out. But then mothers tend to think their children can do no wrong."

"Yes," Farley agreed quietly. "And kids often think their parents can do no wrong. They're mistaken about that as well. That kind of trust can be very dangerous."

"You think I would do *anything* that would hurt JD? I wouldn't!"

"You dragged him into a bull pasture," he answered pointedly. I sputtered with inarticulate anger and was still trying to think of a suitable riposte when he continued, "As it happens, though, I wasn't talking about you."

"Oh, really! Who the hell else is here?"

"Me."

That threw me for a loop, and we walked the next hundred yards in silence. Who had thought he could do no wrong? I wondered. Or whom had he put on a pedestal? Maybe he was just sharing some amateur analysis with me. In my experience, those most eager to pass on parenting advice were those who had never raised children. I was all set to point that out when a glance at his scowling face

told me he regretted the admission—even though I wasn't quite sure what that admission was. "You have kids?" I finally asked, determined to pin him down.

"I don't think you have to have kids to know that they don't belong in a bull pasture in the dark," he remarked dryly. "That your car?" Yes! At last, the slow amber pulse of the hazard lights. I felt a renewed sense of purpose and scaled the fence without comment.

Mating gas to car was more complicated than I expected, but we got nearly all of it in the tank after improvising a funnel with a paper cup, and the car started after only a couple attempts. It was an unexpected reassurance for Farley to climb in with me for the ride to the gas station, but as he pointed out, I'd likely never find the house again on my own and he didn't want me coming back the way I had the first time.

The drive to the gas station had me reflecting on his cynical statement about parents and children.

"So," I asked again, "do you have kids?"

"No," he answered. "I've never been married."

"That's not exactly a prerequisite," I muttered.

"It is for me."

I tried to read some condemnation or disapproval into it but couldn't. It was just a statement of personal values, and I had to admit it was one I respected.

"So what did you mean about kids having misplaced faith in their parents?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, I don't believe that for a second."

"I can't help what you believe."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I let the silence do its work, and eventually, he twisted sideways in his seat, clearly agitated and uncomfortable. "I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sure your son has every reason to trust your care, your judgment. I'm sure you're a fine mother."

"Having one yourself, you should know. Thank you." When he didn't respond, I ventured again. "So the problem is with your father."

Even in the darkened car, the quick, angry glare was unmistakable. Had I not been gripping the steering wheel, I might have retreated to the back seat. "My father was a good man!"

"Okay."

Two minutes passed and I was splitting my attention between the murky road markings and the fuel gauge needle that rested, disturbingly, just below "E," when he said, softly, "But he wasn't much of a businessman apparently." The bare bones of the problem were laid out before we got to the gas station. His father had died six months before, leaving a financial morass behind. It had taken weeks just to sort through all the records and see how deeply in the red the farm was. Farley had taken a leave of absence from his job to help his mother get things under control, but he couldn't think of anything that would do more than delay the inevitable. She was going to lose the farm that had been the only home she'd ever known.

"Parents don't have to be perfect, you know," I offered, hoping I wouldn't make things worse. "They are who they are. They want the best for you and do the best they can." It was the thought that kept me going back to my own parents' house. "We all

just do the best we can. And if your dad wasn't much for seeing that accounts balanced, well, he married a grand lady and raised a responsible son. That's something." *And it would be a shame if you let his image tarnish when it's too late for him to fix things.*

"That sounded almost like a compliment." But he was smiling self-consciously as he climbed out of the car at the Shell station, so it was easy to swallow a retort. The gas cost me twelve dollars of my precious forty, and we were headed south again in a few minutes, though not on the interstate that time.

Farley offered to drive as we navigated the unfamiliar twisting, country roads, but that was just a little too much control to give up for some reason, so I just slowed down even more.

"It might be faster to walk," he observed blandly.

I stopped the car and gestured for him to get out, but he held his seat and we resumed the slow, plodding progress. I don't think I've ever driven that slowly outside a parking lot in my life.

"So where are you headed that it was worth setting out in this kind of weather on Christmas night?"

"Just mind your own damn business!"

"Ho, ho, ho, the lady has a temper. Surprise, surprise."

"We're going to visit family."

"Ah," he said knowingly. "The kind of family who might not do the right things but are doing the best they can?"

"That's right." I had meant it defensively but the hitch in my voice must have made it sound

more like pathetic because he stopped badgering me and contented himself with directions for the rest of the drive back.

Pulling up to the house roused the animals once more, and reminded me of my earlier fear of the pack of dogs that I could hear more than see. "They wouldn't attack, would they?" I asked, just to be sure.

The answer didn't reassure. "Probably not."

"Probably?" I pressed, but he was already out of the car, which meant my options were limited to cowering in the car or getting out and *probably not* being attacked. I thought it over for a minute while Farley faced the onslaught alone. Actually, they quieted as soon as they saw him but still pushed and shoved for attention, anxious to be recognized. A whistle and a hand gesture sent most of them off, but a ginger-colored mongrel stayed by his side.

Farley looked back, apparently surprised I hadn't followed him, then came back to open the door. "What's the matter? Did you decide to leave JD with us after all? Be careful; my mother'd take him in a heartbeat. She collects strays."

"He's not a stray!" But that got me out of the car. The ginger dog looked on placidly and I felt silly having been intimidated by the same dogs that had saved my life only an hour earlier. I reached out a timid hand. "How many dogs to you have?"

"Five, right now."

Five? Not a dozen. Barely a pack. "They certainly are enthusiastic."

"Shasta, here, is the elder statesman of the group, aren't you, boy? He's the one I sent out to ward off the bull."

"Sent out?"

"Well, they're not usually allowed in that pasture, and they know it. He wouldn't have gone but that I sent him. He woke us up, right enough, but wasn't sure what to do next." He ruffled the four-legged hero's head. "Neither one of us were. That damn bull's been nothing but trouble. Hand-raised, which makes for a nice 4-H project but not a well-socialized animal."

"Well-socialized?" The idea had never occurred to me that one would worry about the social skills of livestock.

"Yeah. Without a herd they don't get to do all the mock-fighting and other play that helps them find their place in the group." He ruffled Shasta's head again. "Not unlike dogs. They tussle and scrabble with each other and each one knows where he stands. But ole Blacky," he said with a nod to the pasture, "he's got no notion of who's in charge or how he ought to behave. He ought to be called Diablo. Too damn aggressive. More trouble than he's worth."

"So why don't you get rid of him?"

He gave me a pitying glance and I realized, "One of your mom's strays."

"Yep. She bought him off a neighbor because the boy that raised him would have been crushed if he'd been sold for beef. Mom thought if we kept him in with the dry cows for four or five months, he'd sort of learn his place. Then, by the time he's in with the heifers in a couple of months, he wouldn't be so... boisterous."

"How's it working?"

"Hard to tell. We've had to sell off much of the herd to meet bills, and Blacky seems as mean as ever to me. On the other hand, he didn't stomp

you to pieces, so maybe he's mellowing. Or maybe you surprised him as much as you surprised me."

The look was sharp and censorious and made me want to shrink away. "I didn't mean to."

"I know," he said wearily. "You just wanted gas. Let's go get that boy of yours if you're still determined to get moving tonight."

I was actually feeling far less determined, but there didn't seem to be an easy way out of the corner I'd boxed myself into. "Yes, let's."

As we climbed the steps to the front door, he paused again. "Is there someone you need to call? Someone who will be worried you're so late?" he asked.

I thought of JD's paternal grandparents. "No. There's no one," I admitted, and I saw pity more than condemnation in his eyes. I was rushing off on Christmas night to go somewhere I wouldn't even be missed. "It's a long story." That was a benign description of two people who should have been interested in their grandson but weren't. Or were barely interested. If I arrived they would let us in; if I didn't they wouldn't give it another thought.

"I'm sure it is. Look, call when you get wherever you're going."

"That isn't necessary."

"Maybe not to you, but I'd feel better if I knew."

"It'd just wake you up again."

He snorted derisively and muttered, "Like I'm going to get any sleep anyway," but he followed it with a quick smile that had me rethinking my own retort, and I followed him into the house.

"Well, if you're sure you want me to, I will."

"Thanks. And maybe you could leave your number at home, just in case I need to follow up."

"Follow up on what?"

He sighed, clearly exasperated. "Well, what if you don't call? How would I track you down? I don't think the police would do a missing person's report based on a license plate number. Plus, if you made the extra effort to write your name down, I wouldn't have to embarrass myself by asking you who you are after we've spent over an hour together." The last was said ruefully as he handed a blank index card to me.

I scribbled my name and number on it, feeling suddenly awkward, and no less so when he took the card and studied it seriously. "Tish Mason. Tish Mason," he said, as though tasting the words in his mouth and finding them palatable.

"It's really Letisha, but nobody calls me that."

"This your home number, Tish?"

"Yes." I wondered whether he was guessing based on the area code or had some other insight.

"You're turning around and heading back home, aren't you?"

"Yes."

The annoyed scowl was back, but he only said, "That's probably for the best."

I didn't recall asking his opinion, but before I could say so, Harriet walked in and all three of us were talking at once, and I realized that I'd better draw the curtain on the final act of this drama, so I went to wake JD. I hadn't even touched him, though, when Farley reached past me to lift JD, blanket and all.

"You get the doors," he instructed, still frowning.

A minute later, JD, still sound asleep, was in the back seat of the Honda, and Farley and I were standing awkwardly looking at each other. At least,

I was feeling awkward. Farley seemed to be glowering at me and I had no idea why.

"I really appreciate all your help tonight, yours and your mother's." He didn't answer, so I tumbled on, trying to find the right words. "I know this wasn't the kind of evening you were expecting, but I really appreciate your helping me out of a difficult situation. Really a couple of difficult situations." I gestured first to the car then to the pasture, hoping to prompt a laugh. He just scowled more deeply. "Well," I said, giving up on the effort, "we'll be on our way."

"If you were mine, you wouldn't be in this situation. You—" He stopped, seemingly as surprised as I was by the words. My response jolted him again.

"Your what?"

"What?"

"You said if I were yours. I'm asking, your *what?*" It was nice to see him speechless if only for a moment.

"You shouldn't be in this situation," he declared, with what seemed to me inappropriate acrimony.

"I'm doing my best to resolve it." And with that, I climbed into the car with my son and drove off.

So that was it, I thought. A peculiar—yet oddly touching—encounter with a stranger, a disturbing, aggravating stranger I would never see again.

My quick retelling of the story to JD was of an adventure. I hit maternal highlights like how important it is to keep a full tank of gas, without too

much focus on the pathos of a young, unwed mother headed nowhere on Christmas.

"*That* was the day we met Dad?" JD asked, clearly perplexed. "I don't remember that. Huh. I thought— I remember a merry-go-round and a little train."

"That's right. A picnic in the park. That would have been the next time you met him, a few months later, sort of our first official date." The time in between was something, but not quite dating.

"Did you really think he was going to shoot you?"

"I don't know. I was scared and it was dark. And, well, your father can come off as rather gruff to those who don't know him."

He laughed and we chorused, "Marshmallow." Born on a long-ago cookout, the family nickname was one that aggravated Farley—and, I think, secretly pleased him. Children seemed to easily accept something it had taken me longer to come to terms with: Despite the bluntness, the sternness, even outright rudeness, he is a sweet and generous man. There isn't a mean bone in his body, despite the pretense. It took a long time for me to understand that he wore the tough guy act the way I adopted the façade of being happy—part wish, part acting. But underneath the toughness is a store of love and compassion I could not have imagined on that long-ago Christmas night.

He was one you wanted to count on—and could. If things went wrong through no fault of your own, he was the one you wanted to stand beside you and make it right. And if you were in the wrong, he could still be lovingly supportive even as you got

your comeuppance. That's an aspect of his personality I know quite well. I've encountered it many times in the past fifteen years.

I made the courtesy call to Farley when I got home that Christmas night—a long-distance call when such things were not in my budget—because I still felt guilty for having taken a two-hour block of their evening—and I genuinely thought that would be the end of it. Clearly, I did not fully appreciate how persistent and determined a man I had met. He called every few days, just, he said, “to see how you’re doing,” and I have to admit I began to look forward to those calls. I hadn’t realized how much I missed real conversation with an adult until then. Somehow, without really knowing it, I had let my life be reduced to an array of perfunctory conversations and superficial relationships—except for JD, which I thought was enough. I thought I had settled into a little routine that worked for us, but talking to Farley made me realize how lonely I had become.

As a waitress, I flirted enough to not discourage tips and chatted with the other employees in that snippet style that is typical of all jobs that are done on the run. There was no water cooler to gather around and gossip over; there were just trays to be organized and tables to be served. The brief lulls in between lent themselves not to philosophical rumination but of talk of department store sales and irritating customers. Even major events—evictions, arrests, repossession of a car—were no more than casually noted as the reason for someone’s disappearance.

Suddenly, there was someone who cared not just about what happened to and around me, but also what I thought about it and how I felt about it. I realize now that he also had the patience not to press for too much too soon.

For those first few weeks, there was nothing more than friendly conversation. We talked about the hassles of work, what was on TV, sledding on a nearby golf course, and JD learning how to tie his shoes. Eventually he got me to tell him about the awful mess I had made of my life, pregnant at nineteen by a man who flew the coop at the first sign of trouble, and I commiserated over the problems he was having with the sale of the farm.

It was a platonic relationship in every sense of the word, which I found just a little bit disconcerting. Realizing I had been lonely was a major admission. Realizing I missed, quite specifically, a man's attention was an even bigger step. In the past, that kind of desperation drove me to a bar or nightclub or led me to accept, on almost a random basis, one of the dozen passes made at me each day. I nearly always regretted the action the next day, but eventually I'd find myself back in that same spot, swearing it wouldn't happen again. Coincidentally, I hadn't found it necessary to go trolling since I'd met Farley. He met some of the same yearnings without the need to fight off roaming hands, and the telephone offered a privacy that a bar or nightclub didn't. But still I found myself wondering what was going on and why he hadn't made a move.

"Why do you keep calling?" I asked abruptly in the midst of an otherwise normal conversation one night.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No. No, that's not it at all. I enjoy talking to you."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I'm just trying to figure out what you get out of it."

"The same thing you do, I hope: someone interesting to talk to, someone to listen. A friend."

"And that's all you want, a friend?"

"Lose the belligerent tone, Tish. If you've got something to say, say it."

"I hate it when you do that."

"Do what?"

"Get all stern and bossy."

"I'm not being bossy. I'm letting you know what I'll tolerate and what I won't. The decision of what to do about that is yours. There's very little I can do about it from here."

"Like there's any more you could do about it if you were here."

There was a long pause, vibrating with meaning, before he said, "Is that the problem? You need me there?"

"No! Yes. I don't know." And I blinked back tears. There was no reason to cry, I told myself. No reason other than that I was alone in my crummy little apartment with a sleeping four-year-old, and I had just managed to insult the only other person who seemed to genuinely care about me. And the next thousand nights weren't likely to be much different. "Sorry. I guess I'm feeling a little low tonight. It'll be better tomorrow."

"When are you working tomorrow?"

We were back on solid ground at least. "I arranged a split shift so I can take JD to my parents

in the afternoon. They're going to the circus and then he's going to spend the night. I'll drop him off, then head back for the four-to-ten shift."

"You didn't want to go to the circus?"

I worked up a laugh. "Don't be silly. This way I'll get another six hours in and I won't have to hire a sitter." Besides, I hadn't been invited. It's just barely possible that it was the combination of that oversight and the fact that I'd have the evening to myself that had me thinking about male companionship and knowing that I would probably end up acting on it the following night. And hating myself in advance.

"So, you'll be home by—what?—ten-thirty?"

"Oh, don't call tomorrow. I don't really know what time I'll be home." *If* I'd come home. "I might go out after work with some of the girls." I might. We'd gone trolling together before. "We'll talk next week."

"We'll talk tomorrow. I'm coming down. Shall I meet you at the restaurant or your apartment?"

"What? Neither. Tomorrow's not a good day."

"It hasn't even come yet. It might be a terrific day." When I just sputtered in confusion, he said, "Kiddo, you've got two choices: name the place or let me get 'all stern and demanding,' which you claim not to like. Result's the same."

"The restaurant," I agreed sulkily and gave him directions.

The next day had all the tension of a teenager preparing for prom without any of the distraction of pictures and corsages. I dropped off JD, endured my mother's assessment of my appearance—and let

me tell you, “Dear, you look overtired” is not what I needed to hear right then—before dashing home to shower and change (twice) into something that looked special without looking like I was trying to look special. All so I could get to work on time, where I suddenly had six hours to imagine all the ways things could go wrong.

In the first place, I didn’t really know why he was coming. We hadn’t seen each other in over two months, and that encounter hadn’t been terribly auspicious. The intervening conversations represented a friendship, but replaying our phone call from the day before in my mind, I couldn’t pin down what it was that made him decide that a personal visit was necessary. I ran through a dozen scenarios, each more bizarre than the last, but couldn’t settle on anything that made sense.

At seven, I took a break to feed quarters into the pay phone to tell him not to come, but no one answered. Resigned, I mentioned casually in the kitchen that an old friend was stopping by near closing. That was partly to discourage speculation about who he was but also to stake him out as mine, because I clearly wasn’t the only one looking for action on a Friday night. Lorena had been fawning over a group of businessmen dawdling with their coffee, and I didn’t think it was all for the extra five percent they might put on their expense account.

Farley’s eventual arrival was almost anticlimactic. He stepped in just a few minutes before closing and hovered by the door, waiting patiently—which shot to hell some of my darker scenarios where he sat in my section and left me a twenty dollar tip for a cup of coffee. (Good thing,

too. I hadn't decided whether to be insulted or take it as a joke.) He just stood there and waited as I cleared the last of my tables. He didn't miss me looking at him, though, because the first thing he said when I finally crossed the room was, "What's with the suspicious stare?"

"Not suspicious. Just curious."

"About what?"

No way to touch that, so I blurted out the only other thing I was thinking: "You're not so big."

His mouth worked silently for a moment before the smile quirked and he said, "I beg your pardon?"

Sometimes when a person's said or done something stupid, everyone will pretend it didn't happen. This was not one of those times.

Lorena sidled up. "Honey, if he's not big enough for you, I'll take him off your hands. What do you say, cowboy?" I slapped her hand away.

"He's not a cowboy. Well, he takes care of cows, but he's a man, a cowman, a farmer," I concluded weakly, and pushed her hands away again. "Anyway, he's mine."

"Am I?" he asked blandly, which threw me deeper into embarrassment.

"My friend. Back off, Lorena. The campers at your four-top are leaving." A gentle push had her moving toward them, and I was alone with Farley again. "Give me ten minutes, okay? I've got to finish up a couple of things." In truth, I might have gotten someone else to finish my sidework or even skated on it entirely, but I needed a moment alone to settle myself. The flighty, anxious feeling I had been denying all day was back, and I spent the time it took to fill salt and pepper shakers trying to suppress it again.

By the time I had shed the uniform apron and touched up my makeup, I thought I had it all under control.

But control is something Farley just loves to shatter.

"What do you mean, I'm not so big?" he asked before we were even to the parking lot.

"Nothing." Oh, yeah, like that would work. He raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I don't mean anything by it. It's just that you're not as big as I remembered you. I had this mental image of you about six-three and built like a Coke machine. But you can't be more than six feet tall."

"Five-eleven," he said with a smile. "That's solidly above average. I'm not short."

"No, no, I didn't mean it like that. Not a complaint." In truth, it was something of a relief. Between the phone conversations in which he felt no compunction about bringing me up short for negative thinking and the—apparently—larger-than-life image I had of him in my mind, I had been feeling no little trepidation about seeing him in the flesh. Not that I was afraid of him, not at all. Just.. apprehensive.

"Would you like to go somewhere?" I offered brightly. "There's a dance club I've been hearing about but never been to. Or a comedy club if you want to go into the city."

"I was thinking about something a little quieter."

"A movie?"

"Quieter than that. Is there a coffee shop or something open late? Someplace where we can talk."

We ended up back at my apartment more by default than by design. I wondered, later, if

everything would have turned out differently if we'd gone to the IHOP and had coffee.

"So what do you remember?" JD asked from the passenger's seat.

"About your dad?" Everything!

"No," he laughed. "We were talking about earliest memories. How far back can you remember?"

I thought for a minute. Elementary school was clear. I had some scattered memories before that: being swept off my feet by a wave when I was too young to have been on the beach alone, having a crush on a boy in my kindergarten class. I seemed to remember getting a bunch of helium balloons for my fourth birthday, but there were pictures, so I wasn't sure how much I remembered and how much I knew just from seeing the pictures in the baby book my mother kept. Somehow I trust the memories more when they haven't been talked about and revised for nostalgic consumption.

"One of my earliest memories is of my sister, your Aunt Rebecca, convincing me that there were alligators in the creek behind our house."

"Alligators?" he laughed. "In Virginia?"

"Hey, I was five. What did I know? And I didn't believe her right away. I thought she was teasing. But then I could see the submerged heads..." I caught his quizzical look and clarified, "Moss-covered rocks." His confusion cleared then turned to amusement. How many times had he tormented his younger brothers, using his age and experience to pull one over on them? Getting them to play the

fool, to do his bidding, even to do his chores? Tom Sawyer had nothing on my JD.

"And twenty years from now, who knows what you're brothers will be saying about you?" I challenged playfully. "To their wives. Or therapists."

He laughed again but, after a minute, admitted thoughtfully, "I miss them, you know, when I'm away. I like school. I like it a lot, but it feels like things're changing and I'm missing them. I guess that sounds silly." It didn't, but before I could say so, he was plowing on. "I know everything can't stay the same, and it shouldn't, but every time I come home, somehow it surprises me anyway. I don't know what I mean. Never mind." Flush with embarrassment, he turned to stare out the window, which gave me a minute to swallow the lump in my own throat.

"It doesn't sound silly and I know exactly what you mean."

"Yeah?" he asked cautiously, but continued to stare out the window.

"Sure. You're right, things change. But the relationship you have with your brothers is very strong. They look up to you. They want your approval. They *are* growing up, but so are you. The experiences you are having—in class, in the dorms, in the quad—they're changing you, giving you new perspective. You're meeting people who come from different places, who have different backgrounds than your friends in high school did. All of that affects you, changes you a little. It doesn't change your character; it doesn't change your core self, but when you come home, you've grown a little bit in one direction and they've grown

a little bit in another. It's an adjustment. It's an adjustment for me, too, to watch each of you grow in your own way."

"I guess you don't notice it as much when you see it on a day-to-day basis," JD offered.

No, he wouldn't. But I do.

"But, as I said, they still look up to you and want your approval." Then, ignoring Farley's advice not to interfere between the boys, I said, "I wish you wouldn't give Shawn such a hard time about playing lacrosse." With the advantage of maternal insight, I could say, "And don't roll your eyes at me, young man," without so much as glancing sideways.

"Hah!" he said triumphantly after a laugh. "And I thought you knew everything about your kids. Shawn would have been disappointed if I hadn't ragged on him about lacrosse. Half the reason he joined the team was because it was something I never did. He's a pretty good soccer player, but not a standout. Baseball and basketball he'll fool around with but not take seriously. He's not big enough for football, but, damn, he's quick. Lacrosse is his chance to shine. I hope it works out for him."

"But you teased him about it constantly!" I reviewed a summer's worth of insults and gibes. He kept calling it "field hockey" and asked if their uniforms had skirts.

"Aw, I didn't mean any harm." It was the same thing Farley had said and, in truth, I had been more upset than Shawn ever had. "If I'd ignored it, he'd have thought I didn't care. So I poked at him a bit." A bit. Lord, deliver me from men.

Driving onto campus put an end to the conversation as it took both of us to identify the obscure signage that pointed the way to temporary unloading zones for the various dorms. The year before, we had endured the interminable wait for a Residential Services cart to move JD's gear into the dorm, but having lived that experience once, I was glad when JD said he'd take what he could carry and return with reinforcements.

I stayed with the car and figured it was a good opportunity to check in at home. I'd left Farley with the four younger boys, but, to give credit where credit is due, he's never been one to complain about "babysitting" his own children. He could be just as involved in their lives as I was, and enjoyed all of them, individually and collectively. Which didn't mean we had the same parenting style at all.

The phone came up with a sudden roar of noise and the bellowed order to "Take it outside or I'll take all six of you out—and I won't be gentle about it." I couldn't hear the laughter in response, but I could imagine it, and the background noise dimmed considerably.

"Hullo," he barked into the phone.

"Ah, home sweet home."

His voice went warm and gentle. "Hi, babe, how're you doing?" I could picture him checking his watch. "You're at the university, right? Any problems?"

"No. It was fine. How're the kids? You're down to six? Already scared the rest off?"

"No, there are more downstairs. It was the teeming horde raiding the refrigerator that I was chasing out." Somehow, our house seemed to be the nexus for all the neighborhood youths from

eight to eighteen. On weekends we could frequently field a baseball team from the kids in our basement. Depending on mood (ours) and behavior (theirs), they might be "all the kids" (to differentiate the larger group from those we have a legal obligation to feed and clothe), the "ravenous mob," or "the local hoodlums." *Teeming horde* was fairly benign. I laughed.

And there were all those early, conflicted memories that had been swimming through me over the last couple of hours. "Honey, I need some time with you tonight."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing. I just— I just need some time, okay?"

There was a deep, knowing chuckle that sent my pulse racing. "Oh, like that, is it?"

I don't know why the tone of voice should grate so, but it did; maybe it was the smugness. "Never mind. I *don't* need your time."

"Don't get your dander up, Letisha. I have just mentally cleared my calendar. By seven o'clock, I will also have cleared the house."

"That was fast," I answered, willing to be soothed.

"The horde is going to a basketball game, so I don't even have to concoct an excuse," he admitted. "But I would have."

"My gallant knight."

"I live to serve."

"I wish you were here."

"You're sure there's nothing wrong?"

"No, I just miss you. I wish you were here."

"Yeah." There was enough wistfulness packed into that word to mollify even me.

"JD and I were talking, on the way up, about the past, childhood, the earliest things he remembered."

"Yeah?"

"And he asked if I remember being chased by a bull."

There was a pregnant pause before he asked, his voice losing the friendly, bantering tone. "And did you?"

A frisson of disquiet made its way up my spine. Surely he couldn't hold that against me after all this time. I dismissed the thought. "Well, the point is—and the reason I thought you would think it was funny—is that he doesn't remember it was at your house. He just remembers the incident, in isolation. He couldn't remember where we would have been in a farmyard."

His voice softened in memory. "I'm not surprised. I bet he was only there—what?—two or three times. And it looks a lot different in the light. He doesn't remember my mama at all, does he?"

"He remembers us talking about her. He's seen the pictures."

"But he doesn't remember her." It was a solemn acknowledgement.

"Probably not. He was only four."

"I know."

"I didn't mean to make you sad."

"I know. It's okay." A deep breath. "So, how much of the bull story does he know?"

"I stopped where propriety demands," I said, deliberately prim, and it earned me a laugh.

"Well, perhaps we can review the remaining parts of that story tonight."

Familiar warmth suffused my system, making me sigh with anticipation. "Did it ever occur to you that if I'd had a cell phone fifteen years ago, we never would have met?"

"Don't tell me you're thinking of turning in your friends-and-family plan and going trolling on the interstate again?"

"Hmph! I was looking for something along the lines of 'No, love of my life, we were fated to be together. Nothing could have kept us apart.' Something like that." Boy, men can be dense sometimes.

He chuckled. "Oh, sorry. Let me try again." He continued with the halting rhythm of a child struggling to read something too difficult. "Oh... no... life... of... my... love—I mean, love of my life. We... were... f-f-fated—to be—"

"Oh, shut up."

