

Smooth Landings

**By
Kathryn Jay**

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Chapter One

Ty could hear her for several minutes before he could see her.

He was sitting in the small classroom waiting for pre-flight instruction for his first flight – one might say "maiden flight" but not after looking at Ty – on a hang glider. It was something he had longed to do for years, and he was anxious to get going. The lesson was set to start at 10:00, but he and his reluctant accomplice, Kent, had been at the school's office a half-hour early. Ty didn't intend to miss a minute of his adventure. After signing the release forms, he waited impatiently as the small classroom began to fill. There were to be no more than 15 in the novice session so they could be guaranteed at least five flights each before the day was out. A quick count confirmed that there were more than a dozen people in the room. What was the delay?

Kent's voice, amused and lazy, interrupted his irritation. "Chill out, Ty. It's not even 10:00 yet. Give 'em a break." Ty's response was to shove his left wrist in front of Kent's face. The digital readout was 10:02. Kent snickered. "I stand corrected. I was using their clock." He gestured to the corner where an old clock, perhaps the sole surviving timepiece from a 1950s school building, hung. Ty wondered whether it was even reset for daylight savings time or if they just let it even out six months later. The minute hand made a shuddering move forward as the second hand swept by the twelve. It looked to be about six or seven minutes before ten. He sighed heavily.

In a deliberate effort to subdue – or at least hide – his impatience, Ty resettled himself in the too-small desk against the back wall. Out in the lobby, he could still hear the woman's voice. She was obviously complaining about something, but she was not irate. In fact, she seemed calmly puzzled at the reaction she was getting.

"But that's absurd," she said. "Nobody could be expected to sign a release like that. I never would have registered her for the lesson if I'd known what the release was like." There were low murmurs from the kid on the other side of the counter, but Ty couldn't tell whether they were conciliatory or not.

The woman continued, "You make a big deal about the reservations being non-refundable, but you locked me into a contract I hadn't even seen."

"It's not a contract, ma'am; it's just a release," answered the unfortunate clerk. If it was the same kid that had checked Ty in, he was probably no more than 17 or 18 and looked like he'd never been off the dunes except maybe to go surfing. Shoes were probably a winter necessity, but it was April now, and they were already history. The poor kid was no match for the woman on the other side of the counter.

"It *is* a contract," she insisted, "and I'm not happy with it. Look, here, why don't we just cross out this paragraph? Then we can both sign here and we'll be ready for class."

A different voice entered the conversation, an older, more confident one. "What seems to be the problem? I'm the owner of the school. Maybe I can help."

The woman patiently began again. "Well, I signed my daughter up for your introductory class. I paid for it in town, but now this young man says she can't fly unless I sign this release. And it's absurd. I don't think I've ever seen one that abrogates so much responsibility. So I suggested that we remove this one section here, but I gather he doesn't have the authority. But you do, right?"

He dodged the question. "It's just a standard release. It's what our lawyers say we need."

"Yes, I'm sure they do, but there's nothing *standard* about it."

He tried to distract her by telling her that they'd had virtually no accidents and that all the instructors were experienced, certified teachers with

a minimum of 4 years teaching experience. He repeated lines Ty recognized from the brochure and from the beginning of the release about hang gliding being an inherently dangerous sport but how safety conscious they were in instruction. He ended by reminding her that they could not be held responsible if someone failed to follow safety precautions. Ty could imagine him then sliding the release back to her for her signature.

She was undeterred. "Oh, I understand that. And if my daughter does something foolish, I'm willing to take the blame for that. But it says here that you are not responsible even if you don't *teach* her the right thing to do."

"Oh, no. Our safety orientation is very good. In fact you're welcome to stay for that, for the whole day if you want. You'll see: Safety is our number one goal." The guy seemed to think that settled it. Ty smiled. He could already predict that it wouldn't.

"Right. I hear what you're *saying*, but the *release* says that I have no recourse even if you are negligent in your instruction."

In the classroom, several heads came up in surprise, and Ty was aware that he was not the only one following the argument in the lobby. To his right, Kent was unfolding his salmon-colored copy of the release they had all signed and was studying it carefully.

The woman in the lobby continued. "So what I'm suggesting is that we line through that paragraph, and then my daughter can take the class. How would that be?"

To his right, Kent muttered, "God, she's right. Did you read this?" No, neither one had read it. It was two pages of small print and each had simply signed at the bottom. Throughout the room, there were furrowed brows and quiet exchanges of concern.

Back in the lobby, the owner said, "No, I'm sorry. We're not allowed to do that. Insurance requirements, you know."

"Yes," she returned. "I'm sure your insurance company prefers it this way, but I don't understand how you can take reservations – *nonrefundable* reservations – and then drop this kind of document on me minutes before class is supposed to start." Actually, Ty thought, checking his watch, it was now nearly 10 minutes *after* class was supposed to start, but she was right. Allowing for time to read the release, she had probably been there 20 or 30 minutes. And she was right about their repeated reminders that the cost was transferable but non-refundable. He had read it on the website and been reminded when he phoned in his confirmation, and it was prominent on the confirmation he received in the mail and on signs in the lobby.

So he was surprised by the next words from the owner. "I will refund your money."

Ty heard the first note of uncertainty in the woman's voice. "Well, my daughter really wants to fly."

There was silence. The entire classroom was following the conversation again. After a long pause, the woman said, with renewed conviction, "You know, I bet a good lawyer would be able to shoot that release full of holes. Fine. I'll sign it. There. Okay? And I will take you up on your offer to sit in. That's the classroom, right?"

As her voice came closer, 15 heads swung around to focus on the TV monitor in the front of the room. It was off.

The owner followed the woman into the classroom, then passed her and proceeded to the front where he fiddled with the VCR. Ty stood, indicating that the woman should take his seat. She smiled and shook her head. "No, I'm really not part of the class. You go ahead."

He chuckled and said, "You'd be doing me a favor. I haven't sat in one of those desks since junior high, and they haven't improved any. Too small then and too small now."

She assessed him as though trying to decide if he was being noble or honest. He was, in fact, a big man. Tall and solidly built, with a stance that somehow seemed aggressive even though he was supposedly relaxed. She imagined that he was a man used to getting his way. And this seemed like such a little thing. "Thank you," she said softly as she slid into the desk. He was right about the size too. Though easily five inches shorter than the desk's most recent occupant, she was not short. In flats, which is almost exclusively what she wore, she was still just over five-foot-seven. Her knees bumped against the bottom of the ancient desktop.

Up front, looking a little more harried than he did in the photos on the website, the owner began his introduction. He laid out the schedule for the day: watching the orientation video, fitting gear, hiking to the dunes, and taking turns for a series of flights. Each time he mentioned a safety point, he seemed to look directly at the woman sitting in the back of the room, as if checking that she was listening. Ty found himself increasingly annoyed with the twerp, but the woman sat quietly, apparently unruffled by the attention. Maybe she was used to the patronizing attitude; maybe she got it a lot.

She had been inordinately cool during her entire exchange in the lobby, never raising her voice or becoming shrill. She was *assertive*, that was the word. Not in the way it had come to be used to excuse rudeness, but in its intended meaning: she was clearly expressing her convictions and unwilling to be put off. She acted as though, if they simply understood what she was saying, they would naturally agree with her. Ty's view was much more cynical. Experience was a cruel teacher.

The room was darkened for the orientation video, and Ty leaned against the wall, half-watching the video and half-watching the young woman. Well, she was younger than he was, anyway. At 40, he realized he had technically crossed into middle

age, but it hadn't quite sunk in yet, and he thought of himself as young. She probably wasn't more than 35 or so. Pretty too. Dark hair in short curls that had already been scrambled by the wind of the Outer Banks. As the tape droned on about the importance of listening to the instructors, Ty's eyes tried to pick out the daughter who was going to fly. It wasn't hard. Of the 14 other students most were male, and several others were too old. There were only three real contenders and he bet on the brunette sitting in the front and paying rapt attention to the video. She must already have been in the classroom when her mother was arguing in the lobby, he realized. That certainly seemed presumptuous. Was it possible she was so spoiled that she knew her mother would eventually give in? He snorted derisively.

"Is there something wrong?" came the soft voice, startling him. He looked around in sudden surprise and realized the small room was full of activity. The lights were back on and people were collecting bags and shuffling toward the door.

He looked away from the concerned brunette and tried to find Kent. What was going on? Kent's smug amusement made it clear he'd been caught out, but he helpfully provided Ty the clue he obviously needed. "Ready to get fitted for harnesses, Ty?"

"Yeah, sure, be right there." He flashed a quick smile at the brunette still in the desk. "Are you going up to the dunes?" he asked pleasantly. She appeared to give it a moment's consideration before she nodded her assent. "Good," he said, with another smile.

As they waited their turns outside an equipment room, Kent nudged his buddy. "What was with you in there? You seemed to kind of zone out. Is this seeming a little less fun than before? Because," he

grinned slyly, "I'm willing to back out if you are. It's not too late to go swimming."

"It's too cold for swimming," Ty answered absently. It was the reality of April in North Carolina. The sun reflecting off the vast sand dunes gave a false sense of warm weather, but it was still early spring. The water was probably close to 50 degrees. And they hadn't come all the way from Boston to freeze in the Atlantic.

Kent was undeterred. "Then we could get buy a couple of those big box kites and go learn to fly them. If you're having reservations about hang gliding, that is."

It was no secret that Kent had his own reservations. Ty had goaded him into the trip, with subtle suggestions that anyone who would be scared to glide 10 to 15 feet off the ground (the brochure's limit for novice flyers' class) could not have been as wild as Kent had claimed to be in his youth. He had faltered at that, but the deciding factor was Ty's unusually candid statement that hang gliding was how he wanted to spend his fortieth birthday and he really wanted Kent along with him. Kent agreed. "Besides," Ty had told him with mock gravity, "If something happens, I want *you* to bring the body home." Somehow that had not been the reassurance Kent needed to hear.

So he would have been perfectly willing to leave the harnesses on their hooks in the equipment room and adjourn to the nearest bar to celebrate Ty's birthday in a more conventional manner. No such luck.

"Nope, not having any reservations at all. I was just thinking about . . . other stuff. Steel yourself, young Kent. You are going hang gliding." He shoved him to the doorway where Kent could take his turn slipping into the harness. Somehow the instructor sorted out the confusing tangle of nylon straps and buckles, identifying what he claimed were leg-holes, and Kent dutifully stepped into the indicated openings. *Fwip, whoosh, clamp*, and the

whole thing was buckled on him. Seconds later he was standing outside the small flying school building as Ty was strapped into his own harness. Kent found himself tugging at the straps in an effort to settle things more comfortably; it seemed strangely confining for something with so much open space. He couldn't see the ring on the back of his own harness where the glider would snap on, but as the group of students grew on the porch, he could see plainly what the safety film had shown. The harness looked something like a life vest, and the nylon straps that secured it met in the back where a D-ring awaited the attachment of the clip that would serve as a safety anchor. The helmet he held in his hand did not seem reassuring.

A few minutes later, the whole ensemble was trudging across the sands to a dune that, to Kent's untrained eye, looked exactly like every other pile of sand they had seen since arriving in North Carolina. Leading the group were the three instructors toting collapsed hang gliders. Kent couldn't bring himself to call them "kites" which conjured up images of giggling children and rag-and-string tails, but he had come to understand that along the Outer Banks the word "kite" had much more import than it did in New England. Back home, kites were something children played with for a few weeks in March. He could remember his own frustrated efforts to get a balky kite to launch, for a brief, uncertain flight, until eventually it would tangle, Charlie-Brown-like, in a tree.

Along the Outer Banks, though, the humble kite was held in a kind of reverence. The area, which had once drawn the Wright Brothers for their initial testing of a glider-plane, boasted predictable winds, wide open spaces, and the relative softness of sand for smooth landings. It was a Mecca for hang gliders. But it wasn't just the big kites for gliding. Throughout the dunes that stretched as far along the coast as he could see, there were hundreds of people flying kites on strings.

As they continued to trudge across the dunes, they saw everything from kites being assembled on site from nothing more than newspaper, string, and tape to elaborate nylon dragons stretching over 30 feet in length bobbing effortlessly in the air. There was none of the futile running to keep the kites aloft that he remembered from childhood. In fact, oddly, most of the kite flyers here were adults – young, middle-aged, and senior citizens – but all with the same expression of relaxed enchantment as they studied their wind-borne kites. One guy had a fanciful shark kite that had multiple strings he was playing expertly to force the shark into repeated dives at the sand only to bring it back up each time with a twist of his wrist to arc gracefully into the sky again. No, this was definitely not kite-flying as he knew it.

As they climbed yet another dune, still apparently short of their destination, Kent tried to find Ty to share his observation, but Ty was well ahead, just trailing the instructors. That didn't surprise Kent. He had lost enough games of racquetball to know Ty was in better physical condition. What surprised him was that even as Ty struggled up the side of the dune, he seemed to be deep in conversation with the woman they had overheard arguing contracts with the school's owner.

Chapter Two

Ty had fallen in step with the tall brunette almost as soon as they left the boardwalk behind the school. Without conscious thought, he noted her long stride. She was used to physical activity; there would be no whining about the climb from her, he knew instantly.

"Hi, I'm Ty Reynolds," he put in after only a few steps. No point in beating around the bush. It was no coincidence that they were walking together. Might as well let her know that, move things along.

She offered her hand without slowing the pace. "Susan Markham," she returned. Her hand was soft and warm, and he relinquished it only because propriety demanded that he do so. To cover his reluctance, he flashed a smile and, though she had no idea what a rare treat that was, she was charmed somewhat.

He was an interesting-looking man. *Handsome* was not the first word that came to mind, though in a sense he was handsome. Tall and rock-solid, his body showed evidence of hard use, though whether in a gym or on the job, she wasn't sure. But it wasn't his body that captured her anyway. It was his face. It had a lot of character, she thought, swiveling her head around to the dune they were about to climb. Character. She laughed at herself. She had always thought that was used as a euphemism for wrinkles. And, in fact, maybe that was what was behind her instant assessment. He did have a wrinkled, weather-worn face. There were laugh lines around his eyes, she had seen in her brief inspection, but the lines across his forehead suggested that he scowled a lot more than he smiled. But the whole effect was of a man who had weathered a lot of storms. Survival was character-building. His face had character, not just wrinkles. She smiled at the thought.

"I was impressed with the way you handled the fellow at the school," he said, interrupting her clinical assessment.

"Yeah, well, I don't know how much 'handling' went on. I *did* sign the release, and they didn't make the changes," she said ruefully, shaking her head.

"Yeah, but he offered you a refund. I get the impression that's almost unprecedented." He ducked to get a better look at her expression and was pleased when she smiled at him, a sort of impish delight crossing her face.

"You're right. He did. And if it had been just me, I'd have taken him up on it. But we came all the way down here just for this. I'm not sure I could disappoint Leslie like that just to make a point." She nodded to her daughter who was deep into an interrogation of one of the instructors hauling a kite. He had been right. It was the brunette from the front row, an intense young lady of about 15 or 16. "Over the years I've pulled her out of line at fast-food restaurants, yanked her out of dance class – shoot, once we even left an amusement park during one of my it's-the-principle-of-the-thing fits – but I don't think even I could have been cruel enough to pull her out of this class. She's been looking forward to it forever."

His respect for Susan, already high, rose several notches. And Leslie, who he had assumed was spoiled, had probably been sitting there desperately hoping that she would be able to remain. Poor kid. And lucky kid.

"All the way down here? Where's home?"

"Baltimore. Just outside Baltimore actually. You're from Boston?"

"How could you tell?" he joked. "I didn't say anything about pahking my cah in Hahvahd yahd."

She laughed. "No, but you definitely have that Kennedy twang. I keep waiting for you to ask me what I can do for my country."

"Twang?" His hand went to his chest as though he were mortally wounded. "I don't have a twang. It's the rest of the country that talks with a flat, unimaginative, blandness."

It was an easy, pleasant exchange, and they continued to chat as they followed the instructors around and across several dunes, aiming for some unmarked destination. During the climb up the steep side of what turned out to be the final dune, both Ty and Susan were on hands and knees, scrabbling in the sand. The ground, tan, marbled with streaks of blacker sand, would look surprisingly solid, but as soon as they put weight on it, the ground would fall away, behaving unexpectedly like. . . well, like sand. The result was that the final 40 or 50 feet of the climb seemed much longer. By the end, they were all winded and gritty, and Ty had to marvel that the instructors had managed the entire thing carrying the awkward and bulky kites.

Susan flaked out on the flat top of the dune, while Ty went back to see if he could spot Kent. He was a little more than halfway up – and probably swearing under his breath, Ty thought with a grin. Kent was a good sport and a great friend. Just the kind of guy to have along on a trip like this. Unless he had a woman. He left Kent to navigate the final rise on his own and returned to Susan, dropping down next to her as though he'd done it many times before.

"So how come you're not flying today?" he asked.

"It just doesn't hold quite the same allure for me that it does for Leslie. Since she was little she's dreamed of flying – daydreams and night dreams. She's always wanted to fly. A couple of years ago, she had the chance to fly a glider during a vacation in upstate New York. You know, a real glider: a plane that's towed by another plane, then released and left to fly the currents without power." He nodded. That was a goal of his as well. If the hang

gliding was as much fun as he thought it would be, gliders would be next.

"I'll have to ask her how it compares to hang gliding when we're done. That's something I've always wanted to do myself. You don't like flying?"

"It isn't that I don't like it. But I think I prefer to have a skilled pilot handling the controls. Instead of me. And I think the very things that appeal to Leslie – being at the mercy of the wind, the unpredictability of it all – those are the things I would hate about it. We're just different. She has always dreamed of being a bird. Here's her chance to try it out."

"What do you dream about?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wanted to call them back. It was an incredibly personal question to ask someone, but if she thought so, she gave no indication of it.

"It's something of a family joke," she said with a laugh. "I have the most boring dreams imaginable. I rarely remember them, and when I do, it's likely to be that I'm grocery shopping or writing a memo for work or interviewing a new manager. Normal people don't have practical dreams. I know that. But there you have me: practical to the core." There was a ruefulness to that statement that intrigued him.

"Nothing wrong with being practical," he observed.

"I guess not. Sometimes I envy Leslie's no-holds-barred enthusiasm for life, but the world needs the behind-the-scene workers too. We hold it all together so the dreamers aren't wallowing in their own dirty clothes and empty pizza boxes." He grinned in spite of himself. If he had said the same words, they would have sounded bitter. From Susan it sounded more like distant amusement. It was as though she really did have a feel for her role in things, and she could see the value in that role even when it was not the gloried one. Assertive. He'd been right.

"Ugh!" Kent dropped to the ground with a grunt, spraying sand in every direction.

"And this eloquent gentleman," Ty said, brushing grit from his lap, "is Kent Hoffman, good friend and valued colleague."

"How did I ever let you talk me into doing this?" Kent demanded from his position face down in the sand.

Instead of answering, Ty clapped him firmly on the shoulder and said, "Come on, valued colleague. They've got the flyers together. Time to go get orientated. Haul your sorry butt down to the kites."

Kent, highly aggrieved, muttered, "I just got here," but dragged himself to his feet nonetheless.

The day fell into a lazy pattern as the students alternated turns on the big kites. With Ty, Kent, and Leslie taking turns on the same blue-and-white glider, there was always someone to watch or take pictures of. Ty hadn't thought to bring a camera, but he was flattered by Susan's attention and her promise to send him copies once they were all home. The promise of that future contact was all it took to wipe his characteristic scowl off his face, and she actually got a couple of profile shots that displayed an unselfconscious smile as he felt the blue-and-white kite lift into the wind after a few steps.

It was almost the same look of rapturous joy she saw in Leslie, who gave the impression that with just a little more breeze she could soar heavenward and join the angels where she belonged. Ty's expression didn't go quite as far as angelic, but even Kent noticed as she flipped through the various shots on the digital screen. "My God," he whispered. "I don't think I've ever seen him look so . . . at peace. I guess this trip was really good for him."

They were standing well back from the launch line, where Ty was preparing to be hooked in for his

fourth flight. She looked to Ty to make sure she wouldn't miss the flight before her eyes went back to Kent. "He's not usually at peace?" she asked, not even sure what she meant by that. Or what Kent had meant.

He laughed. "No. Ty is a great guy. I've known him for years, love him like a brother, but peaceful, calm, patient – those are not words I would use to describe him. He's more of a hard-charger, take-no-prisoners kind of guy. Has a time fetish that will drive you nuts if you let it. Loyal to a fault, but very intimidating to people who don't know him well. Between his size and his personality he tends to scare people off." He paused as though considering whether to add the next observation. "But all day, he's been like a kid using his Sunday manners at Grandma's. I've been trying to figure out whether it's you that is taking the edge off him or the excitement of flying that's doing it. I'm not sure yet."

Susan stepped away to position herself to capture Ty's launch off the plateau. Because of the design of the novice trainers, they never went more than about 15 feet off the ground, but she knew from hearing the excitement of each of the new flyers that the difference between two feet *on* the ground and two feet *off* the ground was exhilarating. And most were now able to land feet-first at the end of their flights. She snapped several shots of Ty as he made his fourth and longest flight, rising five, six, seven feet off the sand.

A cheer went up from the entire class as he passed the hundred-yard marker that they had all been aiming for. It was a good day for soaring, one of the instructors had pointed out, and they had seen more seasoned pilots with their own kites soaring for minutes at a time. Leslie was already pestering the instructors about what was required for a "Hang I" rating, but she was a quick study and her own flights off the ridge were getting smoother each time. Susan snapped a couple more shots of

Leslie taking a break to re-hydrate, but then finally let her mind settle on Kent's last words: that Ty's behavior was outside his norm and she might be the cause of it.

The thought was flattering and only a little discomfiting.

Up until that moment she had really been enjoying her time with both Ty, who seemed very charming, and Kent, who had become positively garrulous after his first launch proved that he wouldn't be killed outright. Kent was clearly the more social of the two, chatting with everyone, regardless of age or sex, but she had enjoyed Ty's focused attention in the almost-two hours they'd been up on the ridge. Each time he had unbuckled the safety line, he had immediately sought her out from the bottom of his run as though making sure she had been watching. It reminded her of videos of Leslie learning to swim and ride a bike in which she stopped repeatedly to say, "Watch me, Mom, watch!" It was an excitement of learning that was rarely there beyond mid-childhood; however, it was clearly to rule this day. Leslie, Ty, Kent – virtually everyone there – seemed to be enjoying some throwback to childhood, exhibiting a giddy delight in their new skills.

She had enjoyed watching it, but the realization that Ty might be reacting specifically to *her*, not to the excitement of the day, was a new thought. She blushed. How long had it been since a man had put on his Sunday manners for her? A long time. Kent had said that Ty tended to intimidate, and she knew she was often guilty of the same thing. At work, she had seen the look of fear in a subordinate's face too many times to deny it. And socially, she knew she often came on too strong or too reserved or, well, just too...something. People did not warm to her easily. But as morning became midday, she found herself remarkably relaxed with Ty.

He dropped to her side in his now-familiar position after the hike up the hill.

"Nice flight," she said with a smile.

"Thanks" came with an answering grin.

Feeling as though she might now have a right to a little more exploring, she said, "So...Ty. Is that short for Tyler? Tyrone?" she guessed, puzzling as he avoided her eyes.

"Tibalt." It was clearly an admission.

Her forehead furrowed as she tried to place the name. She had never known anyone by that name before, but it somehow sounded familiar.

"It's from Shakespeare," he finally admitted, seeing that she was still stuck on it. "My mom was a great fan, and during her pregnancy I gather she read and re-read *Romeo and Juliet*. I guess it's a good thing she hadn't just read *Hamlet*, or I might be Rosencrantz." It was an old joke, often told, but she didn't know that and laughed.

"You could have been 'Rose.' Or at least 'Tib.' How come you're not 'Tib'?" she said devilishly. He said nothing, and she finally conceded with a smile, "You're right. Ty is better. It fits you. Tight, solid, strong. Ty. I like it."

"I'm glad you approve. I'll keep it." He drizzled a handful of sand over her foot.

"So did you inherit your mother's love of romance? Or was the *Romeo and Juliet* thing a fluke?"

He studied her so intently that she became uncomfortable. "I have a romantic side. Not many people have seen it."

Oh. Boy. Oh, boy. Walked into that one, Susan realized. She was spared having to make a response to that as Leslie was beginning her final flight. It was a beauty, straight, level, with a speed that remained well above stall, and a landing that was as good as any they'd seen. Susan turned from applauding the flight to find herself eye-to-chin with Ty. She took a step back reflexively and his hands came up to steady her. "Did I scare you?"