He chuckled again, but his voice was warm when he said, "You know I love you."

"Yeah."

"A lot."

"Yeah."

"Come home. I'll read you poetry and tickle your toes. And we'll talk about fate."

"The sooner I leave, the sooner I'll be there. About four hours, okay?"

"Yeah. Drive safely."

"Yes, Dad." He ignored me.

"Stop if you get tired."

"Yes, Dad." No reaction.

"Don't forget to fuel up."

"Yes, Dad."

"And watch the tone, young lady. There are a lot of things we can do in an empty house—not all of them pleasant."

Yipes! "You don't scare me." Much.

"Brave talk," he scoffed. "Think the 200-mile distance is a factor?"

"No, not at all," I lied. "Look, honey, JD's coming back. I gotta go." And then, because it's so hard to judge nuances long distance, added, "You know I was just kidding, right?"

"Yeah, I know you were just kidding—and I was just giving you fair warning. Relax. I love you. Be good. Go cry over your son."

I did. It wasn't as bad as his freshman year, when I had practically fallen apart in the parking lot, but there were a few tears, easily brushed away in the flurry of checking the car for forgotten items and reminders to write. A hug and a kiss, and he was off with his friends.

On the road again, rather than dwell on missing my firstborn, I went back fifteen years to happier memories—if not, strictly speaking, more comfortable ones. I found myself wriggling on the seat, remembering how it had been.

I made a great effort to act as though everything was normal once we were back at my apartment, and Farley seemed to go along with the pretense. We kept it light and casual, as though he often dropped by for an evening. I changed into jeans and a T-shirt—as though the whole slimming-black-dress-with-pearl-earrings hadn't been for his

benefit. We talked about Lorena and about the neighborhood and about how glad we would be for winter to end. He kept me company in the kitchen as I put together a tray of what I think of as kiddie-hors d'oeuvres: Ritz crackers with cheese, apple slices and yogurt. I had nothing alcoholic in the house, but a dazzling array of fruit juices. Farley laughed and settled for grape juice.

It went fine for a while; really, it did. And a half-hour later, we were sitting on the living room floor and talking about JD, while I fiddled with some of his abandoned Legos. I was building, as I always seem to, a little car, red as that seemed to be the most plentiful color of loose pieces, with over-sized wheels. Farley was listening to me, offering an occasional prompting question or observation, and diligently prying apart bricks from a one-time tower so I that I would have enough white ones to simulate doors on my car.

Everything was fine. Then, one of those awkward silences descended—the kind where I know I've got to say something, but I have no idea what and the longer it drags on the more awkward it is—and I was completely at a loss.

I looked up to find Farley watching me, clearly aware, but also clearly not as discomfited as I.

"What is it?" he asked gently, but somehow instead of breaking the tension, he merely accentuated it.

Looking in his eyes, for an instant I felt like I could tell him anything and he would understand, but then the moment was gone, and he was still waiting for me. "It's getting late," I said.

"Talk to me," he said and stopped my move to get up with a hand on my shoulder. "There's

something bothering you and I think you'd feel better if you got it out."

"What are you doing here?" Wasn't that the question of the day?

"Talking to my friend, who's doing her best not to talk to me."

"I *am* talking! What do you think we've been doing for the past hour? In fact, I've been talking almost the whole time. How about you? What's on your mind? What's new with you?" There, dump it back in his lap. Let him keep up a veritable monologue. See how he liked it. But I said it with a smile.

"With me? Oh, not a whole lot new. Mama's fine. She's up to her ears in packing things, preparing to move, getting ready for the auction next month."

"That must be tough on you both."

"Yeah, some. It's actually easier now that we know what's going to happen, now that the wheels are in motion. I think the uncertainty was more unnerving. Now that it's almost settled, I think we both feel like we can breathe again."

"So what did you finally decide? Is she going to move down here?"

"No. Or at least, not at first." I had followed the options for weeks. Farley's preference was that she move into the small split-level house he rented in northern Virginia; he had been subletting it during his prolonged absence but was planning to return to both house and job once the farm and auction were settled. His mother stubbornly resisted that choice, insisting that a young man needed his privacy and independence, and she didn't want to see him rushing home each night to

cater to his ailing mother. Besides, what would she do with her days? How much housekeeping could there be to do? It had made for more than a few tense evenings, I knew.

"She's going on an extended visit. We're not calling it moving," he said with a smile. "It's an *extended visit* with her sister—my aunt and uncle—in Ohio. They're semi-retired but have a small farm. No livestock, which Mama will miss, but a nice variety of vegetables. When she comes back, we'll tackle the issue of moving in with me. In the meantime, most of her stuff will go into storage. I imagine she'll stay through at least the summer. Manning the roadside stand, she says." He sighed. "She's missed Aunt Maureen, I know, so maybe it will be good for her. And some of my cousins are nearby, so that's good, too."

"Are you trying to convince yourself or me?"

He shot me a surprisingly sharp look. "You asked what was happening. I'm telling you. I'd appreciate the same courtesy."

"Huh?" Oh, good, very articulate.

"I just told you what was going on in my life. I did it because you're my friend and you asked. I assumed you were serious, that you really wanted to know. This wasn't a 'Hey, Farley, how're ya' doing?' or I'd've said 'Fine, thanks, and yourself?' You really wanted to know, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course. Why're you mad at *me*?"

"I'm not mad at you." But he stood and paced off some of the not-mad tension. The silence hummed for a minute. "I'm not mad at you," he said more calmly. "I'm worried about you." He dropped to the floor next to me and leaned back against the couch. "But when I ask what's wrong,

you put me off with a *fine-thanks-and-yourself?*-type answer. I think I deserve more than that."

Oh, great, a guilt trip. "You know, this is easier on the phone when I don't have to look at you."

"And yet, on the phone, you did the same thing. Which is why I'm here."

"Is *that* why? Damn, if only I'd covered better on the phone!"

He snorted a chuckle and smiled, and suddenly we were back on an even keel again. Friends. The silence this time was easier. "You know what I think your most serious problem is?" he asked.

"Running out of gas on a holiday?"

"I'm not going to let you turn this into a joke. Do you want to know what I think or not? 'No' is an okay answer."

I marshaled all my nerve, but perhaps not all my courtesy. "Fine. What? What's my biggest problem?"

"Tish, everybody makes mistakes. It's unavoidable. It's human. But most of us get past them. You dwell on yours. You relive them. You beat yourself up about them. You punish yourself over and over."

"I do not!" God! How did he know?

"Sure you do. If I walk out of here right now—and I was tempted earlier—you'd spend the rest of the night wondering what you said or did that was wrong. That's normal enough. What's not is that it wouldn't end with tonight. Six months from now you'd still be doing the same thing. Wondering if you'd hurt my feelings, recasting what you *should* have said or done." It felt like the air had been sucked out of the room.

"And right now," he continued, with a smile that managed to look both fond and pitying, "you're desperately reviewing all our conversations trying to figure out what you said that led me to understand this. Don't bother. It wasn't any one thing." Shit. "It's a pattern, that's all. You get stuck in all the bad places, beat yourself up over poor decisions. It's not healthy." He put his arm around my shoulders, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to lean against him.

"But if you don't—I don't know—take notice of the mistakes you make, how do you keep from making them again?"

"There's a difference between taking notice of a mistake and obsessing over it."

"I don't obsess!"

"Hah! How many times have you run out of gas since Christmas?"

"None." There, my method worked. *Ta da.*

"How many times have you filled your car with gas?"

"I have no idea. I don't keep track." Call me obsessive, will you!

"How many times have you let it get below half-a-tank?" Oh, damn. I saw where he was going just an instant too late to stop it.

"None," I admitted wearily before the counter-argument hit me. "Are you saying it's better—healthier—to simply ignore that experience and run out of gas?"

"No, I'm saying, it was a mistake. It's over. Put it behind you. If you spend all your energy structuring life so that you don't make that mistake again, you'll miss a thousand opportunities to make new and better mistakes."

"What makes you think I structure my life to avoid making mistakes?"

"Well, the calendar for one."

It was such a fixture in my life I didn't even think about the fact that Farley had been looking at my calendar as I had cut up the apples and sliced the cheese. My work schedule and JD's play dates, bills due and overdue, chores and household reminders are all laid out in clearly. And, apparently, somewhat too publicly. "Gas" was marked for Mondays and Thursdays. *So I'm organized! Is that a crime?* I thought, wistfully, of the dance club I had half-planned for the evening. It would have been far less taxing.

"But it's not just the calendar. Do you have any idea how many times you've mentioned that episode to me over the past few months? How badly you feel about putting JD in danger, how foolish it was to wait until Christmas day to fuel up, how you should have been paying better attention to your location, the weather, the terrain?"

The slice was more than skin deep. "I'm sorry if you have found my conversation tedious. I will try to find a broader array of topics to discuss." And I'd never mention that damn night again.

The frigid tone had done nothing to discourage Farley, though. "No, that was a serious question. Do you have any idea how many times?"

"No, I don't. I don't keep a log of conversational topics." Though it didn't seem like a bad idea at that point. "What the hell does it matter? Why don't we say thirty-seven times? Good god, are you keeping track?"

"No, not keeping track. And I think your guess is a little high, but not totally off the mark. I don't

bring it up to hurt you or to embarrass you." He'd done both, but I'd be damned if I'd let him see that. "I bring it up because I have an idea that I want you to try—but not unless you see the same problem."

"Which problem is that?"

"What did I just tell you I thought was your biggest problem?"

It took three deep breaths before I could muster the calmness to say, "That I always talk about the same things," and even then it came out just above a whisper.

"Oh, Tish, that's not it. That's not it at all. That isn't what I said or what I meant." I must have looked beyond pathetic because he put his arm back around me, pressed my head to his shoulder. "It's that you get stuck in negative thoughts. I think that happens whether you talk about it or not, doesn't it?"

How could I disagree with something like that without being negative? So I said nothing, trying to get to the truth of it. I do, perhaps ruminate more than most people. I struggle with bad decisions—had lived for years with some of the worst—but did I find it hard to let go or did I just accept the repercussions of the choices I made? One casting of the situation was decidedly more positive than the other... and, perhaps ironically, that was the one I had unquestioningly accepted. I was willing to take my lumps for my choices. Wasn't it reasonable that I clearly identify those mistakes so they didn't happen again? I tried to explain it to Farley.

"I don't think I do. It just seems silly to spend a lot of effort on self-congratulations when I've done the right thing. Maybe because the mistakes seem

to have more far-reaching effects, maybe because doing the right things should be easier, clearer, automatic—”

“Oh, girl, you don’t give yourself enough credit. Or maybe you just set your standards too high. You’ve got to let some of it roll off your back.”

“I can’t.”

“I know. I have an idea.”

“Which is?”

“No. Back up. Can we agree that you would be happier, more at peace, if you could dump some of the guilt and self-recrimination that you carry around?”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

He dropped a friendly slap to my knee. “That wasn’t the question. Would you be happier?”

“Sure,” I said sarcastically. “I’d also be happier if I had a winning lottery ticket and a beach-front vacation home.”

“You’re becoming exasperating.” And it was beginning to show in his voice. I drew away and he took a deliberate breath. “Would you agree that you’re punishing yourself for what you see as your mistakes?”

“I guess.” Though I hadn’t really thought of it that way before.

“Let’s see if I’ve got the pattern down here. You do something rash or impulsive—we’re not talking about an accident in its truest sense, but a mistake. You do something without thinking about it, without considering the consequences, like putting off getting gas in your car that one time. Then, when it things turn out badly, you might briefly lash out or try to blame someone else, but then you pretty much beat yourself up about it, tell yourself it can

never happen again and make up rules and strategies so that it doesn't. That about cover it?"

"So have you been considering a career in social work long?" I asked. Caustically. What would it take to get the guy out of my head? And how had he gotten in there?

He laughed without humor. "Oh, I'm about to shoot that theory down because the change I want to suggest is not one you'd likely ever hear from a social worker."

"What?"

"First, I want your agreement that you'll give it a chance, however bizarre it sounds."

"What is it?"

"Do you agree?"

"That's nuts. You can't really expect me to agree without hearing your plan. You sound like one of those late-night TV infomercials for real estate. 'I have a proven method for financial independence. Just follow my five simple steps and you can be a millionaire, working just a few hours a week.' But their 'few simple steps' are revealed only in a day-long seminar, which is really just a forum to get you to buy tapes or videos or business kits."

"You think I'm scamming you?"

No. "Yes."

"Then never mind." He scooped up a handful of Lego bricks and began to snap them together.

"When's JD due back? Do you think I'll have a chance to see him before I head back to my mother's tomorrow night?"

The shift was so abrupt it left me a bit disoriented. His tone was completely without rancor, neutral hedging toward friendly.

"I—I'll pick him up after breakfast," I said hesitantly.

"Do you have to work? Maybe we could all go on a picnic in the afternoon. It's supposed to be warm."

"Well, maybe— What just happened here?"

"Nothin'."

It sure as hell wasn't *nothing*, but I couldn't quite pin down what it was. Not a fight, really, but a strain at least. "Why don't you tell me your idea," I prodded. "It's probably a good one." Often in our phone conversations I had been struck by how well he could cut through a complicated issue and bring it down to its essential elements.

"No," he said with what appeared to be sad regret. "I'm jumping the gun here, I suppose. We don't have enough history for you to just trust me. And this will never work without that trust. It'll be okay. We'll talk about things again in a few months. Maybe it'll be easier for you to—well, maybe you'll just find it easier, that's all." He wasn't looking at me, just arranging the Legos in a pattern on the table, then snapping a second layer over the first. I began to disassemble one of the many towers to free up more bricks. A third row joined the first two.

"I want you to tell me what your idea is."

"No. You're not ready. We've already established that." He said it in his firm, no-nonsense voice, one that fascinated me even as it prompted an anxious shiver.

"I *am* ready. I'll agree to your stupid condition." At his sharp look I modified that to, "I'll agree to your condition."

"Which was...?" He stopped playing with the Legos.

"To go along with it, however crazy it sounds. I can do that." Was this me, begging for something even though I didn't know what it was? I had a crazy flash from the old game show, *Let's Make a Deal*, and Monty Hall was trying to quell my enthusiasm as I jumped up and down deciding whether I wanted to trade what I'd already won for whatever was behind Door Number Two. "Wait. One question. This won't be expensive, will it? I don't have much in the way of—I mean, I can't—"

"No, I am not selling videos." He cuffed me genially on the side of the head and I felt slightly chastened. "What I'm talking about is a way to help you feel like you've paid for your 'crimes' so you can move on." He swallowed, noticeably. "With a spanking."

"What?"

"With a spanking."

"That's what I thought you said."

He put a few more bricks on his creation and it began to take shape: four low walls interconnected to form a square. A box.

"You can't be serious."

"I am."

"And how the hell is that supposed to help?"

"Well, if we can target the few things that are most troublesome for you and make you feel like you don't have to punish yourself for them anymore, then I think you'll go forward with a lighter heart. Maybe it'll help you get unstuck."

"I'm not stuck!" I protested.

"Tell you what," he proposed. "You give me fifteen minutes to try it my way. If I'm right, then

you'll feel a whole lot better. If I'm wrong... well, what's the worst thing that happens? You've got another thing to add to your litany of regrets and 'shouldn't haves.'"

"No, the worst thing is that I could lose a friend."

"I don't think that's going to happen." It was clear that my words touched him, though my intent has been to scare him off. "It's going to be all right," he promised, with a kiss to my forehead.

It was going to be all *something*, but *right* didn't seem to be it.

"Have you ever been spanked before?" He was sitting on the sofa then, holding my hands, which were shaking perceptibly as I stood before him.

"Not since I was a little kid. Seven, eight maybe."

"By your parents?"

"Yes, of course. Who else?" Which seemed like a reasonable question until I realized I was about to be spanked by someone who was certainly not my parent. And I wasn't seven or eight.

He gave me a wicked grin that seemed ridiculously out of place. "Let's get this show on the road." Show? God help me. "I'm going to take your pants down, okay?"

"No!" I clutched at the waistline as though my jeans might leap off my body of their own accord.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean for that to sound like a request. It was just a warning of what I was about to do." He tugged at my hands and when I didn't move them, gave me a level look. "You agreed. You're going to try it my way. Fifteen minutes."

What could I do? I dropped my hands. "This just seems wrong," I complained as he tugged my jeans down. And I felt foolish for somehow talking myself into this weird situation. *No, Monty, I don't want to trade for what's behind Curtain Number Two. I'll keep the Neurotic Obsessions I already have, thanks.* Too late. At what point had it all gone wrong? Was there something I could have said or done at the restaurant to have deflected all this? Something I shouldn't have said on the phone recently? It's just that he was such a good listener. And I was so lonely. "I'm sorry!"

"For what?" His voice, gentle and curious, was so like that of our late-night chats that I wanted to relax into conversation. If only I could have ignored my position.

"I'm sorry for whatever I've done that makes you think I need a spanking." I was perilously close to tears. Embarrassed, mortified, and more than a little frightened. All afternoon, as I had contemplated the various ways the evening might play out, this possibility had never crossed my mind. I had flitted through variations of seduction, toyed with whether they would be successful or not, wondered whether we might end up in a club, an arcade, or an ice cream parlor. Never had I thought he was angry with me. Never had I thought he would hurt me. I began to tremble then struggled to get up, an effort that was quashed with one arm as the other shifted me bodily, tipping me forward until my feet left the floor. Panic joined the other feelings coursing through my body.

"No! No, no, this isn't right! You can't! Please don't. Please don't."

"Shhhh, shhh, I haven't even touched you. Calm down."

He certainly *had* touched me. I could feel the solid muscle under my abdomen and his hands on my hips and as he shifted me forward again. He touched with hands that were gentle but firm, soothing every bit as much as they controlled. I did calm down... or at least I stopped struggling.

"Fifteen minutes," he said softly. "You promised."

"I think the clock started when you first told me. You're almost out of time." It seemed clever for a moment. I wanted this over—over, done, and in the past, where I could analyze the whole horrible situation. How on earth had I gotten myself into this position, and how could I have been so wrong about Farley?

"Then I'd best make the most of what's left."

That was all he said before he began smacking my bottom. It stung, of course, but that was no surprise. Naturally, it would hurt. But every bit as much as the stinging spansks, I felt the embarrassment of both situation and position. Had I ever felt as exposed and vulnerable? Had I ever *been* as exposed and vulnerable? During sex, perhaps, there are moments of unguarded defenselessness, but there, at least, both people have gone into it voluntarily and there is, presumably, a degree of trust and, ideally, mutual respect, even if there isn't love. But here was a completely different situation. We had... what did we have? A bargain—a concession—and the vulnerability was all mine. To hell with that. Plus, the pain was beginning to build to something more than the sum of the spansks.

"Okay, stop! Enough!" I commanded.

"No, I'm sure I've got at least four or five minutes left," he answered, never slacking off on his rhythm.

"Seriously, cut it out. That hurts!" In fact, the pain was beginning to replace the propriety of the situation as my main concern. The fact that I was over his lap was suddenly less important than the throbbing in my lower half. It didn't just sting; it pulsed. *Whoosh-whoosh* in vivid counterpoint to the *whap! whap!* that made up the main theme. And it was galling not to be able to do anything about it. My efforts to twist and wriggle loose were suppressed with casual ease, and I had a moment to recall the earlier thought that he really was bigger, in some way, than mere physical dimensions would suggest. On the phone and in my thoughts, I had added to his bulk, made him bigger and tougher than he was—or so I had believed when I saw him at the restaurant. But suddenly, that *big* guy was back, dominating my world in so many different ways.

"Oww!" Any tattered remnants of modesty fled. I flailed and cursed. I begged and promised. And, when I couldn't do anything else, I sobbed. The anger was pretty much gone by then, but pain, misery, and something blacker that I can only identify as despair, were taking its place. My last coherent thought before I gave in to the drain of anguish was *I should have set the kitchen timer because his fifteen minutes have to be up.*

"You took advantage of me."

"I might have," he agreed, totally unrepentant.

"You know I never would have agreed to that if I'd known what you were going to do."

"Probably not." We were on the couch shortly after that first unexpected, horrible spanking.

"So, you—what?—get your kicks out of tricking women into letting you take their pants down and beat them to death?"

"Not *women*, just you. And you're not dead. A little worse for wear," he acknowledged, pushing damp hair from my face, "but not dead. You handled that pretty well. I'm proud of you."

Despite the swirl of confusing emotions, I felt the slight swell of pride at his words. It was less complicated to focus on the pain, though, so I went back to that. I was half-kneeling beside him on the couch, having pulled free once I realized I was no longer restrained. He had tried to draw me into his lap, but I had struggled away, replacing clothing in a desperate, futile attempt to force normalcy. Then, knees still shaking in reaction, I had dropped back to the couch in exhaustion—only to leap up again at the fresh assault on my nether regions. I settled on a compromise position—half kneeling on my own impetus, half relying on the couch to hold me up... and half letting Farley's arm take the load. And if that's three halves of a whole, it's probably clear which one wasn't working. But I wasn't in his lap.

Nevertheless, the arm around me was firm and sure. "That really hurt." I complained, testing for a response. He nodded sympathetically but didn't say anything, just reached up to wipe my cheek. The tears on my face weren't dry, but I wasn't crying anymore. Anger and pain were easing just enough

for bafflement to make a showing. How could he be so gentle now when just a few minutes ago...?

"I don't understand."

He looked at me with undisguised fondness and had a funny little half-smile that I found as bewildering as I did reassuring. "You really don't get it, do you?"

"Apparently not." I don't like feeling like I don't know what's going on or like I'm missing a joke, but it was hard to work up any real protest. There were too many steps of this whole evening that I was missing. This was just one more thing I didn't get. "You said... you said... you made it sound like you wanted to help me, but..."

"I did. I do. I will."

"But you— I— You're not helping me. I want you to leave." I wanted something, but it wasn't clear just what.

He looked, for the first time, a bit uneasy. He glanced briefly to the door, then back at me. "No, not until I'm sure you're okay."

"I'm fine."

"You're not. You will be," he added hastily, "but you're not yet. I'd feel better if I knew you were settled. Give me a few minutes, okay?"

"Oh, I'm not getting into another time bargain with you, you bastard. 'Just fifteen minutes,' my ass!" The exclamation was unintentional, but beyond the slightest quirk of the lips, Farley showed no sign he'd caught it.

"I'm not asking for that. Just give it a little time, until you're steadier. Until I'm sure you'll be okay alone."

"I'll be a damned sight safer alone than I am with you," I answered. I stood, meaning to escort

him to the door, but was betrayed by rubbery legs and knees that refused to lock into position.

"Hey, hey, hey. C'mere." This time I did end up in his lap, mostly for lack of alternatives, but it turned out to be easier than I thought to collapse onto his shoulder once I was there. He held and petted and soothed much as I imagined he would a fractious animal. Much as I would a cranky son. The comparison was uncomfortable, and eventually I pulled myself free when I was sure I could stand without trembling. It wasn't the same, I told myself. It's not like I tortured JD so that I could have the pleasure of comforting him. That would just be sick. So what the hell—

"What sort of twisted game is this you're playing? You put a hell of a lot of time and effort into setting me up didn't you? Weeks of phone calls, the beginnings of what I *thought* was a friendship. All so you could—what?—make me look like a fool? You—"

"You don't look like a fool, I'm not playing a game, and I'm not leaving just yet. Sit down. Please. We have to talk." All said in a calm, reasonable tone of voice that left me even more confused than I had been. Baffled, and still frantically trying to make some kind of sense out of things, I began to tidy up, a knee-jerk reaction to stress and one that found ample outlet in a home with a pre-schooler. I began sweeping Legos into a plastic bin.

After a minute, Farley joined me, wordless. He tossed the half-finished building he had been working on into the bin along with a handful of stray pieces, but when it came to my little red-and-white

car, he set it gently among the rubble, letting go rather reluctantly.

"How could you do that?" I asked quietly, and he made no pretense of not understanding.

"I'm trying to help." Neither one of us was talking about the Legos.

"Bull!" That was a mild version of what I was thinking.

He seemed to find that amusing. "Yep, it all started between us with that bull. I've almost developed affection for ole Blacky. Felt a pang to give him up, even after all the grief he's caused." And give him up he had, I knew. The equipment was easier to sell off than the stock—easier logistically and easier emotionally. Still the animals, strays and otherwise, were slowly being sent off to new homes. Only three of the dogs were being spared; two would go with Farley when he moved back to Virginia; one would go with his mother to Ohio. For a moment I tried to see the entire awful night as somehow tied to the difficulties Farley was struggling with. Could it be that his frustration, his powerlessness, had made him lash out at me in some clumsy, misguided attempt to feel in control? Could it be a cry for help? Could it—

"You spanked me!" I accused, but if I expected some kind of apology or even guilt, I wasn't going to get it.

"I did. You ready to talk about why?"

"Why?" I was flabbergasted. Where was my apology? If this was a cry for help, he was being pretty damn smug about it. "I'm ready for you to leave."

He looked me up and down as though evaluating the truth of my statement. "I will if you want. I'd

rather stay, but if you need some time alone, I can appreciate that. We still on for a picnic tomorrow? Suppose I swing by around eleven?"

There's surreal and then there's unreal.

"A picnic? You've *got* to be kidding."

Turned out he wasn't kidding.

JD was brimming with stories of the circus the next morning, and I was regaled with vivid, if sometimes confusing, descriptions of lions and motorcycles and high-wire acts. He was doing a repeat performance of a dozen dogs doing acrobatic tricks that seemed to involve lots of barking and hoops. I don't know what the original was like, but the reprise was performed with great enthusiasm, JD providing the barks and an ottoman standing in for the hoops. By all appearances, the dogs must have been good somersaulters.

"And then," JD continued breathlessly, "there was about a million clowns, and they all came out and did funny stuff and magic tricks and the one near us kept pulling stuff out of his ears like colored cloths and balloons and flags and cotton candy but I don't know if anybody would eat it if it was in his ear. Would you?" He looked at me with the guileless curiosity that, no doubt, had prompted his grandfather to buy him a cotton candy free of earwax.

"No, I wouldn't," I smiled, but the chuckle died in my throat at the sound of the doorbell.

"Who's that?" JD raced to the door but knew better than to open it. I hesitated as well. Who would I find? The insightful friend and good listener I thought I knew... or the mad spanker? Neither, as

it turned out. A peek through the fisheye peephole revealed a distorted but grinning face. It did me in just as surely as JD's cotton candy innocence had. I opened the door. I could pretend the previous evening had not occurred if he could.

Farley meant my eyes, clearly gauging his ground and finding it safe, before turning his attention to JD. "I thought maybe we'd head off to Jellystone Park," he said, swinging a picnic basket at waist level. "What do you say, Boo Boo?" *Smarter than the average bear*, I thought.

My resolve to put the odd encounter behind me was settling into deliberate denial. It had not really happened. And it would not happen again as long as I reestablished the parameters that had been working well before: we wouldn't be alone. I wasn't prepared to write him off completely, but I could make sure we weren't alone; we could return to telephone conversations, meet in public places, go places with JD. Farley was probably feeling just as awkward and uncomfortable about what happened as I was.

Sure.

I kept up the pretense during the drive and as we settled into a picnic spot. I pushed JD on a swing until he protested that he could do it *himself*, at which point I returned to the blanket, comfortable in the knowledge that last night hadn't happened and I could keep an eye on JD as he roamed the playground, which had enough climbing equipment to challenge a young boy's stamina.