She shook her head "no," too scared to answer. His quizzical look said he didn't buy it, but he had

the good grace not to call her on it, which she appreciated. He took a different tack. "Look, we're gonna be finishing up here pretty soon, and I didn't want to let you leave without setting up some kind of follow-up."

"Well," she dodged, "I have your email address and Kent's so I can send you your pictures."

"I was thinking about later tonight."

Ten minutes later, she was headed back down the dune with Leslie, who was still babbling excitedly about the miracle of flight. Susan had her own miracles to consider. She had a date for dinner and dancing at a country-western bar. Well, if going out with two guys could be considered a date. Kent would be there too, but Ty had insisted that his pal was quite able to see to his own "amusement." So, that was still a date, right?

Leslie was perfectly content to be left in the hotel room with cable TV (a luxury denied her at home) while Susan went out to dinner a few blocks away. She hadn't noticed the club coming in, but Ty had described it well enough that she found it with little difficulty. Ty was standing outside and smiled approvingly when he saw her. "Right on time," were the first words out of his mouth, and she stifled a smile, recalling Kent's warning about Ty's obsession with time. She had been deliberately prompt. "Kent's inside," he said as she came closer. "I didn't want you to have to look for us."

She thanked him, but only after entering the club could she appreciate what he meant. It was a large multi-roomed layout, and he led her through the main bar and dance floor to a smaller, quieter dining area. She'd never have found them and might well have left, assuming she'd been stood up. Oh, yes, that would be typical.

She knew herself well enough to know how that would have ended: she would have returned to the hotel room to tell Leslie that there had been some

kind of "misunderstanding," and she would never have contacted him again. For someone with a seemingly strong, confident demeanor, she had an amazing sensitivity to being made to feel foolish. Feeling mocked or even ignored could set her off into spiraling self-doubt. It was better to simply walk away while she could maintain her dignity and at least the illusion that she was in control. She had done it a thousand times.

She shook her head in self-reproach as they crossed the final few feet to the booth where Kent sat, picking at a plate of appetizers. Why she was obsessing about being made to feel foolish or ignored – when Ty was taking pains to see that she wasn't – she didn't know. Kent's quick smile and spontaneous hug let her know she was welcomed, but she still felt strangely awkward as she took a seat across from Ty.

The conversation, though, was calming. They talked about the music, the dunes, kite-flying, and their tastes in movies and television. Ty was delighted to hear Susan had heard the original radio play of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and they both teased Kent good-naturedly about his juvenile fixation with the Three Stooges. By the time Ty asked her to dance, they were on their second round of drinks, and she had forgotten the twinge of insecurity she experienced earlier.

"I should warn you," she said with a laugh as he led her toward the dance floor, "I'm not much of a dancer."

"I should warn you," he returned, in a rough voice that sent shivers down her spine, "that I don't really care if we dance. This is just an excuse to put my arms around you." They settled into a gentle swaying step, and she found herself sighing against his shoulder within minutes. Here was a guy who didn't play games. He was clear and direct. What a relief not to have to wonder what he meant or wonder how to take it. They danced through several songs, stopping only when the beat

became too intense for the hold-you-close slow dancing they were both enjoying. "Why don't we go order some dinner? Kent's probably wondering what happened to us, anyway," he said, leading her from the floor.

"I thought you said he could 'amuse' himself," she quipped, but she stayed within the half-circle of his arm as they moved to the smaller room.

"He can. But it's *what* he might do to amuse himself that has me worried." At her quizzical look, he sighed and, slipping into the booth, confessed, "It's my birthday, and it would be perfectly in character for Kent to make some huge, embarrassing production out of it. I did assure him I would beat him to a bloody pulp if there were anything involving strippers or singing telegrams, but I'm afraid he's got more imagination than sense sometimes." He chuckled ruefully. "But he's a good friend, a really good friend. I love him like a brother," he said softly, almost to himself.

"He said the same thing about you this afternoon," she observed.

Ty was unsurprised. "Yeah, we go back a long way. Kent's the kind of guy who doesn't bail when the going gets tough." Susan recalled Kent's statement that Ty was loyal to a fault and wondered what they had gone through together to form such a bond. But there was a more pressing question.

"So how old are you?"

He laughed. "Old enough to know better than to answer that question. Isn't that what women say? I plead the Fifth."

"Come on, how old?" It was the first time he had been evasive about anything, and she was more intrigued by the fact that it bothered him than interested in the answer. "Geez, you got my entire life story out of me before we even got to the top of the dune. Why won't you tell me how old you are?"

There was a lot of truth to her charge. Before his first flight at 11:10, he knew she was 35 and managed a small department store that was part of

a chain that ranged along the eastern seaboard, though not as far north as Boston. He knew she had been divorced for about 10 years and that the split was as friendly as those sorts of things could be. He knew she doted on her daughter who seemed destined to be an engineer – feet on the ground, dreams in the air, and the imagination to bridge them. In return, she knew comparatively little, and most of that came from Kent.

She turned on her most cajoling smile and asked again. "You might as well tell me. I *will* find out. Come on, how many birthday swats do you have coming?"

He laughed and said "Nobody's done that since I was 10. Though I've given my share since. In fact," he added with a chuckle, "I'd be glad to let you have mine." If he'd stopped there, it would have been fine. It was the next words that took them both by surprise. "If you'd like to come back to my hotel, you can count them out." The thought was out of his mouth before he knew it and there was no way to call it back. His brain seemed to seize up, and he could think of no way to smooth over the situation. Neither spoke.

It was an electric and frightening moment for Susan, who realized she was seriously considering going to a hotel room with a man she hardly knew. Two beers did not explain that kind of reaction, but she resolved to have no more alcohol.

Kent chose that moment to reappear and she smiled at him. "So, how old is our birthday boy?"

"Forty," was out of his mouth before he caught Ty's black look. "Woops! Sorry. Was that confidential?" Neither answered, and as Kent looked between them, the tension at the table was clear. Ty was scowling and Susan was busy drawing designs in the frost of her nearly-full glass. Before Kent had settled fully in his seat, he was up again. "I'm going to go see if they have any more of those puffy cheese things. Anyone else want

some? No? Okay. I'll be back later." He beat a hasty retreat.

If he had given it any thought, Ty would have realized he wouldn't see Kent again that evening. But he wasn't thinking about Kent at all. He was berating himself for a clumsy, oafish statement, keenly aware of Susan's discomfort on the other side of the table. They both struggled independently until Ty finally broke the silence to say, "I'm sorry. That was completely inappropriate of me. I didn't mean to . . . well, I'm just sorry. That's all."

She finally looked up. "Are you under the impression that I'm upset with you?" She seemed genuinely puzzled, which only confused Ty further.

"Aren't you? Well, I mean of course you would be. You've known me all of – what? – ten hours," he said after checking his watch. "And that was a pretty awful line. All I can say is that I didn't mean it that way. You're a lovely woman and I would like to see you again. I'm not looking for a one-night stand and I didn't mean to imply that you were, either. But the way it came out it was almost like—" he paused, trying to find a way to characterize it that wouldn't sound even cruder than the reality.

"Like 'Come up and see my etchings sometime?'" she offered, with a smile that disarmed him.

He sighed at the admission but was relieved that they were still on friendly terms. "Yeah, something like that." He continued to try to minimize it. "It was an impulsive remark. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Oh, come on. I bet you don't say anything you don't mean."

Again the word *assertive* crossed his mind. She did not appear to be flirting. She was not being coy. She was just pointing out a fact, yet it caught him off guard. "Well, you got me there. I would love to take you back to my hotel, but I don't think that's a real smart idea tonight. So I'm going to

use all the restraint that comes with getting old, and say, I'd like to see you again. Certainly as long as we're both on vacation, but also once we get home. Boston's not that far from Baltimore. There are commuter flights every day." He paused, then said with an old-fashioned formality that was in stark contrast to his earlier proposition, "May I call on you again, Miss Markham?"

Her eyes went liquid and she didn't trust her voice so she simply nodded. Repeatedly.

Ty smiled broadly.

Chapter Three

It began as simply as that, though of course there's nothing simple about a long distance relationship. It is hard to maintain one. It is harder to *build* one, and that is what they were faced with. The ease they had enjoyed with each other during the three days they were both in North Carolina and the rapport that promised future intimacies was not as clear from 400 miles away. Email and phone calls are a poor substitute for an understanding look or an encouraging hug.

Their schedules had an aggravating way of clashing, too. While Ty's job as a civil engineer was not quite 9-to-5, it was clearly a Monday-to-Friday routine. Weekends were for kicking back and relaxing – and seeing Susan was a big part of that relaxing. But in retail, weekends are key to sales, and it was the odd weekend that she could completely clear her schedule. If he flew down after work on Friday, she may or may not be able to meet him at the airport. He could be assured of her attention Friday night, but, like as not, she was back at the store all day Saturday, too tired to do more than eat whatever dinner he prepared that evening and snuggle up on the couch for a movie before he tucked her in bed for the night – alone – and retired to the small guest room down the hall – also alone. He was getting to see a lot more of Leslie than he was of Susan.

The third time they'd been through that frustrating routine, he considered it a victory that she had fallen asleep in his arms in the living room, and he was a little annoyed with himself for lowering his standards to the point where he was satisfied with that. Still, it showed a great deal of trust, and that had to be a good thing, didn't it? That she would leave herself open to him, put herself fully under his care? His nose and lips traced the curve of her ear, and even in sleep she

responded to the moist, warm breath on her neck, stretching lazily to rub her head against his chest.

His inclination was to tell her to cut back her hours, but he had the clear impression that her response to such an order wouldn't be something he could handle. She would rightfully see it as selfish. She had worked for years to get ahead in an industry still dominated by men. It was no more reasonable to expect her to take weekends off and jeopardize her career than it would be for her to demand that he stop working mid-week so he could be more available during her off hours.

That's it! he thought and nearly nipped her ear in his excitement. He had been so busy brooding over how unavailable she was on weekends that he had completely ignored the possibility of making himself more available on her schedule. He could take off some time mid-week. Certainly not every week, but what if he could do it once a month or every six weeks? If Susan could do that too, and if they could really use that time to build a relationship, then the separation might be more manageable. Or maybe less necessary.

This time he *did* bite her ear, deliberately, lightly, just enough to begin to rouse her without completely dispelling the rumpled comfort of sleep. "Susan? Susan, honey," he murmured, his lips close to her ear. He took her groan as something like an acknowledgement. "If I made reservations for a Tuesday-Wednesday-Thursday getaway in the Poconos early next month, could you take off?"

"Hmm," came the sleepy reply. "Work Wednesdays."

He bit back irritation. "I know you *normally* work Wednesdays. My question was can you take off? Come away with me? Be my girl?" If it was short of begging, it wasn't short by much.

Her eyes finally came open and settled on his face. Her smile was as sleepy as her eyes, still blurry with sleep. "I am your girl, aren't I?"

He answered with a distinct tightening of his arms. "So, will you take off? Is there someone who can keep an eye on Leslie for you? I really need to spend some time alone with you, angel. Please. This is important to me."

"Okay." And her eyes were closed again.

He held her for a long time after she went back to sleep, held her and wondered why she had agreed and if she really had. Ty had the sense that they were on the edge of something – either breaking up or getting married, and he wasn't quite sure which. He wondered whether Susan had the same doubts or a whole different set of her own. Or maybe she hadn't really meant to agree. He was tempted to wake her up for a more lucid discussion but restrained himself. Overtired, Susan had only two moods: the dreamy affection he had just seen or a cranky petulance that made him want to bare her bottom and spank her to tears. That would have its place, but it probably wouldn't be the most effective route for convincing her to go away on a romantic weekend with him. Especially not if he woke her up to do it.

Instead, he let his mind drift back over the past two months, summoning the conversations that they had shared, the times of warm affection that gave him hope through the other times. There were too many other times. There were times he couldn't quite pin down what was behind her voice in a phone call. Was she hiding something or just distracted? He was keenly aware that she had done nothing to merit suspicion and it was his own life experiences that made him unusually alert for deception.

On the phone it was too easy to be wrong, and he did not want to risk driving her off because of his own uncertainties. Their email exchanges were less troublesome to him, but was that because she had a chance to edit out the doubts that might otherwise show through? He didn't know. What he did know was that when they were together she

was more likely to open up to him when he could get her undivided attention, however briefly, and that they always felt closer afterwards.

The day she left North Carolina, they had met for brunch at a little restaurant in Kitty Hawk, while Leslie spent a second day scouring local flight museums. Susan insisted she needed to do some souvenir shopping, specifically for a Christmas ornament to commemorate the trip. It was a longstanding family tradition that they get at least one new ornament for the tree each year, and that ornament had to have some personal significance. There were handmade ones and store-bought ones, ones that could still bring tears to her eyes, and ones that recalled the stages in Leslie's life: a tiny pair of baby shoes, a chalkboard, a bicycle. This year, she wanted to have a hang glider to surprise Leslie on Christmas Eve, so she intended to haunt the little shops for just the right one.

Ty had laughed and predicted that she wouldn't be able to find Christmas ornaments in April, but he had been wrong. It seemed every little gift shop they went in had funny stashes of off-season gifts, and Christmas ornaments were nearly ubiquitous. Eventually, they found just what Susan had been looking for: a miniature blue hang glider suspended in a delicate glass ball. It didn't have the white stripes that their glider had, but it was very close. She bought two.

Cuddling her in his arms two months later, he wondered whether he would still be around at Christmas to see that ornament hung on her tree. The doubt was unsettling. Better to focus on the positive, he reminded himself. And that had been a very good day. They had found the perfect ornament, and he had picked up a beautiful box kite for Kent – both as a thank you for going on the trip and an apology for ditching him to spend time with Susan. But it was the time he and Susan spent on the beach later that day that had been so special.

Thinking back, he couldn't even remember what started it. It was a rambling conversation, drifting from her plans for the coming weeks to more long-term issues, but it was in the context of big-picture goals that he had asked, "Are you happy?"

"I'm content." Was she clarifying or obscuring?

"But not happy?"

"What's happy?" She laughed but seemed to be avoiding his eyes. "A kid on the first day of summer vacation is happy. I'm content."

"But you used to be happy." There was no question now; she was avoiding his eyes.

"Oh, I don't know about that." It was a dismissive tone that tried to end the conversation. He didn't let it.

"I do. You used to be happy. But now you're not. How come?" He was surprised how important it was for him to know the answer to that question. Her evasive eyes sparkled with tears that were quickly blinked away.

This was a tender spot, but his penetrating gaze would not let her avoid it, and eventually she produced an explanation of sorts. "It was just a series of things. When I was 25 my parents died several months apart, and that was very hard. I had always thought our family was close, but it's true what they say; there can be an awful lot of animosity over who gets what. We're all back on civil terms, but I don't know that I'll ever have that same blind trust that I had before. It was pretty awful. And sort of the end of being happy, I guess," she said with a strained smile.

Convinced there was more, he merely took her hand. They both studied the Atlantic where it met the land: blue-green water giving way to sand, the line of driftwood that marked high tide, the light clean sand where they sat.

With a deep breath, Susan continued, "Then in 1992, I had a falling out with my best friend from childhood. I haven't spoken to her since. I don't know where she is, and to be honest, I have no idea

what went wrong between us. She wouldn't talk to me about it. Significant failure number two," she finished wryly. Another deep breath. "Then, when Leslie was 5, my marriage ended. Significant failure number three. See? Just a series of things. Happiness is no longer the goal. I'll settle for content. Content is a damn sight better than what I've had sometimes."

Ty had been quiet during her little monologue, but it didn't take much to do the math in his head. "You were 25 in 1992." She said nothing but pulled her hand away. "Leslie was 5 in 1992." She busied herself carefully repositioning the zipper on her windbreaker. His hand reached out to still hers. "All that happened at the same time?"

Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "I suppose it did."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry."

She jerked her hand from his as though it hurt to be touched. The zipper apparently needed zipping, and it was zipped with a vengeance. She spoke very quickly. "You don't have to be sorry. You didn't do anything. It just happened. Stuff happens all the time. You get past it. I got past it." If there was ever someone who hadn't gotten past it, she was sitting next to Ty, glaring angrily at the ocean. It was minutes before she finally turned to him and let him take her in his arms. She had cried and cried.

Eventually she had pulled away, embarrassed. "I have to apologize. I don't usually do this."

"Do what?"

"Fall apart. Especially not in front of a perfect stranger."

"So I'm perfect?" he teased, which gave her something else to be flustered about. While she was still struggling for the words to make it all go away, he kissed her. It took her so much by surprise that she had to pull away just to breathe, but he persisted with light kisses that landed on salty cheeks and in windblown hair and on swollen

eyelids and, finally, when he was sure she was ready, again on her lips. She didn't pull away that time.

Ty had felt a frustrating impotence that anyone could hurt her enough to cause tears like that after ten years. He wanted to string up the relatives, the friend, and the ex-husband. He didn't even want to hear the other side of it, just string them up and use them for target practice. That she had managed to rebound from that terrible year was a testament to her strength, and he did not want to examine too closely the fear that he was capable of inflicting the same kind of wounds.

Burned in those earlier, critical relationships, she had not been eager to give him raw insight into her psyche. Each subsequent discovery had been a similar moment of quiet and solitude where he could study her reactions and control the situation without ever giving her the impression she was being cornered. He knew pretty clearly which side of the fight-or-flight response would win if she felt threatened. In professional dealings, in intellectual terms, she could fight it out with anyone. But make the stakes emotional and it was a different story entirely. He had known then, and now, two months later, knowing her even better, he knew she was a "flight risk."

All the same, for his own reasons – as well as hers – he wanted something better than "content."

He just wasn't sure he had the patience to do it the right way.

Susan woke Sunday morning with no memory of having gone to bed, but when she staggered out to the kitchen, it looked like Ty and Leslie had been up for hours. Leslie was poring over the travel section of the paper, and an array of computer printouts took up the rest of the table. Ty looked up from his laptop with a grin.

"How's the 9th, 10th, and 11th?"

"What?"

"Well, my first thought was the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th, but then I realized that you'd be tied up with the Fourth of July sales, so that probably wouldn't work. So, how's the 9th, 10th, and 11th?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" she asked in exasperation. She saw the brief scowl and automatically corrected herself. For someone who spent so much time around construction sites, Ty could be amazingly old-fashioned about language. It was easy enough to purge the more vulgar expressions, but "hell," "damned," and "damnable" were too deeply ingrained. And really, what was the big damned deal? Woops. "I'm sorry," she said more mildly. "Let me try that again. What are you talking about?"

She kissed Leslie on the top of the head as she went by, then stepped smoothly into Ty's inviting one-armed hug, grabbing a triangle of cinnamon toast from his plate. On his laptop, she could see a couple cuddling in what was clearly a heart-shaped bathtub. There were bubbles in all the right places, but what on earth was he doing looking at that stuff at the kitchen table with a 15-year-old child two feet away?

"We talked about this last night, remember? You agreed you could get away for a few days as long as it was mid-week, and even Leslie thinks you've been working too hard. You need a break, angel." She blushed at his public use of what had been a private endearment, but she didn't draw away. "So, what works better for you? July 2-3-4? Or 9-10-11?"

Confounded, she didn't answer right away. She did vaguely remember something about going away, but it was more a feeling of closeness than a commitment. And why was he getting Leslie involved? "Well," she said uncertainly, "I guess the second week would be better. Wait. Go where?" She dropped into the chair between them and took

another piece of toast off Ty's plate, still looking puzzled.

"That's what we were trying to decide. We talked about the Poconos last night, but Leslie here thinks you might prefer the islands. What was it, kiddo? The Grand Cayman?"

"Oh, Mom, you have to see this! They've got snorkeling off this reef right by the hotel. And you can go scuba diving after a single lesson, down by this sunken ship. Look at how clear that water is!"

Leslie slid over a spread of pictures and chattered, oblivious to her mother's mounting irritation until Susan snapped at her to "Be quiet a minute, will you!" and then swung around to Ty saying, "Just a damned minute. We didn't talk about this! I didn't agree to this. And don't drag Leslie into your little plots, either. She's got no business in the middle of this. This is between me and you. I *told* you not to come down this weekend. I told you this wouldn't work. Why the hell don't you ever listen to me?"

There was a long silence during which Ty stared at his computer keyboard as though it would provide some answers. "Les, could you give your mom and me a minute?" he asked without looking at either one of them. Leslie all but fled the room, and Susan knew she would have to go smooth ruffled feathers before she went into the store in an hour. She turned on Ty, cursing his presumptuousness and ready to continue her diatribe about putting her on the spot. Expecting his anger to mirror her own, she was taken aback to see him holding out his arms. Her anger wilted. Tears stung her eyes and began falling even before she was in his lap.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "You caught me off guard." Actually, Ty thought, he caught her with her guard *up* and that was the problem. He didn't think she'd appreciate the irony, though. He held her close, rocking a little from side to side, until he felt her relax.

Then he gave the explanation she'd been too tired to hear the night before. "I feel like I never see you, angel. I've spent more time with Leslie this trip than I have with you. I know," he preempted her retort, "you told me you were going to be tied up all weekend and I came anyway, so that's my fault, but this just isn't working too well for us right now. It was worth coming down just for the time we spent together Friday night, and although you don't think we talked last night, it was pretty special to me." She caught an enigmatic smile on his face before he tucked her head back to his chest. "I think we *need* this trip. Away from computers and telephones and airline schedules. I don't really care where we go. Leslie thought since your last vacation was in the air, you might prefer one under water this time. Me? I'm perfectly willing to make it the Red Carpet Inn in Hagerstown as long as I have your undivided attention. I want to talk to you. We need to get away. Name the place and I will handle the details, okay?"

"Okay." Her voice sounded unexpectedly tentative as though the tears were still very close to the surface.

"What is it, babe? There's something bothering you, and I don't know what it is." She didn't answer and he cocked his head, trying to get a look at her face. He followed her gaze and saw she was studying the website he had been on with its short slideshow of room amenities. He knew the Poconos to be a region famous for its honeymoon resorts. Clicking on "Romantic Holidays" had taken him to a selection of packages that all seemed to assume "romantic" had to include in-room hot tubs, dry saunas, and mirrored bathrooms. Inexplicably, there was also a preference for bathing facilities in the shape of champagne glasses; it was hard to tell whether they were bathtubs or hot tubs, but by all appearances, the tubs and their occupants (entangled and sharing champagne in a relatively unsanitary way) were several feet off the main level

of the room. He had been considering the engineering aspects of that arrangement when Susan had entered the room. Her worried stare, though, probably had nothing to do with the tensile strength of the fiberglass in use. The picture changed to a heart-shaped hot tub again.

He turned her face away from the display screen. "Don't be scared. This trip doesn't have to be like that. I told you the first day I met you that I want you in my bed, but I'm not pushing anything. I give you my word on that. This is not a subtle attempt to up the ante."

"Ty, there's nothing *subtle* about you." At least she had mustered her emotions.

"You'd be surprised," he returned. "I'm very determined, but I'm not so blind that I only see the direct route to my goal." He capped off his statement with a kiss to the tip of her nose.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

It was hard to believe that they'd both been angry less than five minutes earlier. Their words were low and intimate, their bodies comfortably enmeshed. He continued to rock her back and forth slightly. "I mean exactly what I said. I might have goals and objectives in mind, but there are always a variety of ways to get there. I'm not so bull-headed that I can't see another way."

She sat up abruptly. "I'm not sure what that means either. You make this sound like a business deal and you're just looking for the right leverage."

He chuckled, irritating her further. "You're projecting again, Susan. I'm not treating our relationship like a business deal at all. If I did, I think I'd call off the deal." He didn't miss the stiffening of her muscles at that statement and hoped it was a sign she didn't want that to happen, but she said nothing, only slid off his lap back into her chair where she hunched miserably over half-eaten toast.

Ty continued resolutely. "I wouldn't put up with this kind of neglect in business, but this isn't

business; this is a very important personal relationship to me, and I don't want to see it fail just because you've got your eye on the dotted line." He went on, despite the dark scowl aimed at him. He'd had a lot of time to consider things lately and hoped it wasn't too soon to lay his cards on the table. "I think, maybe, that you're more comfortable dealing with me at arm's length rather than up close; am I right?"

"Sometimes." It was a grudging admission. She was still hunched over the table and her hair fell down to hide most of her expression.

"But I don't think it's because you don't like me or don't want me around. I think it's because you like me too much. Am I right again?"

"I don't know," she muttered miserably, and he saw two teardrops splash onto the Formica tabletop.