"This is a wonderful park. We've never been here before." It was one of the many regional

parks sprinkled across the area, large sweeps of greenspace that offered everything from quiet hiking trails and fishing ponds to summer concerts. This one boasted a carousel and miniature train, both closed for the season.

"I like it. I used to work here."

"Here?" I knew he worked—had worked—for the state. He described his job as "facilities management," which I had assumed meant something like "building management," but it was easy to see him in this setting, outdoors, overseeing plants and animals rather than scheduling office cleanings and elevator inspections. I said as much and he laughed.

"You'd be surprised how much of that kind of thing gets done at a place like this. This is the off-season and it's awfully quiet considering the warm weather, but during summer it can get pretty darn crowded. It's not all Mother Nature. It's kids getting lost or hurt. It's weekend warriors pouring a half-can of lighter fluid on a bag of charcoal and then being surprised by the flames. It's security lights that seem to break down every time it rains. No elevators, but the train and carousel run pretty much non-stop from March to November. I think I'd sooner tell an office worker he'll have to walk up three flights than tell a six-year-old that the train's broken."

"But you love it."

"It has its moments." He grinned wryly, apparently recalling some of those moments. "So, how're you doing after your first spanking?"

Not fair. No, absolutely not fair! He wasn't playing by the rules I made up. "How am I

supposed to pretend that didn't happened if—if—if you talk about it?"

"I don't want you to pretend it didn't happen."

"Well, I do!" I looked around desperately, half hoping there was no one within earshot, half looking for a reprieve. "I've got to find JD."

"He's right there, top of the slide." He was. Red-cheeked with exertion and beaming with the triumph of having scaled the climbing wall to get there. I watched him slip into the red plastic tube and shoot out the bottom seconds later. Without a break in motion, he was heading back to the climbing wall.

"You didn't answer my question. How are you doing after your first spanking?"

"I wish you wouldn't say it like that—my *first*, like they'll be another."

"There might be," he said, losing the tone of friendly inquiry. "You'll want to modulate that tone if you don't want it to be today."

"I like you a lot better on the phone." That made him smile.

"Some things can't be done from a distance, and this was one of them. Are you going to answer my question? I want to know how you feel. Have you thought this over? Did you get the point?"

"There's a *point*?"

He shook his head in exasperated disbelief. "You really have been trying to pretend it didn't happen, haven't you? God, help me." He rubbed his face as though suddenly very tired, and I felt a twinge of sympathy despite my best efforts.

"What's the point?"

He shot a glance toward the playground, either to check on JD's progress or just to avoid looking at

me. "Look, I thought about this a lot, and I think it will work, but you got to meet me halfway."

"I sense another 'just give me fifteen minutes' deal coming on. I'm not falling for that again."

The low rumbling in his throat was either amusement or irritation and I wasn't much interested in finding out which. "Come on, you're the one who has to analyze, over-analyze, dissect every damn thing." My glare, meant to sear his optic nerve and vaporize nearby flesh, had a less dramatic effect. His mouth twitched in the briefest of smiles before he rephrased his point. "You like to thoroughly understand cause and effect."

"Yes." I didn't mean for that to come out as a challenge, but it did.

"There's nothing wrong with that, but that's why I figured you would have thought about this some, that you'd already be halfway there."

I'd thought about it only inasmuch as I'd deliberately blocked the entire evening out of my mind, but I didn't think I could explain how *that* worked, so I didn't try. It didn't seem to matter anyway as Farley was already forging on, whether I wanted to tread this boggy ground or not. "It doesn't matter," he reassured. "You went along with me last night and that's all you promised. We just need to tidy up loose ends. This'll work," he repeated, almost to himself before taking a breath and focusing on me. "That was a very unpleasant experience, right? The spanking?" Oh, like he had to clarify what the unpleasant part was.

"Yeah." It clearly was... even if the pain, anger, and fear I had felt the night before had faded into something far more muddled. An unpleasant experience to be sure. "Right."

"And you don't want to go through it again, right?"

My hand went back in a defensive—if completely ineffective—gesture. "You wouldn't!"

"No, not right now, kiddo. Relax. That's not what I meant. I meant this: that was unpleasant. You don't want to repeat it. Why did I do it?" When I did not immediately answer, he prompted me. "What did I say your biggest problem was?"

"Getting stuck in negative thoughts. Being overcritical of myself."

"That's right. So I figure as you try to work through this, it's going to occur to you that the best way to avoid a repeat of that unpleasant experience is..."

"...not to get stuck in negative thoughts," I answered somewhat dubiously.

"That's it. Relax. Don't worry about it right now. This isn't an instant solution, just a tool. Give it some time; give it some thought. See if that doesn't straighten out some things. I bet, the next time you find yourself thinking, 'Oh, boy, what have I done now?' you're going to realize that's a road you don't want to go down. I think it'll work. Really. Give it a chance."

"You mean give *you* a chance."

"Same thing." That was interesting, but it seemed smart not to pursue that. "Live with it a bit, pick it apart, like you always do, and see—in a week or two or three—if, at least, you're not struggling over your gas tank."

"And if I am?"

"Maybe it will take a second treatment."

"Sounds rather like a drain cleaner: if drain is still clogged, repeat application."

"If you like," he laughed, and it occurred to me that he had laughed more in the past twenty-four hours than in all our previous conversations put together. This was no frustrated cry for help. He was completely at ease with that had happened, settled and comfortable with this new wrinkle in our relationship. The laughter, too, was comfortable, not mocking. It was as though there was the clear sense of some shared humor we both understood, even though I wasn't laughing. And, of course, that's exactly what it was. He had entered my head, or I had let him in, but rather than the derisive criticism I might have expected—in fact, tended to drown myself in—he took a light, amused tone that was intriguing, appealing, nearly seductive.

"Shall I call you Mr. Plumber?"

He laughed again. "Feeling better?"

"A bit."

"I think it'll get better yet. You'll let me know either way?"

"Sure."

"If this is not the answer, we'll find another one."

We. I'd have to give that some thought.

I stared blankly into the distance. Some dim maternal monitor noted absently that JD had moved to the jungle gym bars, but most of my mind was struggling with the deluge of new information I'd been subjected to.

What happened next is one of the moments I have locked away in my memory vault, one of those special, unrepeatable scenes that capture, in an instant, an entire relationship. He tugged me to his lap—well, not really on his lap, but between his

outstretched legs—and drew me to his chest, wrapping his arms firmly around me, his chin resting on my shoulder, his breath warm against my ear. And he held me as I struggled with my own confusion, but he did not push again. I felt remarkably safe, surrounded by his body. Safe and (odder yet) accepted.

Together we watched JD try to scale a climbing pole. He would reach as high as he could on the pole, then pull himself up, scrabbling to gain purchase with his sneakers, then pull himself up a few more inches with his arms. I watched the painstaking effort as he inched up, resettled and prepared for the next segment. He was about three feet off the ground the first time he fell, betrayed by a sneaker that failed to keep its hold. Even in the distance I could see the surprise on JD's face. I started to get up, anxious to help, but Farley, who had clearly been watching as keenly as I, loosened but did not relinquish his hold.

"Give him a second. He's okay."

He was, in fact, up and already brushing the shredded mulch from his hands, and looking at the pole as though it held some secret hint for ambitious climbers, if only he could see it.

"He needs help. He's too little."

"Give him a chance. He doesn't have to do it right, do it perfectly, the first time. Just the attempt is a worthy effort."

"He's too little," I repeated. "He doesn't have the upper body strength to do that kind of thing."

"Then he'll figure that out. Or he'll get stronger. Or he'll surprise you and do it. What he won't do is appreciate your telling him he can't. What if he believes you?"

I slumped back against Farley, who had never really let me go. "I don't want him to get hurt."

"Of course you don't. But he's not going to get hurt. He might fall, but that's not *hurt*. There's better than a foot of surface cover there. I know because I helped put it down. He's not going to get hurt." I winced as JD slipped again, landing with a *plop* at the bottom of the pole, but Farley's arms stayed tight around me and I could hear the smile in his voice. "See, the worst that's going to happen is he'll bruise his bottom, and you already know how temporary that is."

It pays to have connections, we found out, when we stopped by the park office and Farley managed to talk his way into "testing" the train, which was not scheduled to open for the season for another few weeks. It meant stopping a couple of times in the woods to clear debris from the tracks, but that just added to the thrill for JD, who glowed with admiration by the time we were done. We also got to climb on the carousel, though it wasn't open either. That didn't seem to impede masculine conversation of the relative merits of the different horses on it and which one JD would ride *if* he could.

A couple of hours later, as the late-winter twilight began to descend, we tromped back home, happy and exhausted. Between the circus and the park picnic, JD was stoked with stories and memories, which delighted me as a mother, of course. My own reaction, though, was the unexpected one. I was *happy*, I realized with a start. And it had been a long time since I'd felt

genuine happiness. I had been pulling against melancholy for so long that I had all but forgotten there was something else. However briefly it was there, I would be satisfied with it.

An ingrained sense of fair play made me want to share that with Farley... but the attempt was a fumbling, awkward one. We were in the kitchen as I tried to put together a light dinner under the rapt, silent attention of my guest. "We had a really wonderful time. I'm so glad we went to that park. Maybe I'll take JD back later in the season, when you're there and everything's open. He'd love it."

"I'm sure he will. I probably won't be there though. I imagine I'll be transferred somewhere else. You can't just take a six-month leave of absence and expect to step back in where you left off. I'll probably end up at one of the smaller parks, or splitting my time among a dozen neighborhood parks."

"But that's not right. You *had* to take off to help your mom. It wasn't your fault."

He laughed. "It's not like I was in the drunk tank, you're right, but it's not about fault. It wouldn't be fair to the guys who stepped in to get through the winter for me to come back in the spring and displace them. They've done the prep and the planning, hired the summer staff; they deserve to see how it plays out. And if I don't like my new assignment... I'm free to pursue career advancement elsewhere," he added wryly, and I wondered if he had used the phrase on a recalcitrant employee sometime in the past. "It'll all work out. You needn't worry that I'll end up on your doorstep begging for scraps."

"No, I wasn't." I hadn't been, not by any stretch of imagination. "You seem like someone who always lands on his feet."

I'd abandoned any pretense of dicing scallions for tuna salad and was simply staring at him as I struggled with how to say what I wanted to say. When I realized I was staring, I returned to the onions with great industry. "What?" he prompted softly, clearly seeing my preoccupation.

I finished with the scallions and reached for an apple to peel. "You've been really nice to me lately. That sounds kind of dumb considering what happened last night, but... well, you haven't been as snarly or snippy with me as usual."

"Me? Snarly? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah, right," I scoffed, and we shared a chuckle. "Seriously, though, you have been different."

He tilted my chin up so I would have to look at him. "I didn't think you could take snarly just now," he said gently, and I almost lost it, the tears welling up until I didn't think I could fight them back. He slipped the paring knife from my hand and enfolded me in his arms in a breath. "Shhhh, shhh, it's okay. You're okay." The solidness and gentleness were both very reassuring—and I had not realized I needed reassurance. When I didn't fall apart, he eased back to catch my expression. "I'll call you tomorrow, snarl at you then. How would that be?"

I grinned in spite of myself. "Just what I'll need, I'm sure."

Later, though, as he made to leave, I made another stab at telling him.

"It was a really wonderful day. I enjoyed it a lot. Thanks for making it so special."

"Well, I think first dates *should* be special, don't you?"

I was dumbfounded.

He teased my lips with a fingertip. "Don't you?"

"First date?" Was that my voice squeaking?

"Well, you can hardly count Christmas, can you? Though that would make it easier to remember anniversaries if you're one of those sentimental types who has to memorialize everything." He seemed to be seriously considering the utility of declaring Christmas as our first date while I stood there with my mouth open. I know that I was standing there with my mouth open because his next words were, "You're catching flies," as he ran a finger over my mouth. Then he apparently decided that as long as it was open he might as well take advantage of it. Or me. Or something.

The first kiss was no polite peck, no gentle buss that promised more. It was deep, consuming, and possessive—all of which occurred to me later; at the time, I could no more have thought the words than I could have thrown him out. Or ended the kiss on my own.

When, some time later, I was able to think and breathe with something approaching normality, though I was still clinging to Farley, I managed, "That was no first-date kiss."

I was pleased to see him nearly as staggered as I. He made no apologies (and I'd've been disappointed if he had) but kissed me again—more gently but no more tentatively.

"I'll see you soon," he promised, his eyes still on mine as he backed toward the door.

I was delighted to see the flush to his face. "And you'll call me tomorrow?" What I might have thought needy a half-hour earlier suddenly felt completely reasonable. My guy would call. My guy.

The last thing he said, before a swift parting kiss, was, "Think about that spanking. Tell me if it helps."

I'm sure I was as flushed as he by then.

It would be disingenuous of me to say that everything was perfect after that. We had our bumps, our false starts, and our clashes. There were moments when I'd have happily throttled that man, but even then I know he was *my* man. Bit by bit, he drummed out of me the reflexive self-criticism that had become my boon companion. (I used to say he *beat* it out of me, but Farley made clear how he felt about that phrasing. *Drummed* it out of me is okay, apparently.)

Life didn't turn around immediately. Some holes, once dug, are hard to get out of, but it's a lot easier when you have someone outside the hole trying to help. Gradually, I took a few steps to make things better. I swallowed my pride and took help from my parents (who, I discovered, were not nearly as critical of me as I had thought) and took a new job with smaller tips but more benefits, including stable hours and a health plan. Small steps, none of them easy or perfect, but all of them in the right direction, and when things didn't work out right away, I didn't swear I'd never try again.

(Okay, I did swear that once, but I was quickly reeducated by my man.)

Farley went through trials of his own, particularly his mother's death less than a year later, but he never flagged, and seeing how resolute he could be in the face of adversity—even when that adversity was me—helped me weather my own difficulties.

JD was five when we married, and Farley is the only father he's known. I finally gave up the fantasy that I could somehow rebuild or create a connection to his biological father's family. Their disinterest is sad but for the most part peripheral. I say *for the most part* because I did once overhear an exchange of insults between JD and one of his brothers when they were in both quite young. Smarting from some belittling remark I was too late to hear, Shawn shot out, "Well, you're not even really my brother because Dad's not really your dad." I was so stunned it took me a moment to react, and I'm glad it did or I never would have heard JD's smug, amused retort. "Hey, he's been my dad longer than he's been yours."

Well, he's been my man longer than he's been dad to any of them—from the moment I ran out of gas on the highway, whether I knew it at the time or not. The thought had me glancing reflexively at the fuel gauge: a quarter tank. Should I stop or put it off a few more exits?

Hey, what's the worst that can happen?

Cancer

Making Memories

Lucky. They were really very lucky. How many times would Alicia have to tell herself that before she began to believe it? Lucky to have found it so soon. If they hadn't been doing routine pre-op x-rays, they might never have seen those suspicious shadows. Lucky to have been diagnosed so quickly. He wasn't even symptomatic yet. Lucky to have qualified for the clinical trial out of Texas.

In what warped, perverted universe was it lucky to "qualify" for the opportunity to dose yourself with experimental drugs on the off-chance that they wouldn't kill you any faster than the cancer would?

If one more person told her how *lucky* they were, she would turn violent. Justifiable homicide, that was for sure. It was bad enough to have to live in this shimmering unreality without the patronizing, sympathetic murmurings. For as sure as people said, "Oh good heavens, how awful for you," she knew they were thinking, "Thank God it's not me." She knew that, with some certainty, because it had not been so long ago that she had thought the same thing, hearing about some awful event befalling others. Now, she thought with a shaky breath, she didn't really have a whole lot of spare energy to feel the compassion that should have come so easily before.

It had been just three months since their world had turned upside down.

To accentuate the contrast, it had come after a truly blissful spring, capped off by a long-anticipated tour of Italy. A once-in-a-lifetime trip, and, she thought bitterly, likely to remain so. By any reckoning, they had a wonderful time—restaurants and ruins and restaurants and galleries and restaurants and wineries and restaurants and scenery. At the end of the second week, Logan had apparently "done something" to himself. Alicia blamed his macho insistence on carrying suitcases up and down stairs in every little out-of-the-way hotel they'd been to, but whatever had done it, the hernia put a damper on only the last two days and the flight home. There were rolls of film still undeveloped and bags of souvenirs to be sorted through when the doctor scheduled surgery and they began their downward slide into "luck." Routine X-rays were alarming and prompted another series of tests that were considerably less routine. Even before the surgical scar had healed on the hernia, they were talking to oncologists.

Lung cancer, they said. Inoperable, they said. Caught it early, they said. Wasn't that lucky?

Yeah, lucky, for a man who had never smoked a cigarette, never worked with asbestos, never been in a coal mine. Lucky.

And his lucky, lucky wife got to sit in more dazzlingly similar hospital waiting rooms than she had previously imagined existed and read the same year-old *People* magazines. As the air got thicker and thicker in her own lungs. Breathing, and act that had once been automatic, would never be taken for granted again.

This waiting room was in Dallas. She thought, vaguely, that it should have steer horns on the walls

or cowboy hats or something. Instead it was just another anonymous not-quite-white but not-quite-pastel neutral color with high ceilings that should have felt spacious but just ended up feeling vast. Just like all the others.

"Forgot your book, again, did you?" Logan's voice came unexpectedly from behind.

Well, that was different. Usually he emerged from whatever door or hallway he had disappeared into. She had been staring at it longingly, willing him to come back, but his tests or meetings must have carried him through the labyrinth behind the nurse's station and around because he had emerged through the double doors behind her. Surprise kept the tears at bay, but she managed to toss the magazine back on the table where someone else could not read it.

"How's my brave little patient?" she asked with forced cheerfulness. "They didn't give you one of those cute little gowns?" She had been horrified and frightened the first time he had emerged from a doctor's visit in a hospital gown rather than his street clothes. More tests, more observation, overnight, just to make sure. And he had stood there, awkward and ungainly, trying to figure out how to cover up more of his body than the thin cotton gown seemed designed to conceal, even as he reassured her that everything was all right. "Probably afraid those sexy legs of yours would distract all the nurses," she teased. Since that first time, she made sure that a pair of pajamas, clean underwear, and a razor were always stowed in the bottom of her canvas bag when he went to the doctor. Even if she forgot her book.

"No," Logan answered, with that half-rueful smile he seemed to adopt so much of late. "I told 'em I wasn't spending my first night in Dallas eating green Jell-O and angel food cake in the hospital, and they agreed that I ought to take my wife out to a steakhouse and see what Texas cooking's all about."

Over dinner, he hit the highlights of his afternoon, and she keyed names and details into the PDA that had become the repository for all medical information. Over a T-bone so big that it hung off the plate, Logan described the latest-and-greatest plan. She was pleased to see his appetite back, however temporarily. So often the medications had left him nauseous. One had caused diarrhea so serious they started IV fluids to counter dehydration. This trial, he reported over a mouthful of beef, was likely to cause nausea and appetite loss, as well, but he seemed buoyed by the visit overall, and Alicia struggled to show the same optimism.

"So we're to be back at ten o'clock tomorrow? Does that mean at admittance at ten or in your room already registered at ten?"

He paused thoughtfully. "I don't know. They just said ten."

Alicia scowled over her entry, unsure how to record it. "Well, who said ten? I'll call them and confirm."

"It doesn't matter. We'll be there early, right after breakfast. And if we're not through the paperwork when they're ready for me in oncology, well, I'm sure we can deal with it."

She bit back the instant irritation. Sure, deal with it. That meant he would leave her with paperwork and insurance forms and administrators while he was wheeled off somewhere and they did god-knows-what to him. She snapped the cover closed after keying in "10 a.m.—hosp."

"Something wrong?"

"No."

"I know what that kind of 'no' means, young lady. Now, what's the matter?"

"Nothing!" she said, more sharply than she intended. Bringing turbulent emotions back under control, she was able to smile almost convincingly. "Nothing," she repeated more gently. "Long day. I guess I'm a little on edge. Travel does that to me."

"Oh, come on, you love to travel. Remember that little guest house we found in Vicenza? The one by the Bacchiglione. You enjoyed that. Remember?" He wagged his eyebrows and she laughed, willing to be distracted.

They had been heading toward Milan when Alicia had been captivated by palazzos and basilicas that dotted the hillside. They stopped, hoping to find a tour guide to show them the homes that, according to the guidebook, presaged some of the best eighteenth century architecture in America, and somehow—Alicia was never really sure how, but she blamed it on a faulty phrasebook—she managed to rent a room as well as secure a guide in the few minutes it had taken Logan to find a rest room. The unplanned two days were among the most delightful and relaxing they had. "Hey, who needs an itinerary when you've got time, energy, and interest?" she quoted back to him, on a laugh.

After a beat they both added, "And plastic," as with a single voice, and fell back to easy laughter.

"We should get those pictures in albums and labeled while we still remember everything."

"I'm not going to forget," she said tightly. Everything in the past four months seemed like a series of snapshots she would never forget.

He took her hand, understanding. "I know. But you know how it is. You see one basilica and it's breathtaking. By the fifth, you can't even remember which town it was in. We should get it down while we can still come up with the names and places for everything."

"I'll take care of it."

"We'll take care of it. This is not another chore for you to take on," he admonished gently. He studied her a moment then changed the direction of the conversation, and, hopefully, her attention. "It was a lovely trip."

"Yes." She thought back now and could call some of the photos to mind. But the pictures didn't capture some of her favorite moments. They didn't capture the morning when, curled up in a too-short single bed listening to the rain beat on the windowsill, they decided not to get up at all. They didn't capture the picnic under an ancient, gnarled cherry tree on a hill near Milan. They didn't capture the pleasant exhaustion of sitting in an airport terminal waiting for the flight home. There were some things you just didn't take pictures of; you just had to remember.

"Do you want to take a cab back? Are you tired?"

"Oh, I think I can manage it." He snagged her neatly in one arm as they emerged from the restaurant, and steered her left when she would have gone right. "Hotel's this way, 'Leesh," he corrected, then planted a kiss on her temple. Turning right would have taken them back to the hospital, and he'd had quite enough of that for one day. If they had a twelve-hour hiatus from blood tests and urine tests and CT scans and talk of needle biopsies, he intended to take it. Under his arm, Alicia remained quiet but inched closer, rubbing her head against his chest. They walked in silence.

He'd heard of families breaking up under the strain of serious illness. The support group he'd been to twice warned that isolation was a serious risk. He had no concern that Alicia would leave, physically or emotionally, but there were moments when they seemed too far apart. It was a delicate balance to draw her closer without forcing her to move at his pace. By any standard, she had been supportive and involved. She was apt to see to his comforts with some sort of second-sight, producing food, solace, information, or distraction as necessary. But still... it was as though she was watching, anxious, ready for the other shoe to drop. They were moving through it in tandem but not quite together most of the time. It was the rare moment when she dropped the half-expectant look and let him see the fear.

Back in the hotel room, it wasn't fear but preoccupation he was seeing. Alicia checked and rechecked the contents of the duffle he would take

to the hospital, moving things from their suitcases and her canvas bag to his duffle and back again for obscure feminine reasons. He watched, with a half-smile, from the bed for several minutes before she noticed.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I just like watching you. Always have."

She tugged self-consciously at the curls that drooped in the dry western heat. "I'm not looking my best, I know."

"You're beautiful."

Her flustered smile did him a world of good. He aped a drunken slur and leered, "C'mon over here and give us a kiss, doll-face," and they were both laughing by the time she dropped a peck on his cheek. The moment went from silly to serious an instant after that. He caught her mouth in a quick, thorough kiss that left her breathless and flustered... and retreating. He watched in silence, still tasting her on his tongue, as she refolded a T-shirt he knew damn well didn't need to be folded.

"Do you want me to turn on the TV?" she offered, as though the awkward moment were but an illusion.

"No. Why don't you come to bed?" She opened her mouth to protest and he added the manipulative words he knew would turn the tide. "I'm sort of tired, and we have to be at the hospital in the morning." Instantly she went from nervous to sympathetic.

"Oh, sure, honey." He wouldn't sleep with the television or lights on, so if Logan was turning in, that meant she would try to sleep as well. Less successfully, perhaps, but try she would. Putting

the final touches on the hospital-bound bags, she set them by the door. She donned a nightgown with an unaccountable sense of unease as Logan watched from the bed. They'd been married fifteen years; there was no reason she should feel any self-consciousness about dressing or undressing in front of him, but for an instant she had considered retreating to the bathroom. There was something unsettling about the look she caught in his eye.

"Come here, Alicia," he invited with a genial smile and an encouraging hand. He had her hand in his before he finished the invitation. "Come get your spanking."

She jerked back but was anchored by one hand. "Nooo—" It was a soft wail more than refusal, but she continued to pull on the arm that was now held in both his hands. She was slowly drawn back to the bedside, eyes bright with incipient tears.

"Let me," he said gently, a request for compliance not permission. Her knees folded, and she found herself going across the bed and over his legs.

"But—"

"That's right, you have a beautiful butt. Let's see it." In a breath, her thigh-length nightgown was down up.

"What did I do? I don't know what I did!" she protested but did not attempt to rise.

"Shhh. Shhh. It's okay, baby. You didn't do anything wrong. Everything's okay. Just settle down." The words were accompanied by soothing rubs and pats and, despite herself, Alicia relaxed.

"Do you remember the last time I spanked you?"

"Nooo."

"It was a long time ago, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Has anything changed since then?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean, I'm your husband. I love you and look out for you. Just like always." She met him with baffled silence, which was no more than he expected. He rubbed her back, pushing the flounced edge of the nightgown up still further. "I'm your husband, not your patient, not your case, not your problem." Each phrase was accompanied by a light smack to her bottom.

"Is this because I didn't kiss you before? I was just— You surprised me. I didn't mean—"

"You did kiss me. I know I surprised you, but you did kiss me back. Right up until you remembered that I had cancer. Then you shied off." The spanks were still gentle, but they were still there, too hard to ignore, too light to cause real pain. "And as your husband, I'm going to spank you until I'm convinced you understand me." He felt the twist of her body as she tried to turn over—no doubt to explain her point of view—but he was ready for her; his left hand abandoned its soothing and became a restraint. He felt her body go rigid the instant she realized she was being held down. "Easy, easy," he murmured, as much to himself as to her.

He wasn't surprised she didn't remember the last time he spanked her. He didn't remember it particularly either—it had been more than ten years, after all—but it had undoubtedly been something like lying, mistrustfulness, or disrespect. Those were the kind of insidious threats to their relationship that he had been on guard against in

the early days. Setting the right tone had been important, and he had frequently used a spanking as a sharp reminder of just how much—or how little—leeway there was.

As they settled into what felt like permanence, though, the need for spankings had dropped off dramatically. There was very little need for testing the boundaries once they were firmly established, and there were few things that couldn't be resolved with an open discussion or, on occasion, a quick, angry argument. That last spanking might well have been over an argument that went too far, but generally a single swat to a still-clothed bottom was more than enough to bring her up short or prompt a devilish smile if she'd been deliberately baiting him.

But a true spanking—well, that had been years.

He eased the pressure on her back when she stopped trying to move, and his right hand continuing its methodical trip around her bottom. "You know I love you, don't you?"

"Yes." The uncertainty in her voice was because of the situation not any doubt about the truth.

"And you know I'm not going to hurt you, don't you?"

"I don't know why you're doing this!" came out on a sob.

"But you know I'm not going to hurt you, don't you?"

"I don't know why you'd *want* to hurt me."

"You know I'm *not* going to hurt you, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Good for you." And good for him, he thought with an internal sigh of relief. It had been disconcerting not to get that answer right off. He

had wondered, briefly, if he'd taken the wrong path, but, no, he just needed to give her the time to adjust, to settle in, to remember what it was like to be literally under his hand. He made another slow circuit of her bottom: a few dozen light spanks and the beginnings of pinkish glow on pale cheeks.