"Ah, Susan," he sighed, reaching out to pull her close again. She turned to his chest, but remained in her own chair, breathing shakily, not really absorbing the reassurance he was trying to give. "I could do it up in a statement of obligations and responsibilities, if that would make you more comfortable, but I don't think it would. I make you nervous when I'm close because you *want* to lean on me, you *want* to depend on me, and you wish you didn't."

She looked up, searching his eyes for a sign he was mocking or teasing her. There was none. She nodded and he stifled a sigh of relief. He had been almost certain of his analysis, almost sure that she was feeling an uncomfortable tug between a desire for deepening intimacy and the fear of abandonment that was still too fresh in her past. He had been *almost* sure, but there was still relief that he had been right. If she had, instead, said that she just wasn't interested in him, he might have felt obliged to walk away, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. This ambivalence was manageable. He checked his watch: manageable but tight. She had to be out the door in a half-hour.

"I think we can work this out. We just need some time and privacy to do it. Is being alone with me a problem? Is sex the problem?" he asked directly, gesturing toward the screen, which continued to flip through images of couples dancing, bathing, and cuddling in bed. "Would you prefer someplace that's not so obviously geared to romance? I'm honestly not trying to make you uncomfortable."

He saw a wave of tenderness wash across her face and knew the answer before she said the words. "No, that isn't it at all. I would love to be with you that way."

"Then what?" There was no rancor but the question was still there.

"It's a little scary."

"What is?" he prodded gently. There were many things about the morning's conversation that he knew she might find scary. Some he could fix. Others were beyond his control. He had to wait for her next whispered confession.

"It's been a long time."

"For me, too."

He caught the look of shock and laughed. "What? You thought I slept around a lot? What? I'm a player?" He sobered as she blushed. "You did think that! How could you think that?"

"Well," she stammered, "you know, I just figured, a good-looking guy like you. . ." She trailed off uncertainly.

"And an attractive woman like you. . ." he returned, leaving her to mentally supply the same words to finish that statement.

"Well, it's different with men, isn't it?" She couldn't remember a more awkward conversation with a guy since she was 15 trying to explain why she couldn't go swimming.

Ty seemed more offended than embarrassed. "Is it?" he pressed.

Desperate to end the exchange, Susan ducked to nestle against his shoulder. "I would love to go

away with you. The Poconos is fine. The second week of July is fine. Let me know when and where and I'll be there." His arms felt good around her and she relaxed when he made no move to continue the awkward discussion.

It was fully two minutes before his voice rumbled through his chest. "I know you should be getting ready for work, but we need to talk about one more thing first. We can pick this up by email or on the phone if you want to talk about it more later, but I need to tell you how I feel about that little outburst you had a few minutes ago." She tried to sit up, but he quelled the movement effortlessly. "No, I want you to listen to me. I'm talking right now, and you're listening. Understand?" She nodded, clearly apprehensive. "I spent a lot of time thinking about you last night, a lot of time thinking about us, and nearly all of it was good." He felt her relax fractionally, but she was still alert, still a flight risk. "But one of the things I thought about was your tendency to fly off the handle like that when you have to deal with something unexpected."

And that was the crux of her irritation, he thought. It wasn't going away with him; it wasn't having Leslie know; it was being blindsided. It made her lash out. It was one thing to have an order for the store delayed unexpectedly; she could handle that with aplomb. But throw her a curve in her personal life and she fell back on old patterns: duck-and-cover, however ineffective that might be. It wasn't something that was going to change overnight, but maybe it was time to give her fair notice. "Just so you know, I didn't intentionally spring this on you first thing this morning. I wasn't *trying* to catch you off guard." She nodded miserable acceptance and prepared to repeat her earlier apologies. What he said next completely wiped that thought from her mind. "But the next time you use that tone of voice to me or within my

hearing, you can expect a quick trip over my knee and darn good spanking.

"What?" She pulled away from him then, and he let her. Flabbergasted did not begin to cover the stunned amazement in her voice and posture. She froze, mouth open, for several seconds, then tried blinking as though it might change the picture in front of her. It did not. Ty sat calmly in the chair, studying her carefully. She replayed the words in her mind, convinced she had heard him wrong. No, they were the same: an outlandish threat of what he would do if she should let him see her temper. The connection numbed her for a moment, turning what should have been outrage into confusion. Her thoughts went in several directions at once: He couldn't really mean it! He rarely said things he didn't mean. Spanking? When was the last time she had been spanked? He couldn't really mean it. Why wouldn't he just walk away? Everyone else did. He couldn't really mean it.

She shook her head – in refusal? dismay? perhaps to dislodge the threatening thoughts. Ty hoped he had not precipitated another outburst but was prepared to deal with that possibility. His hand came to rest on her thigh. It was reassuring, grounding. So was his voice when he said in a quiet undertone, "Pull it together, angel."

She glared at him, but her words were measured and clear. "I find that completely unacceptable."

"Good for you," he said with a delighted smile that left her completely baffled. He caught her in a hug that spun her around in a full circle. "I knew you could do it," he crowed, sending her off toward her bedroom with an affectionate smack to her tail. She was halfway down the hall, her right hand rubbing the fleshy part of her bottom where there was the slightest sting, before she realized that she had been congratulated not for finding his plan unacceptable, but for phrasing her objection civilly.

"We're not done with this!" she called back, still civilly, but very aware that she needed to get dressed and get moving.

His laugh echoed down the hall. "No, I don't imagine we are."

Fifteen minutes later, she was back in the kitchen doorway, looking sleek and professional in a crisp blouse and tailored slacks. "Do you think that you might be able to take a later flight today?" she asked. "Maybe we could have dinner together. . .talk some more?" There was more hesitancy than she meant to reveal, but his eyes were warm and reassuring, and she finally added, "I think maybe you got the short end of the stick this weekend. I'd like to make it up to you. But I can understand if you don't want to just hang around, waiting for me to get off work." She trapped her lower lip with her teeth in an effort to keep from babbling.

He was charmed, as always, by the glimpse of vulnerability she rarely allowed. He knew better than to acknowledge it, though. Instead, he made it easier on her by remaining detached and pragmatic. "Well, 7:35 and 8:00 are the last flights out of BWI. I guess it depends on when you are free whether it makes sense to wait until then. If I miss the 8:00 flight, I can't get another until 6 a.m. or something like that."

"I'll be here by 5:00, earlier if I can manage it."

Offer, counter-offer, conditions. Deal. He had a perverse desire to slap the table and holler "Sold, to the lady in the white blouse." Instead, he said neutrally, "Okay, I'll see you this afternoon," and was touched when she crossed the room to kiss him goodbye. Usually, he was the one to initiate contact. He left the question of why for later consideration and focused all his attention on a thorough, sensual kiss that left her looking considerably more disheveled than she had upon entering the kitchen. He smiled into eyes that were

glassy with desire and swatted her in the direction of the front door. "Off with you, Miss Markham. The sooner you get to work the sooner you'll be home."

"Hmm," she murmured, then turned back for another quick kiss. There was something reassuringly domestic about kissing him goodbye and heading off to work.

Knowing he would be there when she got back made the time pass at an erratic pace: hours raced by as she struggled to sort out problems with the payroll; minutes crawled as she met with department heads mid-afternoon. She finally gave up just after 4:00, leaving her desk in an uncharacteristic jumble of completed and outstanding actions.

The image of domestic comfort was reinforced by the view she caught through the kitchen door when she arrived home. She paused a moment before fitting the key into the lock, reluctant to alert either Leslie or Ty to her presence. They were playing a game on the kitchen table, both intently studying the wooden pieces in silence, preparing for the next move. From the stack of games on the table it looked like Leslie had found a kindred spirit – or at least an indulgent one. They were all strategy games: Risk, chess, Othello, Pente. They were playing one called Quarto, a sort of souped-up version of tic-tac-toe that had too many dimensions for Susan to keep straight. At some invisible signal, they both relaxed into their chairs and Susan felt free to open the door.

As she expected, they both turned to greet her, but she was stunned by the look in Ty's eyes. She couldn't face what she saw there. She had expected pleasure, joy even. But it was the first time she had seen what clearly looked like love. No, she had to be wrong. It was just because she had been looking forward to seeing him, just because they'd had that brief tiff this morning and she was feeling a little off balance. It couldn't be

love. Ty took in the alarm and fear that flashed across her face first, and he wondered what she was thinking. Her words gave him no clue, as she turned her attention to Leslie, including him by reference, but not meeting his eyes again.

"So you've found another game freak, have you, Les? Ty, you better watch out for her. I think she sits up at night plotting strategy." Susan allowed herself to be drawn into Ty's lap, but she kept her eyes on Leslie, even as she felt his warm breath on her neck.

"He's better than I am," Leslie declared, with obvious respect. She had taken to playing games on-line because she could rarely find friends or family who would lose repeatedly, and it was not in her constitution to throw a game. Sharpening her mind against Ty could only be good, Susan knew. She relaxed into his arms, which tightened naturally around her, and let her head rest on his shoulder.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your game. I'll go change and get out from underfoot, let you finish," she offered, but Leslie was already replacing pieces in the box.

"You're not interrupting anything," she conceded. "I just lost. I won the first couple of games, but I think that was just until Ty learned the rules. He's really good at this kind of thing. You know how you say you can't think two moves ahead? He's, like, four moves ahead."

All three shared a laugh as Leslie packed up the game. It was something of a family joke. Susan had taught Leslie the rules of chess when the eight-year-old was sick with the chicken pox and was quickly outplayed by a child who saw how the board should look two moves away and was genuinely distressed when her mother made a poor move. Eventually, Leslie recognized that her mother played with a defensive strategy because she was reluctant to risk losing pieces in an aggressive move. The result was that she lost – every time – but she was unable to change her approach because

she couldn't see past the immediate loss. Leslie had shared the observation with Ty as they were finishing their own chess game an hour earlier. He understood the problem on a level even Leslie didn't.

Fortunately, Susan was oblivious to the amateur analysis she'd been subjected to. "All right, Ty," she confessed with mock humility as Leslie left the room with an armful of games. "Now you know my darkest secret. She's right. I'm terrible at strategy games. Word games are my thing, though. I play a mean game of Scrabble. And Boggle. I've probably got word games you've never even heard of. Want to play Huggermugger?"

"Depends," he teased. "Is it as dirty as it sounds?"

His voice was low and sexy and she blushed in spite of herself. "It is *not*," she laughed. "It's a search for a hidden word. You do word puzzles to uncover the hidden word one letter at a time. Leslie hates it, but she plays it with me on Mother's Day to atone for 18 hours of labor."

"Tell you what," he said with an affectionate hug. "I'll play Huffinpuff—"

"Huggermugger!"

"Whatever. I'll play it with you next time I'm down, if you like. For now, we've got about three-and-a-half hours before I've got to be on a plane. You said you wanted to talk. Shall we go out to dinner? Whip something up here? Go for a walk? Or maybe you've changed your mind." He was offering her an out in case she'd reconsidered and realized she'd over-committed herself; his respect for her rose a notch when she didn't take him up on it, though she was clearly apprehensive.

"No, I didn't change my mind. I'm really glad you stayed this afternoon. I, I, I appreciate it. I'm sure you have things to take care of at home, and—"

He silenced her stammering with a kiss, soft and warm as his voice. "Hey, I have things to take care

of here, too. I don't mind staying, and I'm glad you asked. So, dinner here or dinner out?"

"Out."

"Good. As long as I get fed. You can't really expect me to maintain my stamina on what they're going to give me on the plane." He set her on her feet and kissed her one last time before pointing her toward her bedroom and delivering a light swat to get her moving.

As she changed quickly into jeans and a fresh blouse, Susan struggled again with the thoughts she'd been fighting down all day. Had something just changed in their relationship? Or was she just more sensitive? Every conversation seemed to be laden with double-entendre, and she was intensely aware of his hands on her body, particularly on her bottom. Had he always done that or was it new? She wasn't sure. She often felt the thrill of physical attraction when he was close, but this felt uncomfortably like adolescent lust and she was uneasy not knowing what would happen.

Leaving Leslie with money for pizza, they set off for a local restaurant on foot. It was less than a mile away, mostly through a residential area, and the walk would give them time and privacy. Settling into a brisk, long-legged stride, they walked in silence at first. Ty was the one to finally break it. "You said this morning that you wanted to talk. Was it about something in particular?"