"I do love you, you know."

"Yes."

If she didn't remember the last time, she certainly remembered the first. It was a claiming ceremony, pure and simple: a swift, firm rebuke that put her in her place and made it clear that place was in his heart. Knowing his old-fashioned attitude about sex outside of marriage (which very nearly matched her own) she had thought it safe to tease and torment him without fear of consequences. What she learned was that there were all kinds of consequences. A short, sharp spanking and she'd been in his arms again, humbled but reassured of both his strength and his love.

Now, more than fifteen years after that unexpected introduction to the world of Logan McCann's love and commitment, she found it easier to understand and to take. The resistance melted from her shoulders, and she settled onto the bed, conscious of the feel of him under her. Sensing the change, Logan put a little more snap into each swat. The color intensified, going from pale pink to deep rose before she began to arch her back in involuntary reaction to the pain. Where once he might have taken it up a notch, he found himself easing off, soothing and reassuring. "Alicia, you've been wonderful these past several months, but I know it's been hard on you. Don't forget we're in

this together. You've been letting me lean on you, but you can lean on me, too. I miss it when you don't. I— I... need for you to need me."

She twisted about to see him better, tears and misery telling their story on her face. "You idiot." It was a mild observation that made him smile in spite of himself. "Of course I need you. Every minute of every day." Her arms stretched to him in mute plea to be held.

In an instant, she was in his lap, the cocooning comfort of chest and arms recalling earlier, easier times, and all the more reassuring because of that resonance. It was natural to be there, to watch the pulse in his neck beat without a clinical eye, to know his smoky grey eyes would be closed in silent appreciation of the moment, not because he might be overtired. For just this moment, she could relax and feel what it was like to be in Logan's arms. It felt good. It felt right.

"And you know that I'd never let anything hurt you if it was in my power to stop it."

He might as well have opened floodgates. The sobbing became choked and spasmodic, a frantic effort to take in enough air only to have it robbed from her chest with the next sob. He only understood her words because he knew what they would be: "But—you—can't—stop—it! You can't do anything."

He patted her back as he had once patted her bottom, gently, soothingly, whispering nonsense all the while. "Shh. Shh. It's all right. Ah, darling, it'll be okay." He didn't try to answer the charge until she'd calmed down enough to listen. Then: "And don't tell me there's nothing I can do, young lady, because that's not true." She swallowed the

automatic disagreement because she wanted, very much, to believe him. "I can listen to you. I can talk to you. I can be there when you're feeling scared and angry and powerless. And I'll understand because I've felt all those things myself. I can be there for you and love you through it all."

"You can't *not* die."

If she's hoped, vainly, for an argument, she wasn't going to get one. "That's true. I can't promise you that." He wiped fresh tears from her cheeks as he pressed on with the awful truth that he had meditated on again and again since the diagnosis. "But the fact is that I could never promise you that. Just as you could never promise me."

Her forehead furrowed in exhausted puzzlement, but she couldn't phrase the question. "I can't promise you I'll be here in ten years. I can't promise you I'll be here in one. I hope I will. I plan to be, but I don't know. I could get hit by a truck on the way to the hospital tomorrow; I could have a heart attack or stroke or fall down an elevator shaft. We could both get killed in a plane crash on the way back home."

She was not to be deflected. "Or the cancer could kill you."

"Or the cancer could kill me," he agreed. "But my point is that I was never going to live forever. I know you think I'm a god, but—" That, at least, teased a quirk out of the corner of her mouth, but the tears still fell. "But there are a lot of ways to die."

"This one's so unfair."

"It is," he agreed, but were there any that were fair? "But that's what we're stuck with, you and I."

And I'd hate to think that the doctors or the hospitals or just *the knowing* would ruin things for whatever time we have left, whether it's six months or twenty years. I don't want you to back off from me. I don't want you to feel like you can't pull me up short if I'm wallowing, or yell at me if I forget something you've asked me to do. Let's make a pact, right now, not to spend the next year—or whatever it is—at arm's length."

He saw her uncertainty and pressed his advantage. "Suppose we *knew*," he said, emphasizing the fateful word. "Suppose we *knew* it would be... six months. What would that change? How would it make things different? How would we treat each other? Would we be afraid to make a mistake, for fear 'six months' might become 'five months'? What's the point? If we do nothing—just wait—it'll still be five months."

"I don't know," she said uncertainly, wishing she could agree.

"Well, then, I reserve the right to spank you every time you do shy away. I don't mind. Might be kind of fun." He laughed at her open-mouthed horror then kissed the lax lower lip and was relieved to feel her quick, automatic response. Offering love and having it returned was considerably more therapeutic than some of the drugs they'd put in his system over the past three months. "There's way too much I can't control," he admitted, tapping his chest. "*You* I've got a pretty good handle on." He squeezed one of those handles gently.

"If you kissed me now, I wouldn't shy off."

He tested that theory. Repeatedly.

She was right. She didn't shy off, didn't hold anything back. They were in the same place at the same time, with a single thought. Together.

Later, stretched out on the bed of the half-lit hotel room, his eyes took in her languid body with the casual interest of one who doesn't expect to find anything new but enjoys the looking all the same. "If it were done when 'tis done," he said softly.

"What?"

"It's Shakespeare. 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly'" he quoted, recalling a high school English teacher with unexpected fondness. "Macbeth, unless I'm mistaken. He was contemplating murder, but I think it works as well for any death. If the dying leaves behind no consequences or problems, or if the dying itself solves the problems, then best to do it quickly."

"Don't talk like that."

"I think like that. If you don't want me to talk about it I won't."

He saw the emotions battle on her face but was surer of the outcome than Alicia was. "All right," she said, steeling herself. "Go ahead."

"I've been thinking about death quite a lot." They both had, of course, but she had been unable to talk of it before. He had sorted and organized legal necessities—deeds, wills, durable power of attorney—as she had organized his medical necessities.

"I've been thinking about it, and... the thing is," he said, "it's not done when it's done, because even when I'm gone, there'll still be parts that touch

everybody else—like you. So I'm not about to make it easy or quick. Not the dying or the cancer. I'm going to fight it every step of the way."

At home one night, she picked another packet of vacation photos and thumbed through the prints, trying to place the roll in time. Toward the end of the trip, she knew, as they seemed to be in northern Italy, but she didn't remember seeing any of these shots before. Then, suddenly, her hand froze.

There was a picture of her under a gnarled old cherry tree, with a black-and-yellow blanket spread beneath it. She had a basket in hand, but, looking at it, Alicia couldn't tell if it was the beginning of the picnic and she was about to put it down or it was the end and she had cleaned up the remains. She had a distracted half-smile on her face that said her mind was elsewhere, and she was clearly oblivious to the camera.

Libra

Law and Order

Numbers are a part of everybody's lives. They identify you: social security numbers, driver's license numbers, employee numbers. They locate you: telephone numbers and house numbers. They describe you: height and weight. Bust measurement.

They can also serve another purpose. They can reassure and contain you.

Melissa Anne Deckert knew lots of numbers. Dinner was supposed to be at eight and it was already eight-forty-five. There were nine other people at this dreadful party, and eight of them were so irritating that in a matter of minutes she was likely to kill at least one of them. A 2-204, second-degree murder. Or maybe just assault, a 3-202, depending on how far she got before someone intervened. And she knew who that someone was likely to be. She aimed a glare at her husband over the shoulder of Brenda Mascolm, who continued to drone on about the trouble she was having with the architect for their new beach house—which, to Melissa's mind, was really just an excuse to brag that she had both an architect and a beach house.

Across the room, Wade Deckert watched his wife with slight apprehension. It wasn't like her to indulge the self-indulgent Brenda, and he gave some thought to intervening before she did something they would both regret. He turned his attention back to the important question being debated by three of the top legal minds in the

district court—whether Pinehurst or Shinnecock Hills was the better golf course—and hoped Melissa could hold it together for a little longer. She could be a little... unpredictable sometimes. It was both an intriguing and maddening aspect of her personality.

Before he could decide whether to peel her out of Brenda's talons or leave her to fend for herself, he was rescued by the serene invitation of Miriam Whitten: "If everyone would please join us in the dining room."

Wade took the opportunity to excuse himself and escort his wife. Of course, he had to get her clear of her conversational companion first. He smiled the charming smile he had perfected at cocktail parties years ago and inserted himself neatly between his wife and the avian Brenda Mascolm. *Cheep-cheep*. "Why Brenda, we've hardly had a chance to talk at all tonight. Leonard tells me you're making great progress on the house at the shore. I'm certainly looking forward to seeing it." Then, without taking a breath, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to steal my wife for just a moment. We'll see you at dinner."

Brenda fluttered for a moment, caught by those blue-blue eyes, but couldn't work up even a token protest before he had tugged Melissa away. Brenda was stranded only momentarily before she managed to latch onto one of the passing men. "Martin, what do you think about tile roofs?" they both heard before her voice faded into the chatter headed toward the dining room.

"If we left now, we could pick up a pizza on the way home," Melissa suggested. She shot a furtive look over her shoulder. "We could make it. I know where the coats are. Cover me." Before she could

make what he hoped was a sham effort to escape, Wade clapped an arm around her shoulder, turning her deftly toward the dining room even as he laughed.

"I think they've got lookouts posted. They'd make us before we got as far as the street. Besides, they might notice the two empty places at the table, don't you think?"

"Drat. Foiled again." She dragged along with the enthusiasm of the condemned.

He tugged her to a stop in a classy little nook under the pretense of admiring a painting. "As bad as all that, is it?" he asked sympathetically. He knew she hated these professional functions, scornfully calling them "unpaid overtime."

"No, I guess not." She tried to smile. "At first I felt a little like a zoo exhibition—'Come here, everyone; see what we've got: it's a cop'—but that's passed and now it's just tedious. I think I'll hang myself from the chandelier if she says one more word about wallpaper—excuse me—wall *coverings*."

"You couldn't have found someone else to talk to?"

"Why, sure," she said caustically. "There's Candace, with her riveting description of this wonderful spa treatment that just *sucks* the poisons right out of your body. Or Genevieve, who's looking for a co-chair for her benefit to aid disadvantaged socialites or some damn thing."

"Be nice."

"Why should I?" she grumbled.

"Shall I count the reasons?"

"Don't do that to me here," she ordered, but he hadn't missed the quick, involuntary breath—oh, how she'd hate thinking of it as a gasp—and had

seen her eyes dilate first. The scowl was all the more effective in contrast. "I'm just trying to get through this ordeal with all these Ken and Barbie wanna-be's without—" She sighed heavily. "Do you think they're going to finally feed us or is this just another stage of the evening's torture?"

"Be nice," he repeated.

"I am being nice," she muttered. "What I'm thinking is a lot worse."

"That's good, then. Keep it buttoned up there in your wicked little mind, and just let them see your pretty smile." The look of mild insult that prompted made him grin. "Honey, I know this isn't your kind of evening, and I appreciate that you're suppressing your natural instinct to—well, to let everyone know it—but I do appreciate it, so I know you'll humor me. You don't want me working back in Legal Aid, do you? I like this job, and these men have the potential to affect the next twenty years of my life. They're not bad guys."

"And their wives?" she asked dryly.

"Are... well, not to my taste," he acknowledged with a smile. "But this isn't some Edwardian affair where the men retire to the smoking parlor and the women take tea in the sitting room. Join the conversation. Surely you have something to say to several of the top legal authorities in the state."

"Let me guess. You were either speculating who's going to make partner in McClaully, Hampton & Iverson—" His smug look discounted that so she continued, "Or it was golf." His dark brows came down as he took sudden objection to her game.

"All right, enough. And it's not just because you're right." She might have disagreed, but as long as she didn't do it verbally, he could ignore

that. "So tell me what you tried to talk about with anyone tonight?"

"Hmm?"

"Well, I understand that the conversation didn't suit you. I'm asking what subjects *you* tried to raise. The weather? The rising price of gasoline? The banking crisis in Central America?"

"Oh, yeah, riveting conversation openers there!"

"Okay, how about Internet piracy or the state of the legal system or the need for more after-school programs in low-income areas? The revolving door of justice? The reliance on 'emergency measures' for routine staffing of the police force?"

"Sure. Because what everyone wants is a lecture!"

"Good grief! It doesn't have to be a lecture. You make observations. You offer ideas. Then—and I know this is the tricky part—you *listen* to what the other person says. They might have a point of view you hadn't considered. They might have information you weren't aware of. And if that's not a subject that strikes a chord, you try a different area. What you don't do is summarily dismiss nine people as not worth your time after a few half-hearted attempts at listening to them."

Nine, she noticed. He'd included himself in that number, and she wavered between indignation and shock.

"Can you get through dinner civilly or shall I make your excuses for you?"

Her shoulders squared and her chin came up, though whether at the insult or the challenge, he couldn't be sure. "Rest assured, *I* won't embarrass you," she declared with a rare haughtiness. "I'll be charm personified, as I have been all night. I think

we'd best be going to dinner, don't you, Wade?" She turned on her heel—a high, narrow heel that he knew she wore to please him—and stepped toward the dinning room. His eye was drawn upward from the Dolce & Gabbana shoes past delicious curves that disappeared under a shimmering black dress. He'd had to talk her into buying both the dress and the shoes, which she'd found sinfully expensive, but they were clearly, to Wade, worth every dime. And later tonight he would enjoy talking her out of them.

The anticipation of that moment obliterated any vestige of irritation he felt at her bland assessment of the golf conversation. After all, if she couldn't vent to him about the mindless chatter she'd endured, whom could she turn to? And yet, he felt the rise of some dark impulse in him to shake that haughtiness. Just before they turned the corner into the dining room, he delivered a light swat to her bottom and a whispered warning to her ear. "Watch yourself, Missy."

"Don't call me that," she hissed, as he knew she would.

They were the last to arrive and took the remaining two seats, on opposite sides of the table but not quite across from each other. Being on the receiving end of Melissa's dour glare didn't faze Wade in the least. Tweaking her composure on the way into the room was, as much as anything, an effort to distract Melissa, who might otherwise look for new targets. Watching her in a verbal duel was often entertaining, but not in this venue, not with these opponents. He had, on two occasions, had

the privilege of watching her interrogate suspects; he had developed an instant, if reluctant, admiration for her ability in verbal jousting. She could be tenacious and ruthless, qualities that made her an excellent cop but an unpredictable partier. And he had no intention of letting her rip Genevieve Caffry to shreds out of boredom. If he could just keep her attention focused on him....

The shallow saucer of cold soup, which Melissa assumed was some odd gourmet offering, was a sad reminder that the pizza alternative would have been a good one. *Who on earth would think to make cucumbers into soup?* she wondered. Sliced and served in a green salad, yes. Cut up and served with dip, yes. Pureed and served as soup, no. It was a simple matter, really. If she hadn't been so damn hungry, she might have left it untouched. But whatever was coming next could, conceivably, be worse than cucumber soup. She took another spoonful, only dimly aware of the conversation eddying around her until her own name caught her ear.

"What?"

"Genevieve was just saying how much fun it would be for the two of you to work together on the fund-raising committee," Wade supplied with a fiendish glint in his eye. With Leo Mascolm's impressive bulk between them, Genevieve wouldn't be able to see Melissa's horror-stricken reaction, but there were others at the table who could. Wade turned back to Genevieve, hoping to keep attention on himself. "And who exactly is the benefit for?"

"The youth symphony orchestra." Disadvantaged socialites, Melissa had called them. He nearly laughed, but Genevieve looked so earnest that he suppressed the urge. "Oh, you simply must come and see them, you and your wife. There are some really promising youngsters in that group. This is my second year on the committee and I just want to make it the best. We want to be able to send the whole orchestra, not just the ensembles, to the west coast for competitions. There are some really talented kids involved. They work so hard, and it's such a delight to see teenagers making something of themselves."

"I'm sure it is," Wade answered. And her enthusiasm did a lot to warm his opinion of her. "It's so important to encourage young people, isn't it Melissa?"

It was a softball question. All she had to do was smile and agree.

So, why, then did the words come out of her mouth, "Well, I usually see them sometime after they've put down their flutes and violins and picked up bicycle chains and broken bottles"?

Wade hid the grimace. "Oh, but surely in your career you've seen kids who might have been salvaged if their talents had been guided a little more carefully. There are probably one, two, even three kids sitting in juvie right now who could benefit from a structured program. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if there were ten. Maybe more." He pinned her with a glance, despite the casual smile. Melissa wasn't fooled for a moment. They weren't talking about kids or talents or that blasted orchestra. It was a signal, no less clear for having been encoded. The damn numbers, dropped

oh-so-casually into his speech, were both threat and warning: she'd already earned herself ten swats and was well on her way to twenty. Knock it off now.

If only such an order didn't feel like a challenge.

"Wade, you're so naïve," she said with a gentle tone that suggested to everyone else at the table that she considered it an endearing trait. "I find it hard to believe that you really think the little monsters under lock and key at The Hall could have been saved if someone had just played them a little more Bach during their formative years."

"No. But there's something very character-building about the *discipline* of practice. Sitting down for twenty or thirty minutes a day to work on something. It has a way of focusing the mind and confirming priorities." Aware that he now had the entire table's attention, he tried to smooth the way again. "Of course, it doesn't have to be music, though I think that's an admirable pursuit. For some kids it might be sports or art or academics that interest or inspires them." He turned back to Genevieve. "And I think it's wonderful of you to work so hard for something that helps both our youth and our community. I'm afraid don't really have time to organize fundraisers, but I do enjoy music itself. Perhaps there are season tickets available?"

"Why, yes. Yes, there's a very nice subscription package. I'll send you a mailing. The winter concert is particularly popular. That one always sells out."

The conversation drifted off to the calendar creep of the winter holidays that began Christmas advertising before pumpkins had been carved to

jack-o-lanterns, and Wade smothered a sigh of relief.

Across the table, Melissa was lost in thought. Ten. Why, that was hardly a slap on the wrist. He wasn't really annoyed. It was a subtle, almost playful, warning and she hadn't decided whether to heed it. Ten. Or twenty.

She wondered if she was unique in her response to cardinal numbers—and felt a brief pixyish urge to poll the table. That would certainly add a spark to the conversation. *So, tell me, Mr. Mascolm, do you find it enhances your mutual pleasure to spank your wife? Does Brenda find her own excitement heightened if you count the strokes out loud? Does anyone else at the table experience a romantic thrill at just the sound of slow, deliberate counting?* No. Probably not a good idea.

It was a weakness they had discovered together and one that Wade felt no compunction about exploiting. He would count into her ear in that deep, raspy voice, turning her knees to jelly. Operant conditioning, she knew it was from an introductory psychology class, but the knowledge didn't lessen the impact at all. Whether he was trying to seduce her, distract her, amuse her, or (as he had tonight) caution her, the effect was always to secure her immediate, undivided attention. Even when she knew she was in for a genuine and hard spanking, there was something exciting about the anticipation. That excitement would dim appreciably as the moment of reckoning approached and would drop off sharply as the number of promised swats increased, but ten or twenty

threatened hours before the deed—well, that was still a delicious prospect. She lifted her water glass to cover the grin and tried to drop back in on the conversation.

Oh, good lord! How had they gotten back to the stupid beach house?

Wade threw her a quick wink and a current arced between them. It was astonishing, really, how with more than two years behind them she could still feel the unexpected rush of love at odd moments. With all the stuffy, formal people around them, and the near certainty that she had more than an hour before they would be alone, all she could think about was that she wanted to touch him, to run her fingers through his hair.

She even briefly considered some illicit dinnertime footsy, and stopped herself only because, while she was sure she could get her shoe off hands-free, there was no way she would be able to get it back on inconspicuously. Wade and the damn strappy shoes he thought were so sexy. She'd have to tell him the adventure he'd missed out on. And even the telling would have to wait until they were paroled from dinner party prison, another hour at least, she calculated.

It was nearly two hours, in fact, and as they drove home in electric silence, playful flirting was the last thing on her mind. How, she wondered, had it all gone so wrong? She was willing to take her fair share of the blame, but surely it couldn't *all* be her fault, could it?

It wasn't the first time they had had that sort of conversation in front of an oblivious audience. It

could be light-hearted and sometimes was, as the time they had spent much of Wade's nephew's birthday party sparring with each other, working numbers into their conversation and conversation into their numbers. She couldn't even remember what smart remark had originally made him say "ten," but they spent the rest of the evening in cryptic negotiation: *Oh, I bet they're putting up at least thirty new homes on that South River stretch*, he had declared. *No, it can't be thirty*, she'd responded. *There's not room for more than fifteen or twenty*. By the time they were home, he'd ratcheted it up to thirty-five for "lack of cooperation" but they'd both been smiling when she went over his knee.

Tonight showed no potential of turning out as well, Melissa knew. And if she didn't know exactly why, she at least knew *when* it had all gone to hell.

They had—finally—gotten off the topic of the beach-house-that-wouldn't-die during the entrée, only to have the subject turn to the recent wedding of the Caffreys' daughter. Melissa, who counted herself fortunate to miss the actual event, had no interest in enduring the retelling of it. Following Wade's advice, she tried vainly to change the subject and asked if anyone had seen news reports of the corruption arrest of a local dot-com CEO, but she was met with silence and bland looks. Seconds later, they were back to the damn wedding. And that was Wade's fault.

"The reception was wonderful, Genevieve," he had said. "I bet you must have interviewed twenty caterers before finding one you liked." His eyes darted to Melissa only for a moment, but he saw the

slight stiffening that told him she had taken the remark as he intended.

Genevieve answered, blithely oblivious. "No, no Wade. We use Elysium. They handled the Oransons' party last spring. The food is excellent, of course, but the key is that they have the best staff. They manage to keep everything replenished and cleaned up without ever being obtrusive. In fact," she confided with a twinkle, "I wouldn't be surprised if Miriam's using them tonight—if only for the fact that I didn't trip over waiters in the living room."

Miriam answered with perfect equanimity. "Well, we did bring in a little extra help, but no, not Elysium, although they're very good. You know, I recommended them to Martha Brooks." She threw a glance at Melissa to clarify. "Do you know the Brooks? They do a really lovely little open house at Christmas, with just *mounds* of cookies in dozens of varieties that she makes herself. Anyway, I suggested that she might want to bring in Elysium that this year. I know she'd like to have people think that she and Sandy can handle it all, but really..."

"What's the point in going on the cheap when so many could be enriched by the experience?" Melissa had finished for her. The table went suddenly silent. She had meant it as a wry joke, the kind she might have made in the squad room about how the depraved people of the world gave cops job security. The room stayed silent and she had an impulse to slip under the table into oblivion. What the devil was the matter with these people? What the devil was the matter with her? Might as well have been talking about tile roofs.

She had mostly kept her mouth shut after that, despite Genevieve's repeated attempts to include her in the conversation. Probably just so they could mock her, Melissa thought dispiritedly, and leaned her head against the car window.

And now she was getting the cold shoulder from Wade.

"That's the last one of those I go to," she declared. No answer. She slipped out of the heels and tucked her feet under her on the seat.

"It's all your fault, you know," she insisted. He cleared his throat, either coincidentally or in response to the charge. "And I don't care for that Genevieve Caffry. She's too pushy."

At that Wade finally sighed, prodded into response. He sounded more weary than angry. "She was just trying to include you. It was meant to be flattering, an offer of friendship."

"I don't want to be her friend. We have nothing in common."

He tone edged toward exasperation. "Which is why she was offering you a position. It was meant, I think, as a way to *have* something in common, an offer to be part of their circle. You didn't have to accept, but you didn't have to spit on it either."

Spit on it? She hadn't spit on it. Exactly. "What was I supposed to say? She kept pressing and pressing. I might as well have been in interrogation."

He had a fleeting, absurd image of the uniformed houseboy being summoned to redirect a spotlight on prisoner Melissa. "You weren't supposed to say anything particular. But I think

you might have handled it with more tact." *Tell you what, she had offered, if you need crowd control, give me a call. Otherwise I don't have time for that nonsense.* Maybe she had just thought "nonsense." Maybe she hadn't actually said it. Maybe. She slipped back into silence, not speaking again until they had pulled into the twisty, narrow roads of their subdivision, when she finally said, softly, "I'll never fit in, you know."

"Fit in?" Dangerous territory here, he knew.

"I won't. I'm nothing like them."

"Good. I'd hate to think I'd misjudged you so completely after all this time." The kindness in his eyes would have warmed her if she'd caught it. Instead, she stared blankly into the dark. "I'm not looking for a clone of any of those women, Melissa. I'm not expecting you to play the role of society wife. It isn't you and I don't expect it to be."

How could it be when it had taken him months to crack that tough-cop façade? They had met, fittingly enough, in the county courthouse, waiting for the same judge, though not on the same case. As the hours slid by and the docket got further and further behind, they had talked away the afternoon, starting with the weather and moving swiftly to politics, religion, and Shakespeare's sage advice to first kill all the lawyers. She could be, by turns, funny, sharp, even scathing. And the sheer candor with which she spoke was refreshing, a pleasant relief from the lies and manipulation that passed for conversation in other quarters of his life. Wade had been enamored immediately, but it had taken months longer to get Melissa to take him seriously—and longer still before he glimpsed the vulnerability she let surface only rarely. No, he had not been

looking for polish or sophistication. He'd been looking for her.

"Then what was tonight all about?" she demanded.

"Dinner. With friends."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"But what was with all the—" she gestured vaguely, a wave of the hand meant to include the artistic trays of appetizers and cucumber soup and stiff conversation, "—froufrou?"

He gave it a minute, pulling into their driveway and setting the parking brake before answering. "You know the trouble with you, darlin'? You're a snob."

"I am not! Genevieve is."

"She may be. I don't know her very well. But she wasn't acting like a snob tonight. You were." He opened the door and circled around to the passenger's side as she sputtered.

"How can you say that?" she finally demanded. He might as well have accused her of a crime. She snatched the shoes from the floor and climbed out, a fighter going into a match, heedless that her nylons were ruined with the first step.

"Sure you are. Admit it. You think they—all of them—are lazy, weak, ineffectual women leaching off their husbands, dithering away their days having pedicures, and squandering the GNP of a small third world nation on clothes and goldfish ponds."

"They are."

He smothered a short, aggravated laugh. "Lord, you give a suspect with a rap sheet more benefit of

the doubt than you gave those women. They're not all from the same mold, you know."

"Seems like it," she grumbled.

"Well, I'd encourage you to talk to them more but I'm scared what you might say, so maybe you should just listen to them more. They're normal people with normal problems, and just because they don't solve them in ways that involve the police doesn't make them any less human. In fact, I'd think that would make them *more* worthy of your courtesy, not less."

"Look, just because they can buy themselves out of trouble—"

"Listen to you! It isn't about buying their way out of trouble. It's just life. And if Mrs. Caffrey's pet project is the junior symphony, who the hell are you to criticize? Maybe she had a good experience in it as a kid. Maybe her favorite nephew plays second violin. Or maybe she just likes to listen to music. I don't know. But the point is neither do you. So before you sit in judgment of her, I think you better do a little self-examination. This isn't about who's better and who's a fake; it's about individuals." He dropped the car keys on the counter.

"Individually, I didn't think too much of them."

"Well, I imagine they didn't think too much of you tonight." She went quiet, unexpectedly hurt by the realization, then appalled as Wade continued. "Which is going to make it all the more uncomfortable when we have them over to our house."

"Here?" she said with a stab of horror he found comical.

"Yes, here. We've had people over before. You're familiar with the concept of *company*."