"Well, yes and no. I do want to talk about some things that came up this morning, but we could probably do that by email or phone, like you said. Mostly, I felt guilty for not being around as much as I'd like. Sometimes it seems like an awful lot of trouble for just a few hours together. I guess, I just wondered . . . how long we could keep this up? Why do you even bother? This all seems so complicated. I want you here, I'm glad you've come, but I know I'm not making enough room for you in my life, and I don't know why. So far, you've been very patient, but I can't expect you to

wait forever while I'm all confused about my priorities. You said you have goals and objectives for us, and I don't even know what they are, or if I can live with them. And then you say you're going to spank me like a child and part of me says, 'Go ahead; it can't be worse than beating myself up,' but the other part of me says, 'I'm doing fine on my own. Why am I wasting my time with this jerk?'" She stopped suddenly as though realizing she may have crossed an unmarked line.

"Boy, when you want to talk, you really want to talk," he chided lightly.

She swung a wounded glare at him. "Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not making fun. Trust me, this is anything but fun. I just meant that you sure packed a lot into that. It sounds like you've been keeping a lot inside and it's starting to bubble out. I'd like to slow things down a bit and see if we can maybe tackle a couple of those things. How does that sound?"

At her grudging nod, he smiled, and, to her surprise, took her hand and resumed a steady pace down the sidewalk. "First off," he said, "there's the question of why I bother. The answer is very simple. Because I love you. You're an incredible woman: funny, quirky, accomplished, capable, assertive. I love you. I hope you'll come to love me, but I love you regardless. That's why I've come down three times in the past two months. That's why I don't mind extending my stay to talk with you. That's why I look forward to your calls and emails. That's why wild horses couldn't have kept me away this weekend." They were only halfway to the restaurant, but he slowed the pace as he felt her steps falter and finally stop. Taking both of her hands, he looked into gray eyes bright with shock, and repeated, "I love you." When she continued to stand there, open-mouthed and unresponsive, he wrapped her in a tight hug. "I'm not asking for much right now. I think it's too soon.

I know you're unsure. Time will tell whether things will work out for us. Don't try to force it."

"Okay," she murmured softly into the collar of his shirt. His arm settled comfortably on her right hip and they resumed the walk toward the restaurant, though at a slower pace. She felt a sense of calm settle over her as she replayed his words. She had expected an angry, defensive reaction, but his calm reassurance was . . . well, reassuring. She reflected on Kent's observation that Ty had seemed to be using his "Sunday manners" with her during their days on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. If that was so, he was still using them. He was unfailingly polite and considerate, and despite Kent's assertion that Ty was not a patient man, he certainly had been patient with her. She knew he spent his weekend days at her house working on his laptop, playing games with Leslie, and jogging through the neighborhood before making dinner for the three of them, but he never complained about the forced isolation, never pressed for more than she was able to give. The morning's urging that they go away on a short vacation was the first demand he had made – and even that was not so much a demand as a request, an offer even.

By the time they reached the restaurant, she was suffused with the sensation of warm affection. She looked up to catch his eye. "Thank you," she said sincerely. Oblivious to the meandering path her thoughts had taken, Ty looked at her in frank puzzlement, but she just laughed. "Just thank you. That's all. Thank you."

Dinner, at least, made more sense.

It was a Chinese restaurant that specialized in Mongolian barbeque, a favorite of Susan's, though Ty had not been there before. Diners individually selected the vegetables and slivered meat, mixed their own sauce from a variety of choices, and handed over the bowl of uncooked ingredients to a chef who stir-fried them on an enormous griddle.

The result was strikingly individual. They steered carefully away from difficult topics, and talked about the subtle differences in flavor that could be achieved with the same basic ingredients, the traffic they would likely encounter on the way to the airport, and Leslie's growing independence. Finally, when he was sure she was relaxed, Ty raised again the subject of their mini-vacation in July and was pleased to see no return of tension. She volunteered that driving up after work on Monday night would give them more time together and wouldn't be too much of a strain, though they would get there rather late. He agreed to make the arrangements and email her the details and directions. It was as relaxed and friendly a meal out as they had ever had.

The walk back to Susan's house, however, included enough silence for her mind to wander again. Comfortably full from dinner and with enough time that they did not need to rush, they strolled homeward at a more leisurely pace than they had moved earlier. She was comfortable with Ty's arm looped lazily across her back to settle on her right hip, but when he slipped his fingers into the back pocket of her jeans, a shiver of forbidden delight shot through her. She twisted away, ostensibly to point out a flower garden she had always admired. He wasn't fooled at all.

Suppressing a smirk, he enveloped her from behind with a full-bodied hug, "Did I do something to make you uncomfortable, angel?"

"No, no, nothing," she stammered. "Don't you think they're pretty? I think maybe I'll put impatiens in next summer. Wouldn't that be nice?"

His hand went back between them to lightly rub her bottom. "I should warn you," came his voice, low and sexy, "that lying to me is another way to earn a spanking."

She danced away from his hand. "How could I not have realized before now that you have an obsession with butt whacking?"

"Not an obsession, angel. But an interest, I'll admit. Shall I tell you something else? I think that pretty soon, if you don't give me a reason, I might just make one up and do it anyway."

"What?" She was horrified. "That isn't right! I can't believe you'd even say that. I'm not even sure it's fair when there is a reason. But to make one up!" The outrage sputtered to disbelief, and she shook free of his hands the first two times he tried to touch her. The third time he was more insistent, still gentle, but definitely in control.

"Hush now," he cooed as though she were a 5-year-old with a skinned knee, and he waited for her struggles to abate before turning her again toward home to resume their stroll. "Maybe I could have found a better way to say that," he conceded. "What I meant was that I think you've been on edge all day worrying about this – about what I said and how you felt about it, about what it will mean between us – and I was wondering if it would be helpful to just do it, get it out in the open so you can stop dreading that first time. I think that's what's behind a lot of your skittishness. Am I right?"

"Maybe." It was a reluctant admission, with her head still down.

"So what I'm offering is a chance to get it over with. Maybe you're still feeling a little guilty about your behavior this morning?" Keenly aware that he was giving her an excuse, should she need one, Susan was still far from ready to agree to such a monstrous possibility.

"No!" she insisted. "I don't want or need a spanking," she declared, then looked anxiously around, suddenly reminded they were in a very public place. They had been passed by cyclists and others out for a Sunday-afternoon stroll earlier, but the block was strikingly empty at that moment. Still, she lowered her voice as she went to his arms. "Please don't ruin the afternoon. I don't want to talk about it, okay?"

"Okay, not today. But I think it's something we should eventually talk about."

"Not today," she repeated.

"Fine." She couldn't help but catch the note of disappointment in his voice – whether in her or in her refusal to discuss it, she wasn't sure – but their truce held the rest of the walk home. By the time he was packing up his shaving kit and making her laugh with tales of Kent's latest doomed romance, she could almost convince herself that the whole threat-turned-offer of a spanking was something of a joke. Ty was far too gentle and patient to ever do something so . . . awful. He wouldn't treat her like a child. He was far too considerate. If his voice sometimes became very stern on the phone when she was being petulant – well, that was just because he couldn't hold her dose to reassure her. Look what a good sport he'd been that morning when she was a bit out-of-sorts over the surprise of having Ty and Leslie planning the getaway. Instead of becoming angry, he had opened his arms and provided just the acceptance and reassurance she had needed. She refused to acknowledge that it was that very act that precipitated the threat of a spanking. No, he just wouldn't. She was sure of it.

She found herself chattering brightly to cover her discomfort on the short drive to the airport and surprised both of them by suggesting that she park in the hourly lot and walk in with him. Normally, he left when she was still at the store, taking a cab to the airport. The extra ten or fifteen minutes it would take to park and get into the terminal would just barely give him time to clear security before his flight. The worry of missing his flight, coupled with guilt over having unnerved Susan to the point that she was practically babbling, made him somewhat more abrupt than he might have been.

"You don't have to do that."

"Oh, I don't mind," she insisted, the false brightness still clear in her voice.

"Well, I'd rather you didn't. I'm running late enough as it is."

"Oh," she said, clearly hurt. "I'm sorry. I've already kept you several hours longer than I should. I didn't mean to drag this out." She swung the car into the "Departures" lane and blinked back tears. He felt like a cad. They had both done nothing but trip over each other's words all day, alternating ease and anxiety. He kept his mouth shut until she pulled to the curb in front of the entrance for American Airlines. She hit the remote release for the trunk and waited for him to get out. Instead, he reached between them and set the parking brake.

"Turn off the car."

"You're not allowed to here, remember? It's loading/unloading only. No parking."

"Turn off the car." There was no heat behind the words, but it was clearly an order. She turned the key, then returned her hands to the wheel, confused by the conflicting emotions that surged through her.

She heard him trip the release on her seatbelt and still she didn't move. Ty's hands were as gentle and insistent as they'd ever been as he pulled her to him across the awkward barrier of the gearshift and brake. Just as he had that morning, he held her, rocking back and forth slightly, for a minute before speaking. "You're not dragging anything out, angel. I'm glad I stayed. I relish every minute that I'm with you, even the difficult ones." He felt her chest spasm with suppressed sobs and held her all the tighter. "I think this is just a hard part about a long-distance relationship. You don't want to ruin the little time you have together by fighting, but if you pretend that nothing's wrong, then nothing gets resolved. It's kind of a vicious cycle."

She nodded against his shoulder and let out a shaky sigh before sitting back in her seat. "You better get moving if you're going to make your flight."

He studied her for a moment, assessing her mood. She seemed better than she had when they pulled up. She was meeting his gaze, and, although her eyes were bright, there were no tears. "You okay?" She nodded but he was unconvinced. "Susan, if you want me to stay tonight, I will. You seem a little off-kilter. Would it help if I stayed? I hate leaving you like this."

But she brushed off his concern. "Don't be silly. I'll be fine." And with that she opened the door and climbed out, moving to the back of the car where she seemed surprised to see the trunk already unlocked. Ty grabbed his bag, dropped it to the pavement, and took Susan back into his arms. This was easier, without the bucket seats and steering wheel and brake lever. He could feel her long, lean body against his and he felt a surge of love for this proud woman who he knew had no idea why she was so frightened. If she were as short-sighted in her professional life as she was in her personal life, the store would be bankrupt.

"Everything is going to be okay, Susan. Trust me. You take care of *you*. Let me take care of *us*, okay?"

The thought was evidently a surprising one to Susan, who gave him a small uncertain smile. "I'll try. Kiss me goodbye?" Like there was any doubt. He might have been going off to war for the passion that was behind that kiss.

"I love you." He spoke the words as he backed toward the automated doors and smiled at the obvious flush of desire she was left with. Maybe that would hold her until they saw each other again. He hoped so.

She drove home slowly, chewing over the revelations of the day. There was a lot to think about.

Chapter Four

The three weeks between their weekend in Baltimore and their vacation in the Poconos were among the most stressful in their relationship. It was as though that last emotion-filled Sunday stretched indefinitely.

As they had for more than a month, they touched base nearly every day, generally by email, occasionally in on-line chat, and at least once a week by phone. It's the only way to build a relationship across a distance, to keep the other aware of the day-to-day struggles and triumphs. But Ty was keenly aware that something was different after his return to Boston. In fact, it seemed different every time he heard from her. That first Sunday night he called her once he arrived at his Boston condo, and they had a warm conversation that ended with Susan's shy admission that she was falling in love with him. His heart swelled with pleasure. But then she missed their on-line chat Tuesday night, and, for the first time, she began to let days go by without any contact at all.

Without even understanding why she did it, Susan found herself playing little control games and setting Ty up for unannounced tests of his love. Actually, they were not only unannounced, but also un-passable. They would agree to meet for online chat, and she would hide her presence to see how long he would wait before he gave up on her. If he called her at work or at home she might claim to be too busy to talk just to see how persistent he was. It somehow seemed very important to know just how far he would go.

To offset the guilt of that, she did things she knew he would appreciate: sending him the framed print of her favorite hang gliding picture that she had been saving as a Christmas present, leaving messages on his answering machine at home so he would have a cheery greeting when he got home

from work, forwarding the web page of a soaring school in upstate New York.

The result was a baffled Ty. However much he tried to get her to open up or even accept his own sincerity, she claimed to be oblivious to any problems. He found his own emails getting increasingly terse.