The sarcasm passed as she tried to quell the panic at the thought of hosting the kind of event they'd just attended. She couldn't do it. She wouldn't do it. The preparation, the hosting, all of it. Arranging "emergency" overtime at the last minute wouldn't be hard. Let Wade deal with the party. Caterers. Staff. Hell, maybe he could hire one of the neighborhood teens to valet park the guests' cars over at the SuperFresh parking lot. Not her problem. She'd be working overtime.

Wade watched a dark fantasy play out over her features, holding his thoughts until she seemed to accept his proposal. "Maybe not everybody, but at least the Whittens."

Great, she thought derisively, a small group where her absence would be all the more striking.

"It's not going to work, Wade. I won't be backed into this, forced into this. Not five minutes ago you said you didn't expect me to be some society belle. Now you're trying to get me to have a dinner party."

He shook his head, nonplused. "We've had people over before. Mark and Donna. Libby. Tom and Angie."

"Right. Friends."

"Kenny and Baker and McCann." Cops. People she worked with.

"That's totally different." And in a minute she would figure out how.

"Well, it's going to happen, but we're not sending out invitations tonight, so we'll just leave that argument for another time."

He made a show of locking up and setting the alarm for nighttime sensitivity. "We have other things to settle tonight. I'll meet you in the den. We were at thirty-five last count, if I recall."

She stood, numb, for a moment, and he brushed past her in the doorway. She didn't, in fact, remember getting to thirty-five. The last number she clearly recalled had been twenty, and even that had not been firm. But thirty-five and the den...that was firm. When she'd coquetted and teased him early in the evening, when she'd suggested they should abscond from the party altogether, she had not expected to end up with this distant, distracted man. She had not expected to end up in the den. This was not the man she'd contemplated playing footsy with. Not the man who had called her "Missy" and made her blush with his impertinent swat just seconds before she had to face the very people she had wanted to impress. She hadn't done that either, which was probably the root of her own discomfiture. Before she could really come to grips with that, though, Wade was threatening a spanking she'd almost forgotten about, and somehow things, which she'd sworn couldn't get any worse, had.

She deliberately averted her eyes from the small office they shared just off the kitchen. The den was a place of work, of records and files. Only once had he spanked her there, and that had been a quick, impromptu spanking that had required more privacy than the kitchen's bow window allowed. Most normally, though, spanking was reserved for the bedroom. Elsewhere, just the threat of counted numbers was enough to evoke the right response.

Melissa slipped quietly up the stairs, leaving on the kitchen light.

It was like moving through water, with her senses paradoxically both sharpened and dulled. There was the distant sound of Wade's shoes as he climbed the basement steps, the low, mechanical hum that said he'd just put laundry in the drier, yet it was all she could do to make her fingers grasp the zipper at the back of the dress. Hearing him in the kitchen spurred her on, and she was in a flannel sleep-shirt and brushing her teeth by the time Wade's slow, methodical tread took him up the second flight of stairs.

"I thought we were to meet in the den." She could read nothing in his eyes but felt the censure bone deep, whether from him or from herself she didn't know. She continued to brush her teeth, paying more attention to each individual surface than she normally did. By the time she rinsed her mouth, he had relocated to the bedroom, where he sat, fully clothed on the side of the bed. Her side of the bed.

"You look tired," she finally ventured from the doorway.

"I am." He rubbed his temples, which told her he also had a headache. She wanted to go to him, an instinct that was bolstered when he held out both hands in invitation. But instead of the forgiving hug she anticipated, she found herself drawn between his legs, one hand clasped in each of his. He did not speak until, after a protracted, tense moment, she finally met his eyes.

"I'm only going to ask this once and I will accept whatever answer you give me so I want you to think about it before you answer. Are you stalling

because you really don't see why you were wrong? Or are you just trying to delay the inevitable?"

"I— I—" There was no easy answer to that. The night was an awful, miserable blur. There were parts she had enjoyed, brief moments among the long, dull chatter. She had enjoyed the verbal dueling during dinner, delighted in the threats-cum-flirting, but regretted that she had gone too far. She had felt it immediately. The sudden shift of balance. If she had felt something like an animal on display before, her role had suddenly changed. She was no dancing bear wearing a tulle skirt; she was a field mouse who had managed to find a way inside. Call the exterminator. Seal the cracks. Get her out! And the worst of it was that Wade had been watching her the same way. "I— I know you're angry."

"I'm not particularly angry, and that wasn't an answer to my question." When his wife continued to struggle to find the words, he added more gently, "Why didn't you meet me downstairs?"

"I—" she began again, then dropped both her eyes and her voice to murmur weakly, "I just couldn't."

"No good reason?" he persisted, and she knew she was being offered an out.

"No," she nearly whispered.

He began to skim the nightshirt up her thighs. "So we left it at thirty-five."

"I don't actually remember getting to thirty-five. Maybe it was 'thirty?'"

"Well, it's just gone to forty, so you can call the difference a penalty for not meeting me in the den. I shouldn't have to chase you around the house, you know." She might have countered that it

wasn't much of a chase, but the point seemed lost already as she tipped, uncertainly, over his left thigh. She felt the sudden vulnerability of exposure, the catch in her breath that threatened to turn into a sob even before the first spank landed. This would not be the sexy, teasing spanking she had looked forward to a few hours earlier. He was all business, direct and efficient at getting her in position and clothing out of the way.

"One... two... three... four... five." The slight pause after five made the point that Melissa'd just had all the warm-up she was going to get. No teasing rubs or gently probing fingers tonight, she knew. Crisp, firm, these swats were just far enough apart that she could breathe between them, but each had made a distinct, identifiable impression that he could see and she could feel.

As it was almost impossible to talk and count at the same time, he tended to break a session into shorter blocks, with typically ten or fifteen at a time before brief breaks to lecture or demand answers... or fool around. Not time for that just yet, he knew. There was something troubling her that seemed just out of reach. This insecurity complex was unexpected. Melissa was typically clear and decisive; she had a sort of no-holds-barred self-possession that stood her well in law enforcement. She could come off a little aggressive, even abrasive at times, but they typically worked well to hand off touchy situations to each other with an easy confidence. Wade, the natural negotiator, could manage to talk a balky desk clerk into making sure that their room was ready early (while his wife complained under her breath that the hotel gave the wrong check-in time on the phone). In turn, he

had been glad to set her on the utility company when a billing error threatened to cause them credit problems. Some things required the tact and diplomacy he could draw on so easily; some the pit-bull instinct that his wife had in her bones. Together, they were an excellent team; they read each other well and made natural, easy handoffs. Tonight, he had somehow missed the pass. Or she hadn't made one.

"I don't know where this attitude is coming from," he began, "but I know it's going to end here tonight. If you have something you want to say, say it." She said nothing.

"Okay. Six.. seven... eight..." He continued, the swats firmer now but spaced out more. He watched to color bloom and fade with each impact. If the mood were different, he would have enjoyed pressing a finger to just-pinked skin and teasing her about how quickly it would go from pink to white and back to pink. *Digital imaging* he had called it once, and they had both laughed. First, though, she needed to cry, he thought, even if he wasn't sure why.

At "twelve" he heard the first gasp that she couldn't suppress. A few more and she scrabbled at the bedcovers, a feckless move that stopped when he did after "twenty."

"Halfway done," he noted absently, fully aware that that she was following the count as avidly as he was. Unable to resist, he gentled his hand, smoothed it over skin already bright pink at the center of each cheek. She would bruise from this, he knew, as much from her own tension as from the force of the spanking. *Relax*, he would have told her, if it might have done any good. Instead, he

tried other ways to the same end. "You want to tell me why we're not in the den right now?" he asked gently, running his left hand up between her shoulder blades.

"Will you drop the last ten if I do?" she countered, with enough humor to wrest a smile from him. Nobody could keep his girl down for long.

"No," he answered with equal humor, "but it might keep me from adding ten more."

"You wouldn't!" But his hands continued to stroke and soothe and she lay back down, taking a deep, almost steady breath. "Why did you want to? Why downstairs?"

"Was that the problem?"

"I guess. Part of it, anyway." How could she tell him that, already off balance, that new twist had left her completely unable to comply? It was not even a conscious choice to refuse, just an inability to accede, that had led her up the stairs to bed, as though by denying the problem she could make it go away. "Why downstairs?" she repeated. "It's like you didn't want this to take place in the bedroom." Where it usually did. "Because—" *Because you were too angry with me to do it in our special place. Because I was not worthy of that consideration. Because the intimacy of the bedroom was suddenly inappropriate.* She could say none of the dark thoughts that had been circling just out of consciousness.

"Because what?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

"No grand plan, sweetheart. No plot or ulterior motive, which is I'm sure what you're thinking but not saying. I wanted to make sure my jersey was

clean for tomorrow morning and you seemed pretty entrenched in the kitchen. I just figured—" *What? Kill two birds with one stone? Save me the trouble of another flight of stairs? It was easier to issue orders than look at the haunted confusion in your eyes?* "I didn't think how it might sound," he admitted. "But that doesn't make it okay for you to dismiss me, either."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"In your 'happy place,'" he chided.

Too true, she knew, but she groused for form's sake. Sometimes she wished she weren't so darn open with him. On the other hand, that's what made it her "happy place." That she could feel, vulnerability aside, safe over his lap, had been a delightful revelation, one she had long-since shared. He chose the oddest moments to remind her.

"How happy am I supposed to be when I know I've still got twenty coming?"

The first twenty had been to push past her walls, and as that was largely effective, he would have been willing to forgo the rest if he hadn't known she would be disappointed on some level. So he began again. "Twenty-one" was just as firm as twenty had been, but the mood in the room was softening. If it could not actually be called relaxed—and it couldn't, not with the crack of "twenty-six... twenty-seven" reverberating in the air—it was still calmer and more loving than the rest of the evening had been. And there was the inexorable, steady move toward "forty" that represented both an end and a beginning.

They counted the last five together. It felt good to be back in synch, even if he could hear the tears in her voice. And when he did not immediately lift

her to his arms, she stayed in place over his lap, still letting him set the pace.

Hands, gentle once more, found their way along her back and thighs, encouraging her to relax some still-tight muscles. "Something upset you tonight. I'd like to know what it was."

"I wish I could tell you."

Surprised, he stilled his hands for a moment. "And why can't you?" It wasn't like Melissa to deliberately keep something from him. He had worried that forty might have been too much, but what if it wasn't enough? He certainly hadn't taken her to complete surrender—if that was even possible—but thought they had gotten past the brick wall of I'm-not-talking-to-you. "Do you need some more encouragement?"

She snorted at the earnest inquiry but twisted away from his hand when it wandered back across her tender nates. "No, No, it's not like that. I don't know what really happened tonight. I can't tell you what was so awful because I don't know." She sighed. "Mostly, I'm just glad you're not mad at me, too."

He did, finally, turn Melissa in his lap, cradling her to him. Hair, dampened with tears and sweat, stuck at odd angles and he brushed it back with a gentle touch then blew a quick puff of air to dry the skin and make her laugh. He was largely successful on the first part, fully on the second. "You doing better now?"

"Yeah. I don't know. It hurts. Hurts more than usual. You hit *hard*." The slight sulkiness to her tone was inconsistent with the way she molded herself to his body, rubbing against his shoulder

before she found the right place to settle, an action that made it easy to disregard her words.

"Hey, it's not my fault you stayed all tensed up. But you are going to have bruises, I think. You want to put something on that?" he offered.

"Just your hands."

His fingertips were first, rubbing lightly in circles across her bottom, then his palms reaching what places they could. It was a hint at massage without any of the pressure that might reignite sensitive nerves. Because she was engulfed in his arms and draped across his torso he felt the moment when, finally, the tension left her body and she drooped, boneless, against him, either in relaxation or resignation. Rather than risk the mood with words, he lay back, still fully clothed, drawing Melissa with him until they sprawled inelegantly across the bed.

"I don't know why people like that unnerve me so, but they do. And for a little while tonight it seemed like you'd joined their camp."

"I don't mean for there to be camps. I don't think of this as a war. If it is, you should know I'm in your camp. Always. That doesn't mean I'll stand there and let you annihilate the Andertons, but I'll stand by you. I did my best tonight, though I think you might have shown a little restrain in that E.C. Dobbins crack."

"What crack?"

"Don't play innocent with me, Missy. You've already had your spanking. What's the point?"

"Don't call me Missy," she corrected reflexively, "and I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Are you trying to tell me that you didn't know that E.C. Dobbins is Candace's brother?"

"He's *what*?"

"And rumor has it that they invested heavily in his little venture. She's taking it particularly hard." It was not just mismanaged investments, not even a poorly capitalized setup. And if nobody was saying "pyramid scheme" publicly, it was only because not all the evidence was in and investors in his little dot-com fiasco were still being interviewed. The public arrest was, in many ways, the beginning, not the end. "You really didn't know? Then why'd you bring it up?"

"Why— Well, I was just looking for something to talk about. Oh, God!" She blanched. No wonder she had suddenly found herself excluded, looked upon with distaste as an intruder. It was bad enough that they had to deal with the ignominy in the press and endure the gossip and embarrassment, as well as the financial drain that was likely to result—but to have it thrown in their faced at what should have been a friendly social setting. "I was just looking for something to talk about, something fairly neutral, and I knew that was supposed to hit the five o'clock news," she murmured..

"It did," he confirmed. "Big time. So help me understand. If you didn't do that on purpose, why did you let me spank you?"

"Let you? I'm sorry. Was there an opt-out clause?" she teased with a half-smile.

"Well, yeah! Did I not ask you if you understood why you were wrong? If you didn't see why, seems to me like that would have been a real good time to mention it." He swallowed a deep sigh of regret

and brought her to him in a firm, almost rough, embrace.

"But I did see," she said in quick reassurance. "I wasn't what you wanted me to be tonight. I let you down. I disappointed and embarrassed you. I didn't mean to, but I did."

"You didn't embarrass me." He, in fact, had thought she'd embarrassed herself. The trick would be how to repair that damage without making the situation worse.

"And if I didn't know who Dobbins was to Mrs. Anderton, I certainly knew what I was saying to Genevieve about the stupid music committee."

"There's that."

"The spanking was okay. I don't have a problem with that. Not crazy about the way I felt about it at first, but the spanking was fair." But not for the right reasons, and Wade would have to live with that. He tucked her tight to his chest again.

For long minutes there was only the sound of breathing, gradually deeper and slower, and gentle hands that reassured with their touch. "You're not falling asleep?" he finally asked.

"No, just thinking. You're not really going to put us through that again, are you? Invite those people here for some big hoo-ha? Make them eat cucumber soup?"

She sounded so thoroughly baffled by the scenario that he had to laugh. "I think maybe we'll forgo the cucumber soup. Maybe steaks on the grill would be more our speed."

"But what would we *do* with them?" She clearly didn't mean the steaks.

"Feed them. Talk with them. Maybe have a rousing game of volleyball." At her doubtful look he rolled his eyes. "Or Scrabble. Or poker, for heaven's sake."

"Oh, right, I can just see Brenda sitting down at a poker table. 'Now how much are the pretty white chips worth again?'"

His hand delivered a gentle remonstrative swat to her thigh. "Be nice."

She was undeterred. "You can't tell me you really think she's a hard-core poker player. She—what?—watches Texas Hold 'Em on cable?"

"Maybe not," he conceded. "But I wouldn't be surprised if she hopped up to Atlantic City to play the slots. And that's not the point. The point is that if we do the inviting, we set the agenda. We don't give the same kind of dinner parties the Whittens do. It wouldn't be right for us. So if we invite them for steak or steamed crabs or playing tiddlywinks on the basement floor—and they accept—then I would expect them to show up appropriately dressed and ready to participate in steak-eating or crab-cracking or tiddlywink-flipping."

"And you think I didn't do that tonight?"

"Well, you came appropriately—one might even say stunningly—dressed."

"You're just saying that because *you* picked the outfit," she said as she shot a half-hearted elbow into his stomach. "I hear what you're saying, though, and I don't think I agree. It's like you think I went in determined to have a lousy time, and that's just not true."

"Not determined, no. But *expecting* to have a lousy time."

The trouble with some people knowing you so well, Melissa reflected with mild annoyance, is that you can't bluff your way past them. While it was true that she hadn't expected to enjoy the evening, since in fact she hadn't, it was impossible to determine whether that was a self-fulfilling prophecy or simply an accurate prediction. "I plead the Fifth," she finally muttered.

"Smart girl."

"If we invite them here to play tiddlywinks, can we also refuse to hear anything about beach houses, their construction, decorating, or landscaping?"

"Brenda does have something of a one-track mind, doesn't she?" he agreed wryly.

"One track? I think it's a spur. In an abandoned railyard."

He couldn't suppress the chuckle.

Capricorn

Resolutions

I call it my New Year's notebook. It's a little hardbound, lined, blank journal given to me for my twelfth birthday by my favorite aunt, Aunt Tully, who told me to fill it with words. That seemed a little daunting for a twelve-year-old, but I made a start over the next few days.

Because my birthday is January first, it often gets lost in the larger New Year's celebrations. My birthday is not as neglected as it would be if I'd been born on Christmas, but I had heard the joke about how my parents had been gypped out of a tax deduction hundreds of times before I was old enough to understand what it meant. An arrival of January second would have spared me a lot, I think. My husband would say that it wouldn't make much difference; I'd still be a Capricorn with the worry-prone, responsible, cautious nature he claims is native to the herd. (I pointed out that sea-goats, whatever they are, don't travel in herds. He muttered something about proving his point.) In any case, because of the date, I have always seen my birthday as something bigger, or at least different: not just a day for cake and candles, but one for reflection and planning, for wrapping up old business and making new beginnings.

The blank book Aunt Tully gave me didn't stay blank for long. It became my "to do" list, a list not

of daily chores or homework assignments, but of the things I meant to do over time, goals I didn't want to forget.

The entries are dated only by year. I had, on some other birthday or Christmas, received a diary with a tiny little lock to keep out prying eyes (as though anyone cared what was in my diary) but I had been frustrated with the little five- and six-line entry spaces. What was the point in finding the key—or, once that was lost, a paperclip—to open the diary, only to add "played 'Red Rover' at Brownies after school"? Some days there was nothing to say; others I had too many ideas to fit in the cramped space, but I didn't want to run into the next day's, because what if something great happened then? There wouldn't be anyplace to put it. So I kept it short... and left more blank days. And the more blank days, the more discouraging the exercise was.

But the journal Aunt Tully gave me was different. There were no boundaries, no suggestion that I should have secret thoughts to preserve for posterity, and that lack of expectation was very freeing. If she'd said it was for my first novel, I'd probably have balked, but *fill it with words*—that I could do. Or at least I'm still working on it. I keep the book on a shelf in the bedroom, where it is handy to jot down a line or two whenever I think of it. The book has outlasted diaries, index cards, Filofax, Day Runner, Microsoft Office, and Palm Pilot. It is nearly filled now, with the goals of twenty years laid out in ballpoint ink. Looking back on those notes now, I find some funny, some sad, some ridiculously naïve, some galvanizing.

While I now think about it as my New Year's notebook, it started out a bit more humbly than that. "Plans" it says in the self-conscious cursive of a twelve-year-old on the first page. And, really, what is a New Year's resolution but a plan? A plan of something to work on or do or change over the coming year. And whether I'd written just a few lines (my, I must have thought I was perfect at age fifteen!) or pages and pages (in my uncertain early twenties), it just got tagged onto the end, the benefit of a blank book.

Each year, I try to take some time in the post-Christmas lull, to take stock in myself, see how I did on the last year's resolutions, and set some goals for the coming year.

So last year was no different. And very different.

Usually, I start at the beginning, read through some of my previous "plans." The early ones are typically concrete, if not always achievable.

1984: Write here regularly and keep it up for at least a year.

Well, that one I've certainly met, and it's probably one of the main reasons I've stuck to this over the years—the fact that I planned to when I was just twelve.

1986: Make ten new friends at school.

I know myself a lot better now at thirty-two than I did at fourteen, or I'd have written "Make one new friend" instead of ten, because I'll never be the social butterfly that I longed to be in junior high, but the goal itself was enough to push me into inviting a group of kids over to play foosball in the

basement and into angling my way into what I would only later realize was my first date with Scott Trowler from geometry class. Hence, also in 1986: *Dump Scott*. Hey, I might not have known I couldn't make ten friends all at once, but I knew Scott wasn't one I wanted to keep. Fortunately, Marianne Banks was, so the whole effort was worthwhile. We don't play foosball anymore, but she's still my best friend, so I count that a successful plan, even though I didn't meet the goal.

There are others that I never even came close on.

1991: Bicycle across America.

*1993: Hike to the bottom of the Grand Canyon...
Throw a snowball in the Grand Tetons in July*

*1994: Buy Mom the antique grandfather clock
she's always wanted.*

1995: Get a job at IBM.

Somehow the transition from college student to fully-functioning adult did not take place as miraculously as I'd imagined. Money was tight for years and discretionary income was something I aspired to, just as I'd once aspired to work for IBM. By the time I might have been able to afford the trips, I was raising three kids instead. I don't begrudge them that sacrifice at all. The parks will still be there in years to come. Mom, on the other hand, won't. Heart disease claimed her in 1997 before I'd had the chance to dig myself out of debt. I try to tell myself that she would have wanted me to make the right choice—the grownup choice—not to buy her a gift I couldn't afford. Mostly that works. But each year as I review my *plans*, I am

reminded that some opportunities are limited, some sacrifices worth making.

Other plans are more vague, if no less ambitious.

1999: Stop resenting the move. I need to learn to bite my tongue sometimes. It isn't fair to Mark, and I know it, but when I'm frustrated or hurt or upset, I tend to take it out on him—then get even more upset with him because he lets me. I agreed to relocate, so it's not fair to hold that over his head... but I do. I feel lost and out of place here, but that's certainly as much my fault as his. Probably more. I know he's trying to be the husband I expect, but neither of us really knows what that is.

2000: Appreciate Mark more. Being pregnant smoothes out all the rough edges. I never realized how happy I could be to be responsible for someone else. As we wait for the baby, I have to admit that things are getting better between Mark and me. So many of the clashes we once had have evaporated. Mark teases me by saying that it's because I've become less stubborn, but I know it's more than that. We're working together toward the same goal: a happy, healthy baby. I need to remember how important it is for us to work together. Our most difficult times have been when we're pulling in opposite directions.

2003: Explore hidden desires.

2004: Be honest—with myself and with Mark. If I can't tell him what I want and need, I'd better drop the demand. It's irrational to expect him to

read my mind—then torture us both because he can't.

There are, of course, many other entries in those five years, but those happened to be some of the ones that my eye fell upon as I did my stock-taking in late December, and pulling them out as a series certainly puts the situation in sharp relief.

Ironically, I had checked off the first three of those resolutions during previous year-end reviews. I *had* stopped whining about moving to South Jersey—but that was mostly because we'd relocated back to Delaware... and that was probably my influence, because it was, at best, a lateral move for Mark.

I *did* appreciate him more... when I wasn't ragging on him about one thing or another. My pregnancy with the twins probably made it easier to feel like I was being more appreciative at the time. For some reason, I can thoroughly enjoy Mark's doting on me when I'm pregnant or newly delivered, but the same actions are just as likely to leave me feeling pressured and agitated at other times. As Mark says (sometimes fondly, sometimes with exasperation), I'm a complicated woman.

It was the 2003 goal, though that stopped me cold: *Explore hidden desires*. I had. Check. I just hadn't done anything about them. It was guilt over that fact that had driven me to remind myself, some months later, to be more honest with Mark. I had spent a year and a half exploring those desires... and I had yet to share any of it with Mark.

A chance phone call to the Dr. Phil show on spanking and sexuality had stirred long-dormant images. A few days later, I worked up the nerve to

type "spanking" into an Internet search engine when the kids were down for naps. The first few places I hit were... well, explicit enough that I cleared the browser history, dumped the cache, and shut down the computer for fear that I'd be discovered. But during the following days, the idea ate at me, and I developed a narrower query the next time I sat down. And the time after that. In a matter of weeks, I had a handful of sites that met my prurient needs. They were bookmarked under carefully benign names like "quilting," "crafts," and "mom-to-mom," but they represented a world I had not known existed, answered questions I hadn't thought to ask.

I wasn't alone. There were others with the same thoughts, the same desires. Women who expected—and got—a good spanking when they went too far. And there were—wonder of wonders—men who stepped up to the task while still valuing their partner's spirit and individuality. Believe it or not, for those first few months as I dabbled secretly in that world, I did not make a specific connection to my life. I read on-line stories and forums as I read novels or watched TV: they were interesting, entertaining, sometimes provocative. But they didn't affect who I was: the mother of three young children in a hopelessly hum-drum life, marking my days by potty trips and story hour at the library.

I love my husband. We've been married for seven years and I didn't—don't—see that changing. But sometimes I did wish it could be different. Sneaking into my subconscious was the disloyal but exciting notion that it could be—exciting because it made the stories much more personal; disloyal

because it seemed wrong to draft Mark into a role he had not auditioned for.

So the situation ground on. I held him up to an invisible standard and he repeatedly fell short. And for some reason (ha!) this was not beneficial to our relationship. The bickering was back. Even on Christmas Day, we argued. About how many toys could be out at one time in the living room. About whether I should have bought the electronic books for the twins. About whether the discarded wrapping paper could be burned in the fireplace. About what time we should leave after dinner with the in-laws. After all the anticipation and preparation for Christmas, it felt like the day was just ruined. I wanted to cry. Instead, I snarled at him, made my displeasure abundantly clear, and stormed out of the room.

Which is how I came to be reviewing my New Year's notebook on Christmas night and get hit in the face with my promise to myself to honestly share what was going on in my head.

I was not going to be able to check that one off.

It took me another hour to gather my thoughts and emotions well enough to be able to try the pitch. The kids, worn out from an early start and eventful day, were all down for the count, each tucked into bed with some newly acquired favorite toy. Action figures and stuffed animals I could understand, but Evan's new Darth Vader helmet seemed an odd choice for bedtime. I carefully eased it off my four-year-old's head, then went in search of Mark.

He wasn't in the living room where I'd left him, but the paper-and-toy chaos had been tamed somewhat, so he had obviously spent some time cleaning up after I walked away. The TV in the family room was silent, which meant he'd retreated to his den, just off the family room. It was the only truly private room in the house. The children understood, even as toddlers, they were not permitted in Daddy's den without an invitation. As they grew, it was often the site of serious discussions—praise or reprimand—and quiet one-on-one time. I have on occasion used it as an escape, a brief reprieve from the continuous demands of young voices. That night, though, instead of offering me an oasis of calm, it just seemed forbidding. In case his mood was not receptive, I came up with an excuse: an offer to make coffee or hot chocolate.

I knocked, as I always do.
"Come."

It's hard to judge mood from a single word, so I still didn't know how to read him, but I put on what I hoped was a friendly smile and opened the door. His look, steady and impassive, gave me no encouragement.

The offer of a drink didn't have to be an excuse. Maybe it could be a conciliatory gesture. "I thought I'd make a pot of coffee. Would you like some?"

"No. Thank you."

"How about hot chocolate?"

"No. I've had more than enough to eat and drink today. Thank you anyway." Very stiff, very proper.

I took two steps closer to the desk where he sat.
"I think we need to talk."

"I don't have the energy to squabble with you tonight, Allie."

"But I just want to—"

"Not tonight, do you hear?" he said somewhat more sharply.

So. A test, whether he meant it that way or not.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you. Goodnight, Mark."

I heard his sigh and the scrape of his chair on linoleum, but I was halfway across the family room before the door opened again. "What is it, Allie?" When I hesitated, he sighed again. "Do you want to come in and talk about it?" Not an enthusiastic invitation, but an invitation nonetheless.

It's amazing how important all the choices seem when I don't know what to do. Where to sit? The chair would be closer to the door and easier to flee from; the couch would make for more intimate discussion... unless Mark sat at his desk, in which case I might end up laid out like a psychoanalysis patient. *And how does that make you feel, Allison?* It made me feel like a damn idiot, and I hadn't even opened my mouth. I stood in the middle of the room, unable to make the next move.

"Well?" Impatience, I thought, but not actual irritation.

"Where should I sit?"

"Wherever you like." When I continued to stand there, he dropped heavily to the sofa, simplifying my choice. I spent a moment getting myself settled on the couch, tucking a throw around my legs, getting comfortable. Stalling.

"I'm not sure, really, what I want to say."

"Well, then, let's not waste both our time. I have work to do." He started to get up.

"You do not have work to do. It's Christmas Day, and I can't really believe you planned to work tonight. You just don't want to talk to me."

I waited for the denial but it didn't come. Sometimes I don't want to be right.

"You don't want to talk to me," I repeated, as though I hadn't hoped for contradiction, "because you think I'm going to argue with you, like I've been doing most of the day." Not wanting to hear the agreement there, I hurried on. "But I'm not going to argue with you. Or at least I don't want to. I want to apologize for the awful day we've had. A lot of it—certainly way more than half—was my fault. I want everything to be perfect—just so—and probably make too much out of the little things that go wrong."

"There's a lot of pressure around the holidays," he conceded. "I've seen it building for weeks, but I don't know how to stop it because it's something you do to yourself. Don't set the bar unrealistically high. It's never going to be perfect, but it wasn't awful either. The kids had a wonderful day."

"But you didn't."

"The kids had a wonderful day," he repeated, with a friendly, insistent nudge to my leg.

I wanted to say that he had argued just as pointlessly as I had, that it wasn't just about the holidays and he knew it, and that I didn't need him to make my excuses for me in any case. "Yes, they did." That bought me a smile.

It felt like an extremely careful negotiation, and I was tempted to leave it at that. A cessation of hostilities, a tentative peace, was an improvement. But leaving then would have meant going back to

our room where my New Year's notebook sat in judgment. *Be honest.*

"But I am sorry about how today went, not for the kids, maybe, but for me and you." The retreat was almost imperceptible, but it was there: his shoulders tightened a bit; the hand on my knee stilled. All the plans I'd made before entering the room slipped from my mind, but there was one point frantically trying to make its way out of my mouth, however inelegantly. "Before I mess this up any more, I want make it clear that this problem—or whatever it is—is mine. You might be able to help me with it, but it's *my* problem. It's not because you've done something or haven't done something or anything like that."

"Like what? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"And you don't really want to know," I said as an unexpected wave of affection swept over me. "But you'll listen because it's important to me." That was, on some level, the reason I had been reluctant to approach him. He would listen. It would have been easier, I think, to believe he would brush me off. Then at least I would have an excuse. "You love me, so you'll listen."

"It'd be easier to listen if you told me what you were talking about." His smile reflected mine and for a moment I felt closer than we'd been all day.

"Okay, but I'm going to tell you, up front, that this is hard for me to say, and I may not be clear about everything on the first pass."

"We're on about the third pass now, and I have no clue what you're talking about, so I figure it has to get better."

"I have, um, pictures of myself different from how I am."

"I'm sorry. Pictures?"

"Not photographs," I bumbled. "I mean like visions, impressions of what I want to be like, how I want to be with you, and it isn't the way we are now."

I had his attention at least. "How do you see yourself? How do you see us?"

"Now? Or in my vision of the future?" I gave myself points for not hyperventilating.

"Whichever."

"Well, right now, I think we're pretty normal, an average couple with pretty typical problems."

"And you'd like to give us some atypical problems, is that it?" He meant it as a joke, I think, and was alarmed when I didn't correct him. "Allie?"

"Don't rush me. Let me find the right way to say this. When we clash, like we did today, it usually starts with something pretty minor and it just keeps spreading to other things. We go pretty quickly from *something* going wrong to *everything* going wrong. I know that's something I do."

"It is," he agreed solemnly.

"Right. And I'm saying it out loud so you'll know that I know it, too."

He studied me curiously, as though trying to make out the figure being formed by too-few puzzle pieces.

"But I also know that I do that mainly with you. I don't implode when it's just the kids and me. I don't pick fights with them when I'm in a bad mood. I don't try to get Troy and Denis to tease Evan when he's had a rough day in preschool."

"So you're happier alone with them."

"No, that's not what I'm saying. I'm just—I knew this wouldn't come out right." I sidled up next to him, pushing and prodding until one arm came around me. It's pretty hard to feel superfluous when someone's nuzzling up to you, I figured. It had the added benefit of letting me avoid his eyes while I continued. "I'm happy with you. I'm happy with the kids. I'm not particularly happy with me, and I'm hoping you'll help me change that."

What's the point in hiding your eyes when your husband—or in this case, *my* husband—can just capture your chin and *make* you look at him? "Why aren't you happy with yourself?"

I had told myself I wouldn't cry, but he was making it really hard to stick to that plan. "For exactly the reasons we're talking about. When something goes wrong, I push you and push you for a reaction, even when that's totally unfair or when it's not really your fault to begin with."

"Evan's teacher calls it 'acting out.'"

I did my best to suppress the glare, but Mark's amusement suggested it was largely an unsuccessful effort. "Until I resort to biting and temper tantrums, maybe we could just say that I tend to push for a reaction from you."

"And what sort of reaction are you going for?" A reasonable question. A logical one. A difficult one—and not because I didn't know the answer.

"You know, I really like that new cable modem you had put in." His baffled expression was gratifying. I had been off stride throughout the conversation. Let him join me. I gave it a couple of seconds to settle before continuing. "I can surf the 'net so much faster and find answers to so many

questions. And I've hit on one strategy that I think might work for us. It involves... spanking."

He shook his head as though to clear errant thoughts. "Again?"

"Spanking," I repeated firmly. "Some women—like me—find it difficult to put an end to behavior that's destructive or dangerous to their relationships. And sometimes—if their partners agree to try it—they find that a punishment like spanking helps them curb it."

"And you found this on the Internet?" Another hard question. I got up to pace. Do I say that the advice came from the Internet, where any crackpot with a modem can become an instant guru? Or do I admit the whole truth? In for a penny, in for a pound, as they say.

"It's something I've felt all my life. I finally looked it up on the Internet and found out that there a lot of other people who feel the same way. Some people—married people—have their entire relationship structured around it; some have written agreements for a sort of behavior-modification program; some just use spanking as sort of a sexual kick."

"And how do you see it, given that you've felt this way 'all your life'?"

"I don't know. I don't know! It's all mixed up with sex and you and love and fear. The best I can say is that I feel more tied to you, more loving toward you, when I feel how strong you are. And I think, in some crazy way, that's what I'm expecting when I push you."

"So when you insist on putting crumpled gift wrap in the fireplace, I should spank you?"

I can't explain it, but somehow it sounded stupid and insulting when he said it like that. As though this long, difficult, emotional journey could be reduced to a single sentence. "Never mind! Forget I said anything. You can go back to your paperwork. Merry Christmas!"

He was off the sofa in a flash. "Allison, don't you dare walk away from me tonight. You set foot out of this room and I *will* spank you, whether that's what you want or not."

I wanted to run. I wanted to hide. I wanted to cry. I let my hand fall from the doorknob but couldn't turn to face him. Instead I leaned my head against the door, blaming it on the exhaustion of a long day. It was a surprise to feel his arms come around me, turn me gently to him. "Easy, Allie, easy. Come here, doll." Any mockery that I had read in his voice was gone then. He held me close, tucked to his chest, while I gathered my thoughts and settled my breathing, wiping a few stray tears on his sweater.

We've talked about it since, so I have a good idea now what Mark was feeling, but at the time I didn't have a clue. I just knew he was taking care of me, accepting even if he didn't understand, and that felt surprisingly good. (Now I know he was delighted to see how quickly I caved to his stern command. It's a good thing for both of us I didn't know that on Christmas night. It would likely have turned out quite differently.)

Resettled on the couch, he held and petted me some more before finally saying, "If this has been in the back of your mind all your life, you're going to

have to give me some time to catch up. I'd like to see whatever Internet sites you think might help me understand, and we need to talk about this a lot more whether we follow through or not, but I'm glad you told me." I could feel the rumble of a chuckle through his chest. "You've done and said a lot of things in the last seven years that threw me, Allie, but this one about tops the list, I think."

"Why?"

"Why? I'm not even sure I can say. It's just totally unexpected. When you came in here tonight, I thought you were going to try to continue one of the numerous arguments from earlier in the day. This was certainly not the way I thought the conversation would go. Tell me, why tonight? If this is something you've thought about for years, what made today the day to broach it?" Before I could answer, he hurried on, "Don't misunderstand. I'm glad you told me, and I think it clears up a lot of other questions, but what prompted this little display of Christmas candor?" I imagine he was proud of his verbal wit, but it just made me feel more foolish.

"It was in my book," I muttered.

"Again?" he prompted, lifting my chin so he could see and hear me more clearly.

"It was in my New Year's notebook. I promised myself I would talk to you about this before the year was out."

His managed to look amused without crossing the line to patronizing. "Six days. Cutting it kind of close, no?"

"Oh, shut up." It's hard to effect a really good elbow to the gut when you're being hugged.

He chuckled again. "Anything else in your little book you want to talk about?"

"No," I replied grumpily. But I stayed in his arms. It was a good place to be after a really lousy day.

There were moments during the next few days, that I almost regretted our little Christmas conversation, but I couldn't quite work up the nerve to say it had all been a mistake. Mark wouldn't have let me get away with that, I imagine, but the thought was there. Once I had shown him my private bookmarks on the computer (and endured some needling about the names I had used to shroud my interest), he kept disappearing into his den for hours at a time, resurfacing to watch me with a speculative eye.

To his credit, he left all conversation until after the children were in bed for the night, but I still found myself jumpy and ill at ease during the day when his eyes were on me. Nonetheless, I appreciated that he was home, using a week's vacation time. It was not only a matter of having an extra set of hands with the kids, but of valuing the family time that is really the heart of the holidays to me. We went ice-skating and played Candyland and made fudge and pored over picture books together.

But when the children were in bed for the night, we sat and talked, the two of us, about the things he'd read... and what he wondered... and why. We talked about what I expected—from myself... from him... from a spanking. *Why couldn't it just be simple and straightforward?* I asked once in

exasperation. Why did we have to talk it to death? But instead of snapping back at me (which is probably what I was hoping for), he pulled me close and soothed my jittering nerves.

"You've met the requirements of your plan," he told me. "Because all you had to do was talk to me about what you wanted. And that was right. I'm glad you did. But that was the beginning of a path, not the end of one, and you're going to have to let me negotiate the next turn or two. Ease up. It's taken us more than seven years to get where we are. If we're going to make a change, I'd rather do it right than spend the next year trying to repair the damage."

"Damage?"

"When I first started reading the stuff you marked for me, I was... well, angry and hurt. It's a blow to the ego, I guess, to find that I'm not the man you want me to be."

"But that's not—" He shushed me absently and I subsided into silence. I had never meant him to feel inadequate. In many ways *I* was the one who felt inadequate. Foolish. Immature for needing this... whatever it was I was looking for. Attention. Supervision. Parenting.

"But as we've talked and as I've read and thought about it, it's not so big a leap. You're just looking for me to be more involved and more attentive, and I can do that. I *want* to do that, and I want to do it in a way that makes you feel loved and valued." I liked his version of events far more than I liked the way it was playing in my head. "If I overcompensate," he continued, "or if you feel like I'm trying to change your personality, I think that would spell trouble for both of us. On the other

hand, if I leave it all up to you to decide—the when, where, how long, and how hard of a spanking—you’d find that even more frustrating than the way things are going now. Or so I gather from what I read on-line,” he added thoughtfully. “So I’d like to take it kind of slow, give us a chance to warm up to the idea. How’s that sound?”

“For a guy who’s had a grand total of four days to think about this, I guess that’s pretty good,” I had to concede. We shared a sweet kiss then, so his next words were all the more unsettling.

“I think it’s time for your first spanking.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

Heard him, maybe. But the mischievous glint in his eye was sending very mixed signals to my already befuddled brain.

“What?” I repeated stupidly, even as I edged away from him on the sofa. (See, not so stupid after all.)

“I said I think it’s time for your first spanking.”

Hearing still worked, then. Damn. Heart did, too; I could tell because it was thumping audibly. My voice, however, wasn’t working too well. It took three tries before I could manage to say, however weakly, “But I haven’t done anything.” In fact, my behavior had been beyond reproach for the past several days. I had held my tongue when he’d let Evan crush Cheerios into the tablecloth, hadn’t bitched when he’d disappeared into the den at bath time, had even picked up the newspaper he had left strewn all over the living room. “Why?”

“Practice.”

"I don't need practice." I can't even explain why something that I had thought about so long suddenly seemed like a bad idea. Or even, why, after all the talking we had done, it came as a surprise. But it did. Even more so as he gathered me to him.

"Why so skittish, Allie-cat?" That's an old nickname, and it seemed singularly inappropriate at the time. It is rooted in my independent, self-sufficient nature, and I was feeling neither one right then. Instead, I had the sense of being cornered, and it took everything in me not to show my claws. *This isn't happening right*, I thought in confused protest. There was supposed to be naughty behavior that provoked a quick, certain spanking. Not this loving, practical discussion that gave me time to suffer misgivings... and act on them.

I moved away some more. "This isn't right."

"You may not need practice," he said, "but I do. And I don't intend to get it when we're in the throes of an argument. We've got the time and privacy right now. I think it's as good a time as any. Can you give me a real reason to put this off?"

Real reason. *Real* reason. "Because I don't think I need one right now, thank you." There, that seemed pretty real to me. Over the past few days, I had begun to accept that an idea that had been romantic and comforting in fantasy had left me feeling vulnerable and exposed in the telling. But the reality—God, the concrete happening—was mortifying. What had I been thinking when I opened this can of worms! *Be honest*. Clearly a bad idea.

No matter how much I might wish I were somewhere else, Mark's gentle, insistent hands brought me back. "What is it? Second thoughts?"

He smiled, and I worked to remind myself how I had gotten myself into this situation to begin with. *Be honest.* I love and respect my husband. I didn't want him closed off from me, even in the small, private, embarrassing part of my mind. "Second thoughts? I think we're up to at least fifth thoughts by now. Seriously, honey, I don't think this is such a good idea."

He seemed concerned, earnest, intent as I tried to explain. I thought I was really getting through to him, which was to his credit because I was a little fragmented—one might say incoherent—in my explanation. Still, I thought he got the gist of it, which was that once we'd crossed this Rubicon, things wouldn't be the same and I wasn't sure I could risk the change. I believe I even used the phrase "can't un-ring the bell," and I'm sure I was clear that things would be best if we just never started. He listened without argument.

Which is why it was all the more disconcerting, minutes later, to find myself over his lap.

"I still don't think this is such a good idea," I repeated. No answer. He just continued to shift and prod, rearranging us both on the comfy leather sofa in his den. It was reassuringly like the way we would settle into each other to watch TV together, companionable jostling until we were both satisfied. Except that as we got closer to settled I found myself far from comfortable, and we never sat in the den to watch TV.

Leather is surprisingly cool to the skin on first contact. I lay my cheek on the cushion, resigned but still not terribly happy about it. "I think I should replace resolutions with affirmations."

"Do you?" he said with audible humor.

"Yes. You know, like 'I am happy with who I am.' Or 'I am caring person.' Maybe 'I will have a long life, replete with many friends.'"

"That last one sounded more like a fortune cookie."

"Or," I continued, undeterred, "'I will never mention spanking again.'"

"Oh, that's a good one. Be sure to write that one down." There was laughter, still, in his voice.

"I will. I will. Definitely the way to go. Affirmations, not resolutions. Think how much easier it would be to read my New Year's notebook without all those goals to meet, things to finish."

I risked a glance over my left shoulder. He smiled. "You might be distracting yourself, you know, but it's not working on me."

"I know," I said, then pressed my face to the leather. "But I'm doing the best I can."

Mark's hand, warm, familiar, loving, eased up my back, under the loose flannel pajama top. "I know you are. And you're doing fine, honey. I know this is hard for you. I know it's scary. But I think this is something we need to try. You're going to be okay. Just try to relax a bit. We'll take this easy, both of us."

It was at that point that I realized that, in his own way, Mark was just as scared as I was—maybe more so. I had already gotten through the most difficult part for myself: admitting out loud that this was something I fantasized about, something I

wanted on a visceral level, even if I couldn't articulate why. As uncomfortable as that notion was for me, how much harder would it be for someone who did not have those years of suppressed longing to fall back on?

Like a quarterback with the wrong playbook or an actor without a script, he was picking his way through, trying to get the flow of things without highlighting his own ignorance. The help I had offered had been limited by my own lack of knowledge. I had pointed him to the Internet, with its own baffling array of "scripts," the equivalent of saying *You're going to be the sheriff in a small frontier town. Here are a bunch of Westerns to read for background. Write your own lines, but make sure you fit in with everyone else. Rehearsal's at 9:00.* For all his fine qualities, Mark will never be an actor. He doesn't have it in him to mouth someone else's words, to take a director's notes. In fact, it was much easier to see him as the quarterback with the wrong playbook. After a quick assessment of the players' skills, he would adjust his own direction so they could follow him, abandoning complicated plays, falling back on the tried and true, drawing diagrams in the dirt if necessary. Not an actor, no, but a good leader.

"Just breathe, Allie." Had I been holding my breath? I don't know, but I laughed, a release of nervous tension that I think eased us both.

His hand, warm and reassuring on my back, finally lifted, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world that it should move to my waist, coax the elastic of my pajamas down past my hips. It was a lovely gesture that made my muscles relax without conscious thought. Even when his hand

came back up to caress and tease that newly uncovered flesh, I could slip in that fuzzy, dreamlike space where everything seems okay and nothing is impossible. I wasn't awkward anymore, or embarrassed. I wasn't foolish or immature or needy. I wasn't the mother of three preschoolers who might wake at any moment and demand a drink of water or confirmation that there were no monsters in the closet. I wasn't someone afraid to be herself with the one person she should be able to trust.

He never asked if I was ready, never told me he was about to begin, but gradually, the gentle, calming pats became more abrupt. I felt an odd jolt—not an alarm of danger so much as the familiar toll of far-off bells rung at an unexpected time. So this was a spanking. Huh! Different than I expected, but the same, too. The position was good. I could feel Mark's hard legs under me, appreciate the gentle rocking that his motion forced on us both, the echo of spansks to my bottom. He kept it up, with the same small area being introduced, again and again, to his hand.

In that muzzy, fuzzy, lax world, I drifted for a while before being tugged out by the vague, not altogether uncomfortable, burn he was igniting. In my imaginings, of course, spankings never hurt at all. That is, I would imagine the *idea* of pain, but that's rather like imagining winning the lottery: entertaining but utterly without impact. This, however, was quite real.

"Ow!"

I heard a grunt of acknowledgement, but that was all. He continued to spank, perhaps one spank per second. Not that I was timing him or anything,

but there was a slow, deliberate pacing that made me suddenly aware that I had no idea how long or how hard a "practice" this was. The easy acceptance I had been floating in just a minute before was gone in an instant.

"Stop. Stop. Please stop!"

He did, but it was strangely deflating to have been able to put an end to the proceedings so quickly. Before I could process that weird thought, though, I found that Mark's arm, which had been holding me comfortably close, also restricted my movement a great deal. I was limited to craning my neck awkwardly and reaching back with the one hand that wasn't trapped. I could not turn over, even if I had had the energy and volition.

"You're okay?" Mark said, but it seemed as much statement as question.

"Yes. Yes, it's just... I think that's enough, that's all. It kind of hurts. I think we're done." But if I couldn't turn over, I surely couldn't stand up.

"I don't think so."

A spark of panic flit through me. When had I lost control of this little adventure? "But this is just practice. You said so. I haven't done anything wrong." I could hear the tremor in my own voice and it embarrassed me. Mark must have heard it too because he eased the sturdy grip on my hip and used that hand to stroke my back, reaching all the way up under my pajama top to rub my shoulders and neck.

"Settle down, Allie-cat. It's practice, yes, but I'm not done practicing."

"I am!"

"Sadly, I do not have another partner. So you're just doing to have to bear with me a little longer."

Despite everything, I had the distinct impression he was laughing at me.

"There's nothing funny about this," I muttered, but the magic of his hands had already eased most of the irritation. One hand soothed the tight muscles of my neck while the other traced gentle circles on my bottom.

He chuckled but somehow it seemed companionable by then. "I'm trying to decide whether this is more a cotton candy pink or light rose petal. Maybe I should stop by Home Depot to pick up some paint chips—I mean, a color palette."

That did it. I finally laughed, myself. During my last attempt to freshen the living room, poor Mark had endured weeks of consternation and repeated consultations while I struggled with the huge distinction between chrysalis and scenic shell (which Mark claimed were indistinguishable light grays), and he had looked wistfully back at the days when color names actually *meant* something. "I'm aiming for a strawberry ice cream shade, I think, and I'm not quite there yet." His hand squeezed one cheek, testing.

"But it hurts!"

That bought me a light swat. "Petulance is not an attractive quality, Allison." Oh, this was too weird. Like some latter-day Dr. Frankenstein, I was victim of my own ingenuity. I huffed a good huff and settled back down. But that was only because his hands continued to roam and they felt so darn good.

"Now if I understand the progression here, you're feeling a burn. Am I right?" The question displayed a remote concern, the way he might ask about a mildly interesting but inconsequential

matter. *Did you add rosemary to these mashed potatoes? Is it raining? Are you feeling a burn?*

"Yes, damn it, it burns. Can I get up now?"

"I might not know a lot about spanking, but I'm pretty sure this is the power position. Am I right?"

"Yes, but—"

"So I think that if I say it's not quite time to let you up, then it's not quite time. Right again?"

"Right." Actually, it was getting pretty hard to concentrate because his hands were so busy. The burn that I had complained about was hardly noticeable given more recent distractions. He went over my apparently cotton-candy-pink bottom with just the lightest brush of fingernails, starting tremors throughout my body, then blew across the tender skin, igniting all manner of new embers.

He put my own question back to me. "Are we done?"

"No," I conceded.

"No, indeed. We just had what I believe you would call a warm-up. Now it's time for the main event."

The "main event" comprised several dozen spanks, not especially hard but so close together that I found myself wriggling in a futile effort to avoid that hand. Still, between visions of cotton candy morphing into scoops of strawberry ice cream, the realization that I had just tried to talk myself out of something I'd spent a year talking myself into, and the relief that, all things considered, I didn't yet regret keeping my resolution to share my thoughts, it wasn't too hard to take. And, of course, when it was over (and I was *finally* allowed to get up), I got to crawl into Mark's arms.

For a long time we didn't talk, just held onto each other as the emotions settled. I had felt a disquieting anxiety at the loss of control and some indignation that he would spank me for nothing. But the truth was that he was right to take action. On some deep, almost unacknowledged level, I had been afraid he'd never actually do it, that despite all the conversations, he would actively avoid ever getting to the spanking part because he really did think I was a kook to want him to. So I had been decorum personified, determined not to confirm the dark prediction. But, again, without the playbook, Mark had come through for me.

Eventually, we left the little cave of intimacy that the den had become, returning to the real world of mismatched socks and Lego blocks, but still the flush of new discovery remained with me. I straightened cushions and picked up toys automatically but kept finding reasons to touch Mark. "I never thought you'd do it," I finally admitted.

"I know. You've been working real hard not to give me an excuse, haven't you?" he asked, then laughed at my chagrined response before giving me a kiss. "I considered leaving it till Saturday—sort of a traditional birthday spanking—but decided to satisfy your curiosity and mine tonight."

"Curiosity?"

"Tell me you haven't been wondering what it would be like, how it would feel, how *you* would feel. So," he said, as we headed to bed, "best thing?"

I grinned in recognition. It was a game that developed when Evan started preschool. Asked what he did that day, he could reduce three hours of activity to a single word: played. But forced to answer a more specific question he could become positively ebullient, producing animated descriptions of games and personalities and childhood promises. The two most useful questions had turned out to be "What was the best thing that happened today?" and "What was the worst?" and both had been added to our parental repertoire. It was now as much a part of the bedtime routine as *Goodnight, Moon* was. For the children, it was a chance to draw out the tucking-in process (and they took advantage of that sometimes), but for me it helped highlight the little moments otherwise lost in the hurry to get things done or finish my chores. I might hear about a game at preschool, the ladybug in the garden, or chocolate milk for breakfast. (Or about popping tar bubbles in the driveway. Some things I don't want to know, but that, at least, explained the stains on Evan's clothing that *never* came out.) However you look at it, "best thing" was a gentle effort to gain insight into the children's psyches.

So, no fool I, I knew exactly what Mark was going for with that question. Still I couldn't suppress the smile. "Stew. The stew at dinner turned out great, didn't it?" I tossed over my shoulder.

That bought me a quick, solid *thwack!* that made me jump despite the giggle. "Okay! Okay! Worst thing: a spanking really *does* hurt. You wouldn't think such an obvious thing would come as such a surprise, but it does. Best thing? I don't

know. There are still a lot of emotions swirling around in me, and I'm going to have to let them settle a little bit, but it's probably how close I feel to you right now." In fact, I felt like I couldn't get close enough. I couldn't stop touching him. "I want to crawl inside your clothes, be inside your skin."

"That's not the way the biology of the matter works," he teased, but I could tell he felt much the same. I suppose having a half-naked woman wriggling on your lap for so long would be enough to rev up any man, even a vanilla—and frankly by then I had my doubts about how vanilla Mark was. Practice indeed!

Still, arm-in-arm (and occasionally lips-on-lips), we made our way toward the bedroom, stopping only at the boys' rooms to check on them. Even as I adjusted the blankets Evan had kicked off in sleep, my mind was skipping ahead to the next phase of the evening, so I was surprised to see Mark waiting in the doorway with a thoughtful, distracted expression.

"I'm going to want you to be a little less cooperative tomorrow," he said. It was an off-handed remark that left me puzzled. "I want to practice my flip-and-hold technique."

On the up-side, I got to check off my 2004 resolutions on my birthday and Mark and I are much closer. On the down-side, Mark has offered to help "motivate" me for some of my 2005 resolutions. Aunt Tully was a sweet old lady. I bet she never meant to set me up for this. Bless her and that damn journal.

Aquarius

Water Seeks Its Own Level

One of the attractions of being a teacher was supposed to be having summers off, Angela reflected wryly. But that was not in the short-term plan if she intended to continue to pay her rent, and she'd become rather dependent on the idea of eating regularly, if not sumptuously. A nine-month salary just didn't cover twelve months' living; at least not for a first-year teacher, it didn't. So it looked like the days of finding a summer job were not over after all, she reminded herself, and picked up the classifieds again.

What wasn't part-time required the kind of experience she didn't have. *Accountant. Automotive technician. Carpenter.* She skipped the *Sales* listings completely. Several weeks earlier, when it became obvious that she didn't have the seniority to get one of the sought-after summer school spots, she'd begun looking. "Sales Rep," the ad had said. "No exp. nec. B2B. Active, personable, outgoing. gd \$." The person on the phone had been pleasant but vague, but Angela had bought her line that she was just the receptionist who set up interviews. Even through the first group interview, Angela was aware that she told them more than they told her, but still it had sounded

promising and the potential money was good. She might even be able to take make enough in ten weeks that she could take an actual vacation before school started again in September. With the distance of several weeks, she could laugh at her naiveté, but at the time she had not realized how little information they provided. She'd been strung along through a series of interviews and accepted as a "provisional" employee before she understood that what they described as business-to-business marketing was merely a new twist on the almost-dead concept of door-to-door sales. It was merely that they accosted people at their offices instead of at their homes. She'd taken a precious day of leave to learn that lesson, as she and her "trainer" strolled through every office in two high-rises trying to sell spa memberships. She was mortified. Back to the classifieds, but no more sales jobs.