They even managed to get into a genuine argument – their first, really, excluding the tension of their last Sunday together. About *sheets* of all things! Susan's casual mention that she had bought new sheets for the guest room prompted Ty to reminisce that as a college student newly on his own he had put brand-new sheets, fresh from the wrapper, on his bed during what turned out to be a heat wave. It had been a couple weeks before he washed the sheets with the rest of his laundry and discovered that they weren't *nearly* as itchy and uncomfortable once washed. Ty chuckled as he recounted his own naiveté, but not at Susan's response, which implied that he thought she was too dumb to know that they should be washed. He, in turn, was put off by her tone, which was stiff to the point of rudeness. There were several foolish emails on both sides, expanding to the appropriate fabric and acceptable colors for sheets, before it occurred to Ty that Susan was goading him. Nobody could be that fixated on sheets! He drafted a short response telling her to knock it off, then wisely sat on it overnight.

The next afternoon, he deleted that email and instead sent her driving directions for the hotel in the Poconos and a link to the hotel's web page.

By Friday night, they seemed to be back to normal. Saturday, instead of a recap of his day playing golf with Kent, he sent her a Shakespearean sonnet. The love poem he got in return was unfamiliar; he suspected it was by Susan Markham.

Close and far, up and down, they vacillated.

The Friday after the Fourth of July – the last Friday before their trip – she was out when he

called, which was most unusual. His effort to catch her Saturday morning before work meant he woke her, cranky and irritable, when she'd rather have had an extra hour's sleep. After an apologetic email that night and a brief rundown of taking Leslie to a technology camp on Maryland's eastern shore, he heard nothing for two days.

He steeled himself for what would surely be a difficult reunion in Pennsylvania.

The plan was to meet at the hotel about 8:00. With traffic and other possible delays, he wouldn't have been surprised if she ran a little late. It was better than a three-hour drive for her. Of course, his would have been even longer, but he linked it with a series of business meetings in New York on Monday and, true to form, was checking into the hotel by 7:45. There were no messages. By 8:00 he was in the room.

By 9:00 he was concerned. By 10:00 he was angry.

By 10:15 he had a theory. And a plan. The key was whether she showed up.

Which she did at 10:30. He met her in the lobby, where he had been sitting on one of the overstuffed couches reading a trashy mystery and keeping an eye on the door. Dressed in jeans and flats, she had obviously been home after work.

Ty stood as she entered but he made no move to approach. A lot depended on her demeanor. She faltered for a second when she saw him, then pasted on a smile and came toward the little waiting area that was arranged to look like a living room – if anyone had red velvet couches in their living rooms.

"Oh, Ty, I'm exhausted," she declared.

"Rough trip?" he asked neutrally. Delivering a vacant kiss to her forehead and taking the overnight bag from her hand, he led her toward the elevator bank.

"Long day," she responded with a sigh. "I just want to get a shower and go to sleep. I probably shouldn't have come up tonight at all." The

elevator, waiting on the lobby level, opened immediately.

"When did you make that decision?"

"What?"

"When did you finally make the decision of whether or not to come?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" It was the first note of insecurity in her voice.

Ty hit the button for the fourth floor and waited for the doors to close before answering. "It's a simple question, Susan. You thought about not coming. You obviously went home after work. How long did you sit there and deliberate before you got in the car and drove up here?" His tone was intentionally casual but there was no way to hide the edge to the question.

They arrived on the fourth floor before she had mustered an answer. The hard curve of his arm guided her out of the elevator and down a quiet hall. "I'm not sure what you mean," she insisted. "I planned to come and I'm here."

"Yes, here," Ty agreed. "When had we agreed we'd get here?"

Her hesitation was clear. "I think about 8:00 or 9:00."

"And what time did you leave?"

"Well, as it turns out I couldn't leave work early." In a more compromising mood, he might have let that pass, but Ty had had too long to consider the situation, too long to brood. He spotted the evasion instantly and gritted his teeth. As much as he had been expecting this, he was still disappointed by her behavior.

"So," he summarized her elisions, "you left work, on time, at 5:00, went home and thought about it for a couple of hours, then decided to come anyway. Is that about it?" He slipped the keycard into the slot at Room 418 and pushed the door open, but they both remained in the hall eyeing each other. Susan was only just realizing how angry Ty was. She had seen him irritated a few

times, had heard him frustrated on the phone, but she had never seen him truly angry. It was a tight, controlled fury that was more unsettling than shouting would have been. She didn't answer.

"Inside." The word was clipped. With more experience, the tone alone would send her into fits of apologies, but she was still naïve enough to think she had a choice.

"I'm not sure I want to go in with you." The words had barely left her mouth when she yelped at the sting of his hand making sharp, unexpected contact with her bottom. Between the surprise of that spank and the force of his hand, she found herself propelled into the room she had not wanted to enter. He threw the deadbolt, which doubled as a do-not-disturb sign, and dropped her bag nearby. It was a beautiful suite, he knew from his initial check-in, but neither one of them would be focused on the view or amenities bragged about in the hotel's brochures for a while. Only the furniture and its location would figure prominently. Ty would need someplace to sit down. Susan wanted as much furniture between them as possible.

Her voice was high and uncertain. "I can't believe you're this upset because I was a little late."

"I'm not." That was all for a moment and she took a tentative step toward him, but honor forced him to extend the thought before she got too close. "I'm this upset because you've been manipulating me and lying to me for the past three weeks. *And* because you're 150 minutes late, which you know drives me nuts."

She retreated to the far wall again and picked her strongest ground "I haven't been lying to you."

"Yes, you have. You lied to me every time you told me that things were okay. Because they're not. You lied to me when you said you were too busy to talk, that you were looking forward to this trip. The reality is that you weren't too busy, and you've been dreading this trip, haven't you?" When she didn't answer, he sat down with a sigh on one

of the two couches in the room, a full-sized one facing a coffee table. The other, a loveseat, was between them, facing the gas fireplace that was turned off in the summer heat. He put his feet up on the coffee table and sighed again.

"Why don't you come over here and sit down." Despite the polite phrasing, it was not a question.

"No thanks. I'm fine here." The high, anxious note was back in her voice.

"Suit yourself. You always do."

There was a dismissive attitude to the words that cut her to the quick. For the first time he saw not just anxiety but injury in her expression. Good, then she did have feelings close enough to the surface to see. He had worried that they might be buried too deep for ready access. Time to prod at them a bit, make them more tender and noticeable. "Were you lying to me when you said you were falling in love with me?"

"No."

"That's hard to believe. You're not acting like a woman in love."

"I'm not very good at it. I haven't done it a lot." Touché.

"I'm not sure you're doing it now." Even from across the room he could see that caused her to blink back tears. *Careful, not too far. She's still a flight risk*, he told himself. "Susan," he began in a tone meant to soothe and reassure, "I love you very much, but I'm not going to put up with this kind of treatment. You need to tell me what's going on so we can discuss it and work out our problems. You gotta give me something to work with, though. What are you feeling? What do you think?"

"I think this conversation would be easier if we weren't on opposite sides of the room."

"You're probably right."

"If I come over there, will you promise not to spank me?"

"I promise not to do it right away." It was a small concession.

"But you will later?"

"Probably. You've earned it, haven't you?"

"No!"

"That's what we need to discuss then, isn't it?"

He could see her weighing the choices. He tried prayer, wishes, and telekinesis – anything to pull her to him. One of them must have worked, because she took two hesitant steps and he opened his arms. At that she lost any reserve. Just as she had in her kitchen three weeks earlier, she went to him quickly, tears dropping even before she touched him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I've been so inconsiderate. It's just been so mixed up. . . crazy thoughts . . . sad and angry and I'm sorry." And just as he had three weeks earlier, he held her and rocked her, saying nothing until he felt the tension begin to leave her body.

Curled against his chest, her long legs folded up on the couch cushions, she was a forlorn sight. If he had not known it would only precipitate a replay of this evening on another night, he would have been tempted to let it all go and tuck her into bed for a good sleep.

Chapter Five

The tears lasted only a minute, the hitched breathing a little longer, before she seemed somewhat calmer. He continued to rock her back and forth gently, an oversized child safe in his arms.

"That last day we spent together must have been harder on you than I thought," he murmured between kisses to her brow and cheeks.

"I guess so."

"What's bothering you the most about what I said – that I would spank you for a temper tantrum or that I love you?"

"Well, that you would spank me, of course!" Did he imagine the slight hesitation before she answered? It didn't really matter. He was confident that, however uncomfortable she was with that reality, it was the possibility of a deeper relationship with him that was at the root of her behavior. But if she believed it was the spanking, he would play along.

"But you're here. And you *are* going to get spanked. You know that, right?"

"But that's not fair!" His silence invited her to make her case, so she tried. "I'm not a little kid. I deserve to be treated like an adult." He remained silent, attentive to her argument. She sputtered out the conclusion. "And adults don't get spanked."

"Some do." The lack of acrimony in his manner was confusing her. He seemed calm and unconcerned, almost dispassionate. She compensated by becoming increasingly emotional.

"Well, I don't. It's . . . it's . . . it's unseemly and inappropriate, that's what it is. And I won't allow it."

The contrast of her regal pronouncement and the fact that she was still curled in his lap, with his shirt fisted in one hand, was too much to ignore. A smile snuck onto his face unexpectedly and he turned to untie her shoes in an effort to hide it.

"Shoes don't belong on furniture," he reminded, as though she were five years old.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking," she responded, as though she were five years old, and kicked off the other shoe.

Two battered sneakers hit the floor

"Can we talk about this in the morning?" she asked. "I'm really tired." It was the wrong thing to say.

"So am I. I've been waiting a long time."

"I'm sorry about that. I just wasn't sure what I should do."

"What you should have done is picked up the phone and told me you were having some doubts. Then we could have talked about it. We could have worked things out. You made a different choice: to have a three-week temper tantrum. Now it's time to face the consequences of that choice."

"That's not fair!" she repeated, but the protest was much weaker this time. "I don't want to be scared of you."

He surprised her by agreeing. "I don't want you to either. I don't like to see you dodge away from me because you're afraid, but I also won't put up with your manipulations and your temper just so that you feel safe from my hands. I love you, and I'm sorry if talking about spanking has made you feel unsafe. I almost wish I never mentioned it during my last trip down. My fault. Stupid. And lousy timing. But it's done. It's out there. You should know what being with me is like and that's a part you have to know. If that's unacceptable, tell me now. We'll shake hands as friends and I'll go home to my lonely apartment. We'll probably exchange Christmas cards for a year or two then nothing." He paused to study the expression on her face and wipe a tear away with his thumb. "But if you can say, 'You know, Ty, I think it's a really crummy idea, and that's not how I want things between us, but I love you enough and trust you

enough to give it a try,' well, then I think we have a starting point."

"A starting point?" There was a glimmer of hope there.

"Let me be clear: a starting point for our future, not a starting point for negotiations. There's precious little room for negotiations here."

"But there is some room?" she persisted.

"Not at the moment. I'm willing to discuss it, clarify, negotiate even. . .as long as a spanking is not imminent. But *after* you're in trouble, well, that's the wrong time to come to a new understanding. You know as well as I do that your behavior over the past several weeks has been completely unacceptable. You've been rude and selfish and hurtful, and you're about to face the consequences."

She took a very shaky breath. "If I'm so awful, why do you bother?"

"You're not 'so awful.' I fell in love with a woman who was so forthright there was no mistaking her meaning." He took note of the frown that prompted and traced her lips with his thumb. "But that doesn't mean I can't also love the woman who is sometimes so unsure that she sabotages her own future. I just need to understand that one better. I need to see her more. And probably punish her more so she knows when to put an end to it. Because I think that part of you can be very self-destructive."

"Sometimes," she conceded in a whisper.

"I love you, angel. You have many fine qualities. But you're not perfect. Neither am I. Be honest. There are things about me that you don't like."

"You're too bossy."

"Yeah?" It was both agreement and an invitation for more.

"That's it. You're too bossy."

"Honey, you aren't even trying. The desk clerk could probably come up with a better list of my failings than that, and I barely met him. I'm bossy,

stubborn, demanding. I expect everything to happen on time, and I get sullen and uncommunicative when the schedule's not kept. I can be so ruthlessly logical about something new that I can sap the joy right out of it. I'm so organized I make the Swiss look laid back. I can shave in the morning and have razor stubble by noon. I have no fashion sense at all. I hate cocktail parties. I'm entirely too judgmental sometimes, and I have a very long memory for unrighted wrongs. I make lists compulsively."

The beginning of his catalog came very quickly but he paused to caress Susan's face before adding the final two points in a softer, unmistakably loving, voice. "I can get an idea in my head like this trip, and Heaven help anyone who gets in my way. And I overreact to *anything* that threatens someone I love."