She'd had visions of summers full of educational tours and foreign travel, curriculum development and grad school classes. Oh, who was she kidding? She'd had visions of sleeping late and hanging around the swimming pool. Hey!

Swimming pool operators, lifeguards, instructors. F/T & P/T. Tate Aquatics. 555-POOL.

Quentin Tate checked his schedule: four more interview before he'd be able to squeeze in some dinner. Late April and early May meant long, tiring days, but he knew from experience that time spent now would pay off with a smooth-running summer. The small store sold swimming pool chemicals and deck furniture to private pool owners, but the real money, and the only way to make it through the

winter, was pool management. He hired the staff, saw to the maintenance, and was generally responsible for the running of more than two dozen small apartment, condo, and motel swimming pools. But the feather in his cap, and the only reason Tate Aquatics was still afloat, so to speak, was the contract for Lexington Commons, a member-owned community pool. This was his third year of a three-year contract and he wanted it to be the best. If he got the right staff in, and the weather cooperated, the board of directors would still be relaxed, happy, and flush with the glow of summer tans when they renegotiated in September.

He sped through the next two interviews because he knew the kids well. Both were fifteen-year-olds from his last summer's lifesaving class and were starry-eyed at the idea of having "real" jobs. He slated them into different apartment pools where they would back up someone with more experience during the busy mid-day periods. If they were dependable and could arrange transportation, they could each pick up enough hours filling in for other guards that they'd be working nearly full-time. Not a bad prospect for a fifteen-year-old.

The next interview piqued his interest, though. She was no fifteen-year-old kid. Angela Warner was a teacher at Westover Middle School, and judging from her high school and college graduation dates, he figured her to be no more than twenty-three or twenty-four. He looked forward to the possibility of installing her as his second-in-command at Lexington. Her summer camp experience and the year teaching suggested that she would probably not run screaming from the

sub-adult range of the membership that seemed to make the pool their summer home. If she had a good rapport with the youngsters—able to enforce the rules without coming off as tyrannical—the rest would be, well, child's play.

Maybe not all of it, he thought ruefully. The largest segment of the daily population was the nine- to fourteen-year-old set. There were kids who showed up for swim team practice and didn't go home again until dinner. Parents and siblings came and went, but the kids stayed at the pool, swimming or talking, playing basketball or volleyball. By summer's end he would know most by name, would know which were the troublemakers and which were in trouble; he would break up fights and offer advice, would be a role model to some and a warning to others.

But those younger kids were comparatively uncomplicated next to the teenagers. Most kids drifted off by fourteen or fifteen, finding jobs or trouble or at least more attractive ways to fill the bulk of their summer hours. The ones who remained were often what he thought of as the "lovesick": kids caught in their first infatuation. Unfortunately, it was often with one of the lifeguards, who were not really in a position to crush egos by telling their admirers to get lost. It was, after all, their pool. Then, too, there were the constantly shifting relationships between the guards themselves. With a staff of more than a dozen, there seemed to be endless ways they could couple and de-couple. As a result, Quentin spent a considerable chunk of time addressing schedules and preferences. If history proved any indication, he would end up firing at least one for inappropriate

behavior that neither one of them would see coming. *Ah, the impetuosity of young love*, he thought with sardonic humor. It was the thought of finding two of his better prospects on the floor in his office last summer that made him long for another genuine adult on the staff. Sure, they might have just been "trying on the new staff suits," as Jason had stammered, but that didn't really explain why his was on inside-out or why Jennifer wasn't in the guard chair at the diving well like she was supposed to be. Another adult, that's what he needed.

"Angela Warner?"

The young lady turned from admiring a patio set—as though she had a patio!—and beamed at the man in the office door. "You must be Quentin Tate."

Come July, there were still days he was unsure of his choice.

For the most part they worked together well. She was inventive and energetic, willing to take on lots of extra tasks. She taught group and private lessons before the pool opened in the morning and often after it closed in the evenings. She reinvigorated the pool's Fourth of July festival with games, contests, and picnics that kept the pool packed all day long. She had suggested—then planned—a swim team sleepover at the pool, a variation of the "lock-ins" used by some youth groups. He was half-dreading it: a team-building experience meant to develop camaraderie, create fun memories, and allow virtually no sleep. Yes, she was definitely fun and enthusiastic. Everyone to like her.

But she could be so darn... prickly; that was it, he decided. It wasn't quite moody, because he'd never seen her depressed or mean-tempered, but she could be so damn unpredictable. Like that morning, when she saw the guard rotation sheet.

"Why aren't I on the towers?" she had snapped. "If you didn't need me until four, I could have taken the morning off."

"Oh, yeah, I juggled the rotation a bit to give you a few hours on the ground. The grass needs cutting, and I thought that would give you a chance to set things up the way you want them for tonight, too. And I have to make the rounds to the other pools so I definitely need you here. Why? Did you want the time off?" he had asked hesitantly. She was typically at the pool six or seven days a week, if only for her lessons, and he had come to rely on her presence and support for the younger guards. When she wanted time off for a dentist appointment or to meet a friend for lunch she was good about leaving a note for him on the scheduling calendar. "If you'd let me know I could have scheduled TJ or Lee." He scowled over the chart trying to see how to readjust. It was going to be a warm, sunny Saturday and they would need all three guard chairs manned all day.

"Never mind," she'd all but snarled, "I wouldn't want to disrupt your precious schedule." With that she'd flounced out of the office, leaving Quentin open-mouthed in her wake. He'd given a few minutes for his own irritation to settle before he went looking for her. He found her, not in the maintenance shed readying the mower as he expected, but coiling and organizing the lane ropes from the morning's swim meet.

"Angela?"

"What?"

"Watch the tone, young lady."

Her eyes went wide and she fairly quivered with resentment, but she managed a monotone when she asked, "Was there something you wanted, Mr. Tate?" with such icy formality that he was flummoxed. What the hell *did* he want? He wanted her to laugh and say he'd misunderstood. He wanted the bright and talkative coworker that he'd come to enjoy. He wanted to know what he'd just done to set her off and how to make it right again.

"I want that grass cut before I'm back at two o'clock. We've got over a hundred kids in here tonight and there's a lot of preparation to do."

"I'm well aware how many kids will be here tonight."

"Then we understand each other?" Hardly.

She fired off a mock salute and went back to shoving coiled ropes into their places. Quentin, more baffled than he had been to start, walked away. What was there about her that made him sometimes want to wring her neck?

The distraction of the check-ups at the other pools was a welcome relief. Most were running well, but it kept the staff on their toes to never know when he might stop by. He spotted a few early problems with water quality and talked to the pool operators about how to resolve them. He did a little impromptu counseling when seventeen-year-old Jeanie Lowell tearfully confessed that one of the residents was making her life hell, and made a note to follow up with both the property manager and

Jeanie in a few days after she'd had a chance to try his suggestions. "Nobody better mess with my employees," he told her. "The next time he bothers you, page me. I'll make a personal appearance and we'll get this straight." She looked up at him, her glowing admiration practically drying up the tears, as though he could do anything.

It was something he was fairly accustomed to. The kids, both male and female, often put him on something of a pedestal. He made it all look easy. The learning curve at the beginning of the season was always amusing to watch. Most of the new guards, who envisioned summer days twirling their whistle and flirting with the opposite sex were surprised by the combination of work and tedium that the job entailed. Learning and operating the filter equipment, maintaining the records required by the health department, monitoring water quality, cleaning the pool, deck, bathhouse, and grounds—all that had to be done in the few precious minutes they weren't actually up in a guard chair preventing potential trouble. At Lexington, they were fortunate to have enough staff to have someone on the ground most of the time, as Angela would be that day. But at the small pools that were contracted on tight budgets, it was the same sixteen- or seventeen-year-old kid responsible for all of it.

He was pleased when he stepped into one of those apartment complex pools to have the harried guard on duty ask for his pass without taking her eyes from the water. She was much more interested in what look like an incipient water fight than she was in him. When good-natured splashing turned to dunking—*tweet!*—she benched both perpetrators for five minutes. They grumbled but

complied, which told him this wasn't the first time. Finally, she turned to take his pass and blushed. "Oh, Quentin, I didn't realize it was you." She looked, guiltily, at the pair of ten-year-olds consigned to ignominy under the guard chair and blushed again. He smiled, quick to reassure.

"It looks like things are going well. Water looks good. Mind if I check it?" he asked even as he popped open the small testing kit he carried. Chlorine and pH levels were good, and he left her to watch the kids while he inspected her records and the filter room and noted what supplies were needed. Summer would be over by the time these little inspections ceased to unnerve the guards, but he considered it a lesson well learned. Constant vigilance beat last-minute panic. If they were prepared and on top of potential problems, they had nothing to worry about. He only came down heavy on the kids who tried to take the easy way out rather than doing it right. A classic tip-off was a set of chlorine/pH readings that were always at the exactly ideal level. *Nobody* was that good, not even Quentin. The numbers fluctuated with the sunshine and the number of people in the pool. The only way to consistently get perfect numbers was to lie.

His thoughts went, involuntarily, back to Angela and the first clash they'd had, early in the season. Memorial Day weekend was about as tough a shake-down cruise as he could imagine for a new staff, but they did it every year. And every year there seemed to be new ways to screw up. This year it had been assuming that Angela, who had several years' experience as a lifeguard, knew a fair bit about pool management. Trying to give her a chance to shine in front of the other guards, he had

instead managed to highlight her ignorance, and he blamed himself for putting her on the spot.

Still, couldn't she have just *said* she'd always worked at lakes? Instead, she just offered inane guesses to his questions until he began to doubt that she had the credentials at all. So it was really quite reasonable for him to ask, "You *have* guarded before, right?" Wasn't it?

That was the first time she had called him "Mr. Tate."

"Yes, Mr. Tate. I'm quite familiar with the principles of lifesaving. If there's trouble in the water, or if you have a heart attack in the diving well," she said with a threatening lack of irony, "I'm quite certain that my skills will be shown to good advantage. I know emergency rescue and first aid. I'm familiar with several ways to evaluate swimming abilities and am a certified instructor. I simply don't know what the free chlorine level should be for a pH of 7.4. In fact, to tell you the truth, I don't know what free chlorine is. Suppose you enlighten us all."

He hadn't been sure whether to remove the foot from his mouth or the brick from his head. It had taken quite a while to recover from that bad start. Still, once schools were out and they had the long summer days of working side by side, they'd developed a good rapport. She had a quick mind and wicked sense of humor. She also had a good ear, which made her a dangerous but terribly good mimic. The echo in his head of Angela saying, "Quentin, dear, I'm sure you don't realize it, but..." in the irritating whine of Mrs. Fitzsimmons was enough to make him smile, but it certainly did make

it harder to pretend to take the old bat seriously when she came in for her daily complaint.

He'd hit another three pools then head back to Lexington to see if he could shake loose what was bugging her, he decided. It hurt more than he expected for them to be at odds. Somehow, through the work and the hours and the talking, he'd developed a real affection for her. He liked most of the staff, but... well, they were kids, really, and as the years marched on, the gap was more and more pronounced. Angela was an adult, even if she hadn't acted very grownup today, he thought with some annoyance. And along with the dread of what the sleepover might bring, he had been looking forward to getting some quiet time with her.

They had a program of late-night swimming, music, and games that would run until midnight, after which everyone would be encouraged to go to bed. That wouldn't work, of course, and they would spend the next several hours drifting about, making sure that the poker games were friendly, the giggling groups of fourteen-year-old girls didn't get too loud, and the little kids were allowed to sleep if that's what they wanted to do. It wasn't too different from the sort of crowd control that he did during the day. Typically just the presence of a chaperone was enough to deflect serious trouble. So he and Angela would probably spend the hours from midnight to four, when the last of the hard-core partiers would finally sleep, just being visible. And as that was a fairly long and undemanding period, they'd naturally have some time to talk. To get to know each other better. Somehow, backwashing the filters was not conducive to the kind of conversation he had in mind.

The closest he'd come the kind of personal conversation he longed for was a quiet Sunday morning when he'd come in even though—certainly not *because*—Angela was slated to vacuum the pool. Over the years, he'd developed a theory that pool-vacuuming style was an indicator of a character and personality. Some people hated it, rushing through with impatient, jerky movements that stirred the sediment up before it could be pulled in by the vacuum's pressure. Others adopted a more businesslike approach: vacuum only the diving well, where the sediment was most noticeable, and let the regular filtration take care of the rest. A few seemed to appreciate the Zen-like opportunity to work alone in the quiet early morning, enjoying the hand-over-hand motion on the pole, the only sound the slight ripple of water.

Angela clearly fell into that third category. Watching from the front office, he had been reluctant to disturb her, but she didn't seem annoyed at the interruption and had talked and joked good-naturedly with him as she finished the vacuuming and he scrubbed tiles in her wake. Doing tiles was a tedious job and hard on the knees, but he hadn't minded at all because it gave him an excuse to continue to talk. He told her of the struggle to make Tate Aquatics profitable and bits of his youth that inspired him. She told him stories of her experience teaching that had made him look back sheepishly on his own hard-headed early adolescence. He hoped his own teachers had been as sanguine, but there was just something about twelve-year-olds that made them push and protest, save face in front of their friends, and resist the inexorable demands of school. Perhaps if he'd had

a teacher like Angela who could talk excitedly about Harry Potter, not old Mrs. Geffly who had wanted him to read *Johnny Tremain*, well, maybe then it would have been different.

With a rueful smile at that thought, he approached the wide double-doors of the bathhouse at Lexington, noting, automatically that the paint would hold up for another season and that one section of gutter could stand tightening. In the distance, he could hear a lawn mower whirring away, probably up beyond the snack bar where there were picnic tables. Good. It would mean cleaning out the footbaths more often today and tomorrow unless he wanted to hear from Mrs. "Now-Quentin-dear" Fitzsimmons, so he added that to his mental list of things to do. His days were full of mental to-do lists.

And every single one of them was gone when he stepped into the bathhouse.

To the right was the entrance to the men's changing room, showers, and lockers; women's were to the left. Directly in front was the sign-in desk, essentially a half-wall that formed one side of the main pool office. What caught Quentin's attention, though, was what was going on in the office. There stood Angela Warner, pretty and sleek in her navy blue guard suit, an odd half-smile on her lips as she pointed out something on the bulletin board. And there stood Dean Ambrose, member of the swimming pool's board of directors, his hand resting on her hip as though it belonged there and he leaned in to whisper in her ear.

For a long moment, Quentin did nothing.

When he spoke it was with brusque command. "Angela! My office! Now!" They both jumped at

his voice, but he did not wait for whatever explanations they might offer. In two steps he was into the locker room that would give him direct access to the deck. The main pool office was entirely too public a venue for the conversation that he had in mind. What was the woman *thinking*, he wondered, that she would engage in that sort of flirtation with anyone? Worse still, he was not just anyone, he was a married man with two kids... and a wife, who was, in all likelihood, on the pool grounds at that very moment. Did she want to cause scene? Start a scandal? Get fired? She was on her way to doing all three. What a fool!

The converted storage closet that served as the manager's office had the advantage of being air conditioned and somewhat private, but the disadvantages of being very small and directly adjacent to the pump room. Between the noise of the air conditioner and the sound of the pumps, it could be hard to hear himself think. He spent relatively little time there, but this was not a conversation to have in the main office or under an umbrellaed picnic table.

She trailed in a minute later, clearly not having taken his "Now!" directive to heart. The minute had given him a chance to clear his head of some of the clouding emotions, though, and when she stepped in, he was ready to keep everything strictly business. Except, perhaps, that he slammed the door behind her. "Sit," he directed, levelly. She did, but with such a furrowed brow that it was clear she was considering something else. She looked confused more than embarrassed.

"Well," he demanded, "what do you have to say for yourself?"

"About what?"

About letting another man touch you. About destroying my fantasy where I was the one for you. About falling for a sleaze like Ambrose.

"About why you're sitting around in the office when you're supposed to be working, for starters." She looked a trifle discomfited by that, at least.

"I... well, you said to have the grass done by two, and it will be done by then. Some of the spirit came back into her spine. "It's not my fault you're back early."

"That's not the point!" Of course it was her fault. He hadn't been able to get her out of his mind all morning. He'd rushed through some of the visits, cut others out entirely, all because he wanted to get back and talk to her before she went up in the chair. Instead, he'd walked in on a scene that still wanted to wrinkle his nose in disgust.

"I want to know what on earth you're doing carrying on like that during *pool hours*, in the *pool office*, with a member of the *pool board*." There, that put as fine a point on it as possible. This was strictly work-related.

The guilt he expected to see didn't materialize. "Actually, I clocked out." There wasn't, technically speaking, a time clock, but she had logged herself out for three hours when she talked TJ into coming in early to mow the grass. As annoyed as she was with the way Quentin had handled the entire thing, she could appreciate the budget was set up to cover only a certain number of hours per week. If she wasn't pulling her assigned weight, so to speak, she couldn't very well count the hours. On the other

hand, since she was there and on the ground, she had found herself running water tests, mending a lane rope, doing first aid on two kids who been sure they didn't need shoes on to play basketball, and even spelling one of the guards who needed a break from the chair. For someone who wasn't working, she'd had a damn busy morning. On top of that, she'd had to play diplomat with the annoying chairman of the social committee, who wanted to cram yet another adults-only event into the last few weeks of the summer.

"You clocked out?" he repeated. He came from behind the desk. Abandoning one power position for another, he perched on the edge of it, forcing her to look up. "That's just dandy. When the cat's away, the mice will play, I suppose."

"Meaning?" She came out of her own chair with the word. Everything at the damn pool was set, the overnight was all on schedule, and she'd put the final touches on preparations for Sunday morning. What more did the man want?

"I leave you in charge, leave you responsible, and as soon as I step off-property, you're setting up liaisons in the pool office, is that it? You just clock out when you feel like it, go parading around in that skimpy outfit, and start coming on to a man old enough to be your father?"

Her mouth fell open in amazement, then her eyes lit with fire as she replayed the accusations. "Skimpy outfit?" she sputtered. "Coming on? Liaisons!" He never saw it coming, but the burning imprint of her hand on his cheek would have been hard to deny even if the slap hadn't thrown him into the door.

"Consider that my two weeks' notice!"

The line had been a great one, she would think later, and the slap had been well deserved. What she didn't consider, until it was too late, was that it put a very large, very angry man between her and the only exit from a tiny room. Just because his anger was completely inexplicable didn't make it any less real. They stood for a moment, the handprint on his cheek going from white to red, as she considered her limited options: waiting him out or trying to bluster past him.

There was, apparently, a third possibility she had not imagined.

She took a step toward him as though expecting him to move. He did, but only to plant his left foot and pull her roughly against—almost across—his body. In another instant his hand cracked against her bottom. Stunned, she did not even really struggle at first. His hand smacked hard, again and again, against her Speedo-clad bottom. By the sixth or eighth strokes though, fury replaced stunned amazement and she began to struggle in earnest. Confused, bare-footed, and unbalanced, she was at a distinct disadvantage. It took nearly a dozen to fight her way free, by which time she was red-faced and gasping with indignation and embarrassment.

Quentin dipped his hands into his pockets as though to deny his own actions and stepped back behind the desk, leaving the door unguarded.

Storming out was another action made less effective by bare feet, but Angela gave it her full attention, even as the inarticulate sounds of frustration and confusion fought their way free from her throat.

Slam!

Well, Quentin thought as he shuffled papers on his desk, that could probably have gone worse. It was just hard to see how.

For Angela, the afternoon passed in an agony of discomfort, the least of which was the pain in her bottom. More troubling were the emotions and arguments that played over in her head. She'd grabbed her gear from the main office (which had been mercifully empty), then retreated to a stall in the women's room where she finally gave in to the tears but resisted the urge to beat her head against the cinderblock wall. When she emerged twenty minutes later, the veneer of control was back in place, but she still hadn't firmly decided what to do. Castration with a rusty blade seemed like an attractive option but was probably unrealistic. Just walking out had its merits: Let Quentin find out just how much of the preparation for the sleepover he had left in her hands when he had a hundred spirited kids crawling the walls. That would serve him right! It just wouldn't serve the kids right. And it wasn't fair that she should have to miss it after all the work she'd put in. And really, unless she was prepared to walk away from the job for the rest of the summer, she'd have to see this through. So, she finally admitted to herself, *I guess I have made my decision.*

They managed to avoid each other for hours. Quentin did paperwork in his office until the walls seemed to close in, then grabbed his toolbox and a ladder and made tightening the gutters and downspouts the most important thing that had to be done that afternoon. It wasn't until he was picking

up litter in the parking lot—a job he usually subcontracted to the nearest eight-year-old in exchange for an ice cream cone from the snack bar—that he admitted to himself that he was deliberately avoiding Angela. He had been surprised to see her in the guard chair, sweat pants on over her bathing suit despite the heat, when he emerged from his office. It was technically a violation of policy, but he wasn't prepared to call her on it. It was enough that she was there, and he felt a mixture of both pain and relief each time he heard her use her whistle or yell at some kid to "walk!"

She was clearly trying to maintain normality, but normality at a distance. Not once had she looked his direction, even when his work on the single-story bathhouse put him almost at eye-level across the pool.

Kicking himself as seven kinds of a fool, he acknowledged that he was going to have to, at a minimum, apologize. Really he owed her an explanation as much as an apology, but he'd have to play that by ear. What he absolutely had to do was apologize. And there was no way to do that if he was hanging out in the parking lot pretending to inspect the fencing.

"Full house?" he inquired coolly of the six guards sprawled around the office, but the question barely caused a ripple. When had he lost complete control of the staff?

"Oh, hi, Quentin. We're just waiting for the stragglers to clear out," offered Tom Berron, who, as near as Quentin could recall, wasn't even on

duty. "I'm going to go down to the sub shop and get dinner for anyone who wants to order." He slid a well-used menu across the counter with a pad and a pen. "Hey, somebody want to see what Angela wants?"

Quentin did, but this wasn't the time. He glanced down at the menu, trying to decide what was least likely to go down like a stone, but was brought back to the present by the unsteady sixteen-year-old voice of Andy Castilla who stood at the office door and hollered "Angela! You want food?"

On the deck, some smart aleck said, "Well, if that's the way you ask, no wonder she won't go out with you!" and was met with hoots and laughter. Quentin heard the snap of a towel and the yelp of its victim, but moving against the surge of exiting patrons through the locker room, he was too late to identify the guilty party. There was just Andy, flushed with embarrassment by the set-down, the damp towel innocently slung over his shoulders. Quentin handed him the menu and pad and suggested gently, "Why don't you go over and ask her, rather than scream it across the pool, hmm?"

He had forgotten the decision to close the pool early because of the sleepover. Forcing everyone out of the pool would give the staff a much-needed break before the twelve-hour-marathon to come. They could get the normal evening chores done, eat, and handle last-minute changes. The only guard still up in a chair was Angela, calmly watching an old man do a lazy sidestroke in the lap lane. He'd be out in another ten minutes. At that point they would have to clean the bathhouse, hose down the decks, straighten the lounge chairs, and empty

the trashcans so there would be plenty of room for all the chip bags, candy wrappers, and soda cans that would undoubtedly fuel the teeming throngs through the night. He was almost looking forward to it.

Two strides took him into the office to make closing assignments, but the way the room went quiet when he stepped in put him on alert. It was very different from the reaction when he had approached from the other side just a few minutes earlier.

"So," he said reaching for a water bottle in what he hoped was a casual manner. "What's up?"

The silence hung for a moment before TJ, urged by eye from several others, said, "We were talking about Mr. Ambrose."

Quentin stiffened, instantly defensive. "What's happened between him and Angela is not a matter for public gossip."

There was no mistaking the puzzled reaction across the room, but only TJ spoke up. "Angela? He hit on her, too?"

A lead weight settled in his stomach. "What do you mean, 'too'?"

In a fumbling, awkward explanation it became clear that two of the guards, sixteen-year-old Amber and seventeen-year-old LeighAnne, had both been complaining that the chairman of the social committee was just a little *too social* for them. He touched too much and stood too close, and they had both been relieved to find a little support among their fellow guards.

"Why didn't you tell *me* about it?" asked Quentin, finding himself uncomfortably out of touch.

"Well," Amber said miserably, "he didn't really *do* anything. Not like make a pass or really cross the line. It just, you know, felt creepy. Like he was making an invitation and waiting to see if I accepted it." She blushed vividly but was heartened by Amber's nod. "Which is, like, nuts because he's old enough to be my *father*." Tom's hand came across to massage her neck. From the way she leaned into it, she apparently didn't find Tom the least bit creepy.

Quentin went down in a crouch to catch her eye, waited until she'd braced herself with a breath. "I wish you'd told me right off, but I'm glad someone did. Your job is to be a lifeguard. My job is to see that you can do your job. If someone or something is interfering with that, I want to know about it. I will deal with Mr. Ambrose." Because he could see the argument building, he added, "I can do it without him ever knowing where the complaint came from, but I want to know if there are any more problems, okay? You treat him politely, but keep him at arm's length. That goes for all of you," he said with a sweeping look around the room. It was something they had covered in orientation—the importance of avoiding getting caught up in their patrons' lives. It was all well and good to be helpful, but some people never seemed to distinguish between desire and demand, and studied firmness was a necessary tool. "Professional distance, right?"

"So, you mean, if he starts to drown, we still have to go in after him?" TJ quipped, breaking the tension.

"Yeah," Quentin said, rising. He waited a beat before adding, "But not right away." The room erupted into laughter.

He managed to dole out clean-up assignments and lock the front door before going off to find Angela, but it was a near thing. He wanted everyone else gone. He wanted the sleepover cancelled. He wanted no witnesses when he threw himself on Angela's mercy.

Finding her was easy. He followed the noise past the diving well and onto the grass where dozens of lounge chairs were arrayed into neat, flat rows. The banging and slapping of aluminum said she was just beyond the snack bar. He braced himself and climbed the small hill.

She saw him but made not the slightest change to her rhythm. She dragged the chairs and lounges into neat groups of four and five, dropping each raised head and foot section with a clang.

"Angela, I want to apologize."

"Mmm hmm?" she said with all the invitation of a spitting cobra.

"Can we sit down and talk for a few minutes?"

"I wouldn't want to be accused of sitting down on the job," she shot back as she snapped another lounge chair into place.

"I guess I had that coming."

"You did."

"Can we please sit down for a minute and talk about things? I've got the kids doing closing cleanup." He gestured toward the bathhouse where hoses were being snaked into the building. "But that doesn't leave us much time."

"There's still the lounges," she hedged.

"Please."

She huffed a concession. "Well, you're the boss. If only for two more weeks."

"I hope I can change your mind about that."

"Don't count on it." But in the hours since their confrontation she had begun to regret the hasty declaration. She would lose not only the last four weeks of guard pay, but more importantly the money she was making from lessons. She could probably make her rent payment, but her student and car loans would be a real problem. As the afternoon had worn on, she had tried to decide whether a new credit union loan or the late fees on the bills she couldn't pay would end up costing her more in the long run.

But she wasn't sure she could work for Quentin anymore, either. For a number of reasons.

She headed for the picnic tables when he would have perched on the edge of a lounge chair. He took the hint and sat across from her, prepared to eat humble pie. Still, it was hard to begin.

"I want to apologize."

He could almost be amused when she stood up again, saying "Fine, it's done," but knowing there was so much ahead dimmed his humor.

"Sit down, Angela. You're on my clock, remember?"

For thirty seconds or so, his clock ticked away as he tried to decide how to start and Angela tried to remember whether her car insurance was due in August or September.

"I'm sorry for what went on in the office today—in both offices. I was totally out of line, and I hope you can find a way to forgive me for it. I'd like to

be able to get past this. I hope we can. I enjoy working with you, and you're a hell of an employee." He had begun to imagine the possibility of taking on another large community pool next summer... if he had a strong manager he could depend on... someone like Angela. "What happened today... well, I know I was wrong. Wrong not only because I misread the situation, but because even if you *had* been necking with that middle-aged sleazeball in the middle of the main deck, I could have handled it better. I could have handled him better; I could have handled you better; I could have handled myself better."

"You could have. I've seen you. Why didn't you?" And for the first time he could see the hurt behind the anger. He wanted so much to reach out and smooth it away.

"I don't know if I can answer that. Why? Because I'm an idiot. And a man. Which I think, today, might be the same thing." He was heartened to see her mouth curve slightly in a reluctant smile. "All I can say is that I sort of flipped out, lost touch with what I knew to be true. And you paid the price. That isn't fair to you. And it isn't fair that you should lose your job, or be made uncomfortable at work because I overreacted. I hope you'll finish out the season here like you planned. Or I can set you up at one of the smaller pools if you'd prefer. You could be completely independent. I don't want you to be uncomfortable. Or to have—what do you call it?—an unfriendly work environment."

"Hostile work environment," she corrected gently. The thought had occurred to her more than once during the day. "But I consider it more confusing than hostile," she admitted. "What on

earth would make you think I have any interest in Dean God's-gift-to the-world Ambrose? And more to the point, what on earth gives you the right to—" she lowered her voice although no one was near "—to *spank* me? I feel like an idiot. I thought—Never mind."

"No, tell me. You thought *what*?"

"It's just— I don't know how you could do that. I thought we were— I mean, I guess I figured you saw me as an equal. I know you're the boss, but I thought you at least saw me as an adult."

"I do!" he reassured quickly, urgently.

"But, then, how could you..."

There was no way to do this without coming clean. "You don't suppose that's the way I normally handle employee problems, do you? If you *had* been slacking off on duty—and, remember, I still don't have the full story on that—there are procedures in place to deal with that. You'd ordinarily get a series of warnings ending in firing if you didn't shape up. This was not a boss-to-employee reaction, and I had no right to spank you." Yet. "I crossed a line with you, and I'm sorry. The only explanation I can offer is that I didn't even see the line. It was... temporarily obscured... by a haze of green. And I understand that was completely unjustified."

"And what brought about this dramatic shift in attitude?" *Green?* she wondered.

"Sanity, mostly. Then the kids were talking in the office and I gather Ambrose is a little too touchy-feely."

"He is."

Quentin stood, throwing up his arms as exasperation temporarily eclipsed restrain. "Why

didn't anyone tell me?" he demanded. "How am I supposed put an end to it if no one tells me what's going on?"

She waited for him to wind down. "Look, if you think I've gotten to the ripe old age of twenty-three without learning how to deflect a little unwanted attention, then you don't know much about women. And there's no reason to go on high alert for what is essentially a harmless flirtation. She saw his eyebrow going up dubiously but anticipated the objection. "That doesn't mean I liked it or enjoyed it or would have tolerated much more of his nonsense, but there's a lot of room between not being flattered and needing to put an immediate end to things. You ignore the first, and a quick knee to the groin takes care of the other."

Between her words and the hard, speculative look she shot at his crotch, he found himself taking a quick, reflexive step back. "Did you know that he was bothering Amber and LeighAnne?"

"No." The sudden softness in her voice and eyes said she'd talk to them about it privately. She might be old enough to handle herself, but she remembered when she hadn't been.

"That's something then."

"Oh, yes, nothing better than shared ignorance," she said wryly.

Finally able to work up a smile for the first time in hours, he tried it out on Angela. "So, are we okay? Do you think that you can maybe stick out the rest of the summer? I really didn't mean to force you have to quit. Friends?"

She drew back, rediscovering some of the indignation that had been simmering for hours. "That's it? 'I'm sorry I was a jerk. Let's be friends.'

You've got to be kidding. You embarrassed me. You embarrassed me in front of a member of the board. You reamed me out for no reason. You made all kinds of crazy accusations. Then topped it off with a spanking. I'm pretty sure that's assault. I could probably have you arrested."

His bland acceptance took the wind out of her sails. "You probably could. Why didn't you?"

"I still might." But she wouldn't, she knew. The thought had first occurred to her when she was slumped in the changing room stall. It would make for a fine revenge, she had thought. For a few brief minutes she had enjoyed a bitter glee about what such a charge would do to his reputation, and she knew how he prized his reputation. What parents would trust him with their impressionable teenagers, knowing he might turn senselessly violent? What property management company would risk a lawsuit by hiring him? Yes, that would teach Mr. Quentin Tate.

Unfortunately, it would not be without repercussions for Angela. Any story about an "assault" would naturally include all the gory details. And they were simply too humiliating. Could she ever face down a class of seventh graders as they giggled about her spanking? She could already imagine the kind of chalkboard graffiti she would be subjected to. The professional distance that Quentin touted was even more important in a classroom than on the swimming pool deck.

No, she wouldn't charge him publicly. But there was no reason for him to know that. "I'm still thinking about it. But I know it would end up being your word against mine."

"I wouldn't dispute your version of events. I'm sure you'd be very fair."

"Are you trying to talk me *into* having you arrested?"

"No," he answered with a rueful smile that charmed. "To be honest, I'd be enormously relieved if we could put this all behind us. But that's not completely in my control. I goofed up. I apologized. The next move is yours." She scowled at him. "You can accept my apology, you can tell me what else I can do to put things right, or you can try to get even. Your first instinct was probably to get back at me and that's understandable. But from what I know of you, I don't think retribution is exactly your style once you've calmed down."

Retribution. Like by having him arrested. "I'm not looking for retribution. I would like to understand *why*—what on earth made you think that was a reasonable way to treat me—and I'd like a promise that you'll never do it again." That seemed a very generous offer compared to some of the things that had gone through her mind in the past six hours.

"Well, I can offer you a conditional promise: I will never spank you over anything related to work. And I will never spank you *at* work. Ever again. You have my word on it."

Her forehead furrowed as she puzzled through the odd provisos: it was not that he would not spank her again; only that he wouldn't spank her at work or over work-related things. Whatever that meant.

"So I should live in fear you might show up at my apartment for a little Saturday-morning beating?" She tried to say it lightly, but the whole

conversation was just too weird. "Look, we've got kids coming back. I still have things to do, and you... well," she shoed him toward the bathhouse, "you can probably find something to do." She gave him a wide berth and moved back to the lounges.

He followed reluctantly, wondering how many times he could alienate her in one day. Without a word he began dropping the elevated foot sections on the lounges she had just lined up. She shot him a quick, surprised glance but didn't speak. They continued to work together, silent save for the slap and scrape of aluminum, moving around the perimeter of the pool.

As they approached the shallow end, he finally said, "I want you to know that I'm not usually so clumsy about this. Usually, when I'm attracted to a woman, I can just say that, act on that. It's more complicated because you work for me."

"Attracted?"

"I'd intended to wait till the end of the summer to... umm... suggest a change in our relationship."

"A little late for that," she muttered.

"I was hoping it would be a positive change. But I seem to have done this all out of order."

"There's an order to this?" she asked half-amused.

"Jeez, you can make me feel like a bumbling kid." He tossed a look at the bathhouse, unsure whether he wanted an interruption or was trying to forestall one. "Here's the thing: I like you. More than like you. I'm very... attracted to you. I'd like a chance to explore that away from all this." His hand took in the pool, the guards beginning to emerge from the bathhouse, the closet-sized office where things had shifted so dramatically earlier that

day. "I realize that might put you in an awkward position."

"Not as awkward as my position was earlier today," she said pointedly and had the pleasure of seeing him flush.

"I've already apologized for that."

"But not explained it."

"As I've said, I'm not sure I *can* explain it. I misread the situation. It looked like you were... inviting his attentions," he said so stiffly she wanted to laugh. "It made me jealous, which I've no right to be at this stage of our relationship. But I was. And I wanted to impress on you the importance of... of behaving with more discretion. I guess I wasn't fully in control of my emotions." Geez, why was it the kids were always underfoot until he could really use them as an excuse?

"Just so I've got this straight: it's not really the spanking you're apologizing for. It's just that it was premature at this 'stage of our relationship.' Is that right?" Enjoying his discomfort more than she should have, she suppressed the smile. "Plead the Fifth," she suggested in a stage whisper, and watched the flush creep further up his neck.

"Okay, I'm not trying to torture you. Or not much, anyway. To be honest, I was attracted to you, too. And realized that working together complicated things."

Only one part of that statement seemed compelling. "'Was'?"

"Am. And maybe I wasn't fully in control of my emotions when I slapped you earlier. So I'll apologize for that as well."

An off-key rendition of *Food, Glorious Food* echoed off cinderblock, announcing the arrival of sandwiches and pizza in the office. "It's forgiven."

"Friends?" he offered again.

"Friends," she agreed, taking his hand.

"Friends enough that you can continue to work here for the rest of the summer?"

"Sure." *And make my car payment*, she added silently.

"Friends enough that you'll go out with me once the season's over?"

"Is that what friends do?" Her teasing grin warmed him.

Anything he might have said was drown out by the air horn that sounded an instant before Kevin Turnhower popped his head around the corner. "Yo! Dude! The food's here."

"Yo, dude, thanks for telling us." As he knew it would, the sarcasm completely missed its mark, but they followed him back to the office.

"T minus thirty," Angela said, snatching a potato chip from a communal bag. "Everybody know the plan of attack? Any questions?" She had already gone through her tick-list and reviewed assignments and schedules before turning over the floor to Quentin, who gave them a low-key but serious charge about showing responsibility and maturity. And if a few eyes had rolled, he could ignore that.

"I have a suggestion." It was Quentin doing the suggesting, so much of the chatter died away. "I think it might be a good idea to have an all-staff meeting after the program ends. How about twelve-thirty?"

Angela picked up on the disinterested reaction from the rest of the guards—impatient sighs, shuffling feet, and eyes all over the room—and took it upon herself to try to discourage him. "I don't think it's really necessary, Quentin. This has been pretty well planned out." She gestured to the poster board schedules that she hoped would choreograph a fun, exciting night. "And if something goes wrong, we're going to have to handle it on the fly. We can't wait until after midnight. Suppose we just leave it until after breakfast tomorrow morning?" Breakfast itself was going to be a major undertaking: pancakes for 120. With any luck, the last of the kids would be gone by eight o'clock—giving them a luxurious three hours before the pool opened again.

"I'd really rather do it before then, if you don't mind," he said mildly. "That way, we can review what's gone well and make any changes needed before morning."

It ruffled her feathers slightly to have to back down, but on one level she could admit that it really was a minor thing. And, besides, he was the boss. Still it took TJ saying, "Hey, I think that's a great idea" to prod her into speaking.

"Sure," Angela agreed. "What shall it be? Twelve-thirty? Or one a.m.?"

"Whatever you think," Quentin smiled, suddenly affable.

She thought it was completely unnecessary and showed a lack of trust in her leadership, but it clearly wasn't the time for that discussion. She climbed up on the counter to ink in the final change on the master schedule: 1:00—Staff Meeting—Pool Office.

She forced a smile. "Okay, everything's lined up. We've got a little less than a half-hour before the ravenous hordes descend. Anybody want to go swimming?" She had slipped away earlier to check for visual damage to her bottom. There was none. Still, she was oddly nervous shedding the warm-up pants she had worn all day.

It was Quentin's comment about her "skimpy" swimsuit that was to blame, she decided. Just as it was his comments that gave her that funny feeling in her stomach when she had looked in the mirror, inspecting her bottom. It was an unexpected excitement that left her off-balance, but not unpleasantly so now that she and Quentin had come to terms—or at least seemed to, even if she wasn't quite sure what those terms were. His eyes on her had her blushing and tugging the material as though it might be coaxed to cover more skin.

From the door of the office, Quentin watched with a smile as she took a final step and sliced through the water in a graceful shallow dive.

"She's going to be surprised, isn't she, Quentin?" TJ offered with a grin of his own.

"Yeah, she is. Hey, TJ, go up in the tower for me, would you? I think I'm going to go for a swim too."

The night couldn't have gone better, Quentin decided at about eleven-thirty—at least given that he had to spend the night in a pseudo-parental role with 110 minors.

Angela had designed a schedule that seemed to suit nearly everyone. She had a real talent for luring the older kids into activities he would have

thought they would scorn as juvenile. But somehow she could co-opt just the right kids and have them draw the others into it. For the first two hours, that had meant all the kids, from six to seventeen, had shared or parallel activities. While a treasure hunt had the younger ones scavenging nickels and pennies from the bottom of the pool, the older kids had, with equal enthusiasm, scrabbled in the diving well for tokens that would win them a chance to chose the next CD or have a post-midnight swim. Moving between the volleyball and basketball courts, he was pleased to see nothing beyond normal youthful exuberance. If the music was a little loud and not quite what he would prefer, it was still a hit with the kids and he could tolerate it for another half-hour.

He weaved among the lounges—now completely rearranged after the evening's straightening—and made his way down to Angela, who had finally taken a minute to step back and breathe. "You did a great job."

"It's going pretty well, isn't it?" She was glowing, but there was an unusual shyness about her.

"Very well."

"I wasn't sure it would, you know, and I was afraid I'd let you down."

"Well, you certainly haven't done that. I'm really impressed. Both with the planning you did and the way you pulled it off. Remind me to tell you the story of the swimming-pool sleepover I went to when I was ten. It'll make you feel even better."

She tugged on his T-shirt as he tried to move away. "Oh, no, you can't just say something like that and leave. What happened?"

"Later," he smiled. And it would ensure that she would think about him any number of times between now and "later."

At eleven-fifty-five, some comedian put Brahm's Lullaby on the sound system. It elicited groans of recognition but was a nice warning that the end was near. Quentin wondered if there was also a recording of reveille to play in the morning. He moved to the master power panel to shut off the overhead lights and was unsurprised to find Angela already there, one eye on her watch, waiting for the magic hour. "Caught!" she grinned up at him.

"It's almost like you want this night to end," he teased. "You know we've got at least four hours left, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know. It's just... it's just been a long day."

He wanted to cuddle her to his chest, soothe away the troubles, most of which he had caused. Instead, he reached across to throw the double-switches labeled "parking lot," and the string of globed fixtures dimmed one at a time. The hundred yards between the pool fence and the trees that separated Lexington from the neighborhood became an inky wasteland. It was eerie to watch, as they were among the lights usually left on for security through the night.

"You ought to give some more thought to sleeping in shifts. I'd be glad to take the first one," he offered. "Or you know what?" He made a very

obvious effort to look furtively around. "You could just go home. Get a real night's sleep in a real bed. You'd feel much better in the morning. If you were back by breakfast, no one would know. You could even," he added conspiratorially, "bring back coffee."

"I could," she agreed with a smile and began to flip, one by one, the light switches that would drive most of the revelers to their sleeping bags. "But I'm not really sure that would be in the spirit of the lock-in." The lights on the volleyball and basketball courts winked off.

"True, but you've been working since—what?—ten a.m." The snack bar lights went off, and the picnic area slipped into shadows. "That's a really long day."

"Afraid of the overtime, boss?" she teased. The baby pool went dark.

"No, I just want to be sure you're not overdoing." The darkness drove some to their sleeping bags, but others moved, moth-like, to the bathhouse or to stand around and look longingly at the pool, which shimmered eerily. The underwater lights would be left on through the night to discourage and detect illicit swimming—the one infraction guaranteed to prompt a middle-of-the-night phone call home to parents.

"There's still that staff meeting in an hour. I don't know whose idea *that* was." She was needling him, but he took it with a smile.

"I'm sure we can reschedule that for later tomorrow. Do what's best for you." It was said with such sincerity that she softened.

"It's okay. I'm still hopped on adrenaline a bit, I think. I'll see it through till morning, then go home

and crash. I rescheduled my Sunday lessons, so I don't have to be back until Monday morning."

"Good thinking. So, shall we make our first pass?" Her wide-eyed reaction had him replaying that line and realizing how it had sounded. He backtracked quickly. "I meant, shall we make the first circuit? See the kids are getting bedded down. You know, like be the visible, responsible adults." *Stop*, he told himself, *you're babbling*.

"I kind of liked the first take on that," she said with a smile. *God, he's cute when he's flustered*, she thought.

"So tell me the story of your swim team sleepover," she said eventually. They had made more than one circle around the pool, but the warnings and reprimands dropped off sharply as the kids settled into the final phase of the night: small knots of kids playing cards or talking, some managing to sleep once it became clear that the rowdiness was over.

"Well, it wasn't just the swim team. It was a sort of Labor Day tradition. There was a big end-of-season party and anyone who wanted to could stay the night and help close down the pool for the season afterwards. Everything from scrubbing and stacking the furniture to emptying refrigerators. That year the highlight of the evening was a big bonfire with hot dogs and marshmallows. And for some reason they decided to make it on the deck—probably so they wouldn't ruin the grass."

"Well, you know how pool mangers can get about grass," she said dryly. The comment went right over his head.

"I guess. It's just ironic, considering."

"Considering what?"

"Considering what happens when you build a fire on concrete."

"It would leave it all blackened, wouldn't it? The carbon residue alone would scar the deck, right?"

He chuckled. "I have no idea. After the explosion, carbon on the deck was the least of our worries."

"Explosion?"

"Oh, yeah. The real reason you don't want to build a fire on concrete is that there's a lot of water and air trapped in concrete. You put a heat source to it—like, say, a fire—that's big enough and hot enough, and that water and air will expand. In this case it expanded straight up about fifteen feet in the air with the *boom* of a cannon."

"You're kidding!"

"I wish I were. Luckily no one was hurt. Not even any real damage, except to the deck. It put a quick end to the tradition of overnights at the pool, though. There is a positive side, of course. It set the bar pretty low, for me. No matter how lousy a day I've had, I can still console myself: At least I haven't blown a hole in the deck. Yet."

She could hear the smile in his voice and gave him a playful shove. "So that's why you didn't want to tell me the story earlier, isn't it? You were waiting to see if I blew a hole in the deck?" She *hmped* a little, self-satisfied *hmp* and gestured dramatically toward the deck. "All in one piece, I'll have you note."

"Yeah, well, it's early yet."

As she struggled, unsuccessfully, for a comeback, Quentin diverted her attention to the

small group of kids milling about the diving board and dipping their toes experimentally into the water. "If I'm not mistaken, those are your lucky winners. Will you do the honors of supervising? If you'll take the tower, I have a few things to take care of in the office. By the time they're back out of the water, it'll be just about one. I'll round up the staff, and we'll be ready whenever you're done, okay?" He gave her a quick, unexpected kiss that left her fluttery as she watched him stride off to the office.

She had the next fifteen minutes to puzzle over it all. Steady, normal Quentin was being anything but steady and normal. She liked the idea that she could throw him off his stride but didn't like that he could do the same to her. It was just too much, too suddenly. Not too quickly, of course, just too suddenly. They'd known each other for a couple of months now, worked side-by-side on almost a daily basis, but somehow, in one day, it had all turned topsy-turvy. From angry outburst and astonishing spanking to friendly conversation and sweet kiss, he had her completely unsettled. If she'd thought that was his objective, she'd have been irritated, but he seemed too guileless for that. It was more that he had blundered into something blindly and was trying his utmost not to make the situation worse. Just as she was.

Now that the financial worries of losing her job were put away, she could almost acknowledge that she had been just as concerned about losing his friendship. As angry as she'd been, she'd been more hurt. It was better to know, she told herself as the kids climbed out of the pool and she climbed down from the guard chair, that he at least shared

some of her feelings. They'd have to work out the rest of it, though.

Not that there was ever any time. Or at least any time that they were not surrounded by adolescents of various sizes. Already, just on their few slow circuits of the pool grounds, she'd heard "Oooh, Quentin and Angela" said in the interested tone that suggested the next line might be about sitting in a tree k-i-s-s-i-n-g. A glare silenced the ten-year-old but made Angela brutally aware that whatever had changed was clearly apparent. And she wasn't at all sure how she felt about that.

Best to get this blasted staff meeting over with, she decided with a cross look at the clock. Staff meetings at one a.m. What was the man thinking!

The answer to that was apparent the moment she stepped into the office and was met with a barrage of sound that could charitably be called singing. The tune, such as it was, could be nothing but *Happy Birthday*, but the words, overlapping and garbled, were hard to make out. Still, there was no mistaking the excited faces that popped out from everywhere, and standing at the front counter was a grinning Quentin, holding an oddly lopsided cake.

When the "song" ended, over a space of several seconds, she found herself grinning awkwardly back at Quentin, uncomfortable with all the attention. He seemed so pleased with himself. And they'd both already had such a tumultuous day. Still...

"Quentin," she said into the expectant silence, "it's not my birthday."

"Well, of course not!" he agreed and the assembled staff laughed. "It's your half-birthday."

"Half-birthday? What's a half-birthday?" He threw an arm around her shoulder and turned her back to the staff all of whom seemed to be grinning idiotically, which made Angela feel even more foolish. "My birthday's in January," she ended feebly. It was strangely reassuring to still have Quentin's arm around her.

"Right!" he agreed, wholeheartedly. "January twenty-second. And today is July twenty-second. So you're twenty-three-and-a-half today."

"Are you out of your mind?" It seemed like a reasonable question.

"Hey, you're the one who said she'd always wanted to have a summer birthday."

That shut her up for a few seconds. She *had* said that. They had been cleaning the pool together one quiet morning and she mentioned that as a child she had longed for a swim mask, snorkel, and fins set. Such extravagances were not within her allowance, and the only gift-giving occasions her parents recognized—Christmas and birthday—were winter holidays. Quentin had been baffled by her equable acceptance. So many kids were inundated with useless, unvalued *stuff*, that it seemed harsh that Angela should have been forced to do without. His own parents, though not extravagant, made exceptions for anything they deemed "educational." They might not buy the Garbage Pail Kids trading cards he wanted, but a book or a Rubik's Cube would have been automatic, as would snorkeling gear. She had laughed at the time and assured him there were no scars; if anything, such deprivations made her more determined to work for what she got.

But the conversation had stayed with him. Her smile moved from awkward to flattered. "So, a half-birthday," she said on a laugh.

"The song didn't work out too well," he pointed out with mock reproof to the assembled teens, "but I think the rest will go okay."

It did. Twenty minutes later, surrounded by torn bits of paper, her accumulated loot, and a dozen cake-eating kids, she couldn't have been more touched. Plastic squirt guns, water balloons, a fly swatter, a beach ball, soap bubbles, and a dolphin raft that squeaked when she squeezed his nose were strewn across the office. The swim mask and snorkel were on her head, the flippers on her feet. And Quentin Tate was watching her with undisguised delight from across the room.

"So I guess there was never really a staff meeting, hmm?" she asked tugging off the flippers.

"Here's the staff. We met. Staff meeting."

"We're not going to critique the schedule, though? Plan for the morning?"

He crouched, his brow suddenly worried, in front of her. "Is there a problem? Is there something you need help with? I thought you had that all settled." Behind them, a curiously intense game of volleyball had started up, using a balloon "ball" across the front counter "net." She moved the dolphin to safety. *Eep!*

"No, there's no problem. I was just braced for—" Suddenly shy, she busied herself tidying up. "This was really thoughtful, Quentin. Just the thing to take the edge off a really long day. I appreciate it. I want you to know that."

"Yeah, sure, no problem." But still he watched her. "I'm going to do another walk through the

grounds. Want to come?" He didn't really need her there, she knew. It hardly took two people to quell the little problems they'd seen that night. And if they were both out there at the same time, it made sense that they should each work different parts of the grounds. There was no sense in going together.

"Sure."

Within minutes, Quentin broke up one poker game being played in the reflected light from the baby pool, not because of the gambling but because the stakes—Hershey's miniatures—were not allowed except on the grassy area. The kids grumbled but drifted off in search of flashlights.

"Boy, you're strict," Angela offered in an undertone.

"I don't want to be scrubbing chocolate off the deck tomorrow morning before breakfast. And I sure don't want to be cleaning it out of the pool."

"At ease, boss. I was just kidding."

"Yeah, I know." His face was lost in the shadows as soon as they left the baby pool enclosure. Between the moon and the shimmering reflections that danced across the deck and walls, there was enough light to avoid tripping over sleeping bodies, but not quite enough to read his features easily. As they had on previous circuits, they strolled the perimeter, staying close to the fence line to avoid disturbing those who managed to sleep—about a third by now, Angela estimated—and reduce interruptions from those awake and bored. She ran a bared toe along the just-cut grass.

"I've never used a lawn mower," she said suddenly.

"You what?"

"I've never used a lawn mower."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't mow grass. I don't know how. I've never needed to. When you told me to today, I called TJ and asked him to come in and do it before you got back. I didn't want you to know, and I figured I could get a book or an instruction manual before the next time you asked, but I didn't have time to learn today and I didn't want to cut off my foot before the sleepover and mess up the whole night." She stopped the babbling with an effort. "Say something." They walked another dozen paces.

"You might have told me this morning. I could have juggled the schedule or something." Or stayed to give her a personal tutorial. Then, almost under his breath: "How is it possible?"

She pushed roughly at his shoulder. "It just *is*, that's all. Not everybody can do everything, you know." The confession was hard enough without being made to feel foolish for having made it. Her chin went up defensively. He could see that much in the semi-darkness, and if he couldn't see the tears that threatened, he could hear them. They continued to walk slowly along the fence line, silent for a minute.

"I know what it's like, you know."

"What what's like?"

"When people assume you know everything, that you know what to do all the time. It seems like it should be flattering, but really it's dreadful." He snapped off a branch that had snuck through the fence ready to scratch the unwary; he hurled it end-over-end back over the fence in a rare show of

agitation. "Because no matter how well you do things, it's never enough. If you do it right, that's just expected. If you goof up, everyone is amazed. That doesn't leave a lot of room for success."

"You do know." He didn't respond to that except to resume their slow circuit of the pool grounds. "Well, at least neither one of us blew up the deck," she pointed out.

He chuckled. "There you go. It's been a good day, then." They stood for a moment in the narrow passage behind the diving boards, watching each other in the reflected light of the diving well.

"May I?" he asked with a nod to her hand.

She let an exasperated raspberry escape before grabbing his hand. "I think we've pretty well established that I'm not going to sue you for sexual harassment. If that little macho display this afternoon didn't do it, holding my hand isn't going to."

"Then how about this?" The kiss, sudden, bold, and thorough, stole her breath.

"No," she said when she could. "I don't think that will either."

"Good. I wanted to do that earlier. Almost as much as I wanted to spank you."

"Okay, I've got to ask: why spanking? Why would you want to spank me?"

"Oh, hell, I don't know. I just know the urge was very strong. Still is, to be honest," he grumbled. "And if you ever slap me again—" The threat hung unfinished, but he added, with a rueful smile, "but I told you: not about work. I meant that." By then, they were behind a building, well shielded from view.

"I clocked out at one. It just didn't seem right to get paid to go to my own party." Then she slapped him—so gently it might have been called a caress if it hadn't been for the devilish glint in her eyes. "Put it on my tab."