"Yes," she said softly. "That too."

"But you want to know what my biggest weakness is? You. I want so much for you to enjoy this vacation, to want me and everything I can offer you, that I'm willing to do almost anything."

"Then why -?" She couldn't even form the question but the fear was somehow less acute when she acknowledged his love. He wasn't expecting her to be perfect. He had faults of his own, though she hadn't really thought about it that way. "Then why -?"

"Why can't I give in to you on this?"

"Just this once," she pleaded.

"Because, as we both agreed, I'm too bossy and too stubborn. You know what you're getting with me. The good, the bad, and the ugly."

"No, not ugly," she said, with a hint of the first smile he'd seen in a while. Her fingertips outlined his right ear and came forward to touch the laugh lines around his eyes. She ached to see them crinkle in humor but they didn't.

"Well, the good and the bad, anyway. I don't want to seduce you and then have you regretting it

because you can't live with the expectations I have about our relationship. You wouldn't sign a contract with a new supplier without reading the fine print. You deserve the same courtesy from me."

"What's the fine print?"

"That in our relationship I'm in charge."

"That's not fair!" He ignored her.

"That decisions can be appealed, but they will very rarely change."

"That's not fair, either." He still ignored her.

"That I alone decide the sentence, and corporal punishment is not only permissible but predictable."

She was silent.

"In return, you will have my complete support – professional, personal, emotional. You will find me completely devoted to you. I don't have a wandering eye or a wandering heart. You'll have me – always." His eyes were intense and sincere. She had no doubt he meant every word he said. "I want to see you happy – not content, *happy*. I'll do whatever I can to make that happen. We'll work out the problems of distance, whether it's me moving down to Baltimore or you and Leslie moving up to Boston or just us finding a better way to handle the separation. We'll make it work."

He paused a moment to let her absorb the words. "That's it. That's what I have to offer. Me, all of me, to help you in any way you need. I'll be there. I'll hold your hand when Leslie goes off to college, wipe your tears when you're sad." With that his thumb reached to brush away the tear that managed to escape down one cheek. His voice softened even more. "And I'll bring you back here for our tenth anniversary and we can laugh at how foolish we both were."

"What?"

"Same room, if you like. I'll make the reservations."

"I think you're two steps ahead of me," she said uncertainly. Anniversary? What anniversary?

"Well, then, let me help you catch up. Stand up." His hands were at the button on her fly before she realized what he was doing, and by then it was too late.

Her resistance, desultory at best, was no match for his determination. She was across his knees before she could figure out how to run with her jeans at mid-thigh. With very little bargaining room, she went with the only card she had to play. "I'll scream!" she announced before his hand had fallen even once.

"Okay."

"What if someone hears?" she asked, desperate to stall.

"What if they do?" Her eyes went wide as he continued the thought for her. "Suppose someone came in? Which of us do you suppose would be more embarrassed? Me, fully clothed and spanking the naughty bottom of my girlfriend? Or you, half-dressed and tearful getting the spanking you so richly deserve?"

The realization that he had thought it through drained her face of color and her voice of any real resistance. "Me," she admitted bleakly.

"Then I suggest you keep the noise down to prevent that from happening. I imagine they're used to a lot of strange goings-on here, but a woman screaming 'Stop! No! Don't' might ruffle some feathers. If you want to keep this private, that's completely under your control. If you're wondering whether I'm willing to accept the consequences if someone reports this, the answer is obviously 'yes.' I think I've made it pretty clear how I feel about people being willing to accept the consequences of their actions." She went limp over his lap. Yes, she knew only too well how he felt about that. She would likely carry the body-memory of that knowledge for some time to come. Consequences. He would accept his just as he expected her to accept hers.

Acceptance is a funny thing, though. It's possible to accept something without really understanding it. It's also possible to understand something without really accepting it. But Susan – who thought she understood and accepted the inevitability of the spanking – realized very quickly that she did neither. This was not the embarrassing, humiliating experience she had dreaded every time she thought about it over the past three weeks.

The embarrassment and humiliation were mere prelude.

They were quickly eclipsed by a burning, stinging pain like none she had ever experienced. Her threat to scream would have been an empty one, for it was all she could do to draw breath into her lungs after the first dozen iron-hard swats. But her nervous system screamed. She tried to count to take her mind off the pain and got to thirty before she realized she didn't know if she was counting the times Ty's hand landed or the final seconds of her life. She gave up counting but Ty didn't give up spanking. Her face was scarlet with rage, pain, and wounded dignity; redder, in fact, than her quite-rosy backside.

When she could finally marshal enough breath and enough coherency to speak, what she said was, "I hate you!"

"I hope that's not true." His unruffled tone made her madder yet.

"I'm never letting you near me again."

"That's all the incentive I need to make this an unforgettable experience."

The sound was like an amplified heartbeat echoing in her ears: wup-wup, wup-wup. When it was interrupted for an instant, she was insanely grateful – until she felt the tug of her panties over her left hip as Ty struggled to remove them. Susan hadn't even realized she still had them. If she'd given it any thought at all, she would have assumed that they came down with her jeans. But for some

irrational reason, keeping her underpants became the most important thing in the world. She reached back with her right hand and managed to find purchase on the center of the waistband. He pushed her hand away and again tried to tug the panties over her hips. Their hands danced a peculiar four-step – yank, push, spank, tug – until it finally occurred to Ty to capture her right hand with his left, anchoring it at her hip and freeing his right hand – his spanking hand – to tug down the panties without interference.

The loss of her panties enraged Susan in a way that nothing else had. Through the next dozen spanks, she began fighting in earnest, pitching her body from side to side and drumming her feet on the couch, desperate to end the spanking. Ty, surprised she still had enough energy to struggle, moved to shift her slightly forward and reassert his hold on her hip.

It all happened in an instant.

Her feet were drumming the couch; she felt the hand at her hip loosen and thought she had a chance to escape. She twisted on Ty's lap, and her right foot, still drumming, came down with full force on the frame of the couch, splitting her toes into two neat groups by crushing the two nearest the big toe.

She did scream at that, screamed and jackknifed her body so that Ty couldn't have held her if he tried – which he didn't because he knew something had gone horribly wrong.

For an instant the sound of her scream and the sight of her folded in half, clutching her foot, kept him immobile. When the scream became a moan, he eased himself out from under her, settling her gently on the couch, and pried her fingers away from her foot. There was no blood, and that seemed like a good thing, but she was obviously in agony and she wanted no parts of any help Ty had to offer. When he moved to step away, though, she

uttered the first intelligible words on a sob: "Don't leave!"

"No, of course not. I'm not going anywhere. I'm just going to call the front desk. We need to get those toes on ice and we need to get a doctor. I'm not going anywhere." He tried to keep a hand on her the entire time, stepping away only to grab the receiver and punch "O" for the front desk. Then he was back at her side, rubbing her shoulder in what he hoped was a soothing way. She was still moaning, lying on her side and clutching her foot. When someone from the hotel finally answered, they seemed not the least surprised by his request for a bucket of ice (crushed not cubed) and a request that the doctor-on-call be paged from town.

As he had thought, there was probably little that surprised them. Nevertheless, he had no intention of having Susan embarrassed in front of anyone but him. He grabbed the spare blanket from the bedroom and returned to the couch, where her moans had died to an occasional whimper. She had no idea what she looked like, he was sure. She was folded in thirds: her torso bent against thighs, her arms reaching down to clutch her right foot as though it might fall off if she didn't hold it. Her jeans were bunched around her knees, no doubt making her position even more uncomfortable, and her bottom, red and swollen, was in stark contrast to her white nylon panties mid-thigh. Her hair was matted with tears and sweat. He fought down the sense of shame in favor of easing her discomfort.

"Honey, somebody from the front desk is bringing up ice, and they're going to call a doctor. Let's get you covered up a bit before they get here, okay?" He wasn't sure if she even heard him, but she allowed him to remove her hands and ease the narrow pant leg past her injured foot. She winced at the contact, rocked back to straighten her leg and winced again as her bottom touched the couch. Tears continued to stream down her flushed face, but she was very quiet in her pain. He heard the

sharp intake of breath as he pulled her panties back up. It was almost as difficult pulling them up as it had been pulling them down. She wasn't fighting him anymore, but he was trying to be very gentle as she lay on her side quivering in pain.

The knock at the door was a bellhop with ice and a message that the doctor was at the hospital delivering a baby, but Ty could call the ask-a-nurse hotline or an ambulance if necessary. He took the phone numbers and promised the kid \$100 if he could produce a fully-stocked first aid kit within 10 minutes. He did.

An hour later, Susan was dozing in his arms, Tylenol PM having taken the edge off the pain enough to let exhaustion reign. A call to the nurse had confirmed what he'd already known: that the toes couldn't be set; they would simply be taped to the adjacent toes for support and allowed to mend on their own. The ice would keep down the swelling and she should stay off the foot as much as possible, using crutches for a few days if necessary. He had handled her gingerly, mindful of every wince and intake of breath. Then he had held her silently until sleep took over.

Chapter Six

Ty sighed, the guilt heavy in his soul. He had been trying to help her, and instead she'd ended up in worse shape than she would have been if they'd simply gone to bed when she first suggested it. He didn't regret the spanking. She'd had that coming. In fact, it wasn't even finished. There'd been no apologies, no admission that she was wrong. And now the vacation that should have been a giddy celebration of new love would be indelibly marked by pain.

When it started to rain, it just seemed fitting. Well, it's not like they'd be taking long walks in the countryside anyway, he knew.

Susan had been asleep for hours by the time he carried her into the bedroom, setting her gently on the enormous bed. She was still clad in a blouse, bra, and panties, but undressing her further seemed like a violation, so he left her in that. Before going to sleep himself, he did two things: He set out more Tylenol and water in case Susan woke in pain, and he left a message on Kent's voicemail that he was going to need some help getting his car back to Boston and someone to cover a meeting he was probably going to miss on Friday.

Then, wearing pajamas he had not expected to need that night, he settled into bed behind her. Unable to resist the urge, he tucked her into the curve of his own body as though that could somehow keep her safe.

Susan woke, groggy and confused. She was not where she had fallen asleep, that she knew. The last thing she remembered was being held against Ty's chest, lulled by the thrum of his heart. The rest of the evening was there as well, just below consciousness, but she dared not examine it too closely. It was more reassuring to stay with that last image. Despite her outrageous behavior, Ty

had been sweet and solicitous, holding her until she could finally sleep. He was still holding her. The weight across her side was his arm, she knew without opening her eyes. They weren't on the couch anymore either. They were probably in the bedroom of what she assumed was a two-room suite. There hadn't been much time for exploring last night – she'd been too busy with histrionics – but there had to have been a bedroom.

When she finally opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the bottle of Tylenol and glass of water on the nightstand. How like him! He was always going out of his way for her, always so considerate. She wiggled her foot experimentally. It hurt, but it wasn't excruciating. She was, however, surprised to find it resting on a pillow. Another example of Ty's thorough courtesy. Reminded of the pain, she reached to touch her backside. There was a tenderness to it in spots, but that thought was quickly replaced by the realization that her hand, rubbing between them, had prompted a completely unexpected reaction. Ty's breathing continued at the same steady rate, but there was distinct movement in his groin, and he shifted slightly, tightening his hold on her. She slipped her hand away, embarrassed to have made her first overtly sexual overture, however unintentionally, when he was asleep. She could still feel his arousal against her bottom, and while she wasn't entirely clear whether she was moving against him or he against her, she couldn't deny the tingling excitement that touched every nerve ending in her body. It was like being on the verge of orgasm for an impossibly long time and she tried to pull herself back from the edge.

It was that very sense of abandon that had frightened her on their first date when he had suggested she go back to his hotel room with him. There was something about Ty – tall, strong, older, confident – that drew her like a magnet. She had recognized the promise he seemed to represent:

stability, reliability, permanence. His dogged courting managed to make a few holes in her resistance.

She had been surprised that her relationship with Ty wasn't draining or exhausting – at least not at first. She looked forward to his emails and calls as a way to rebound after a tiring day. His visits to Baltimore made her feel like a teenager again: attractive and interesting. And wanted. It had been a long time since she had felt wanted.

The realization of how vulnerable that made her threw her into a tailspin, though. That's when the pull of commitment began to feel exhausting. It was easy to blame it on Ty and his crazy threat to spank her, but that was more excuse than cause. She was afraid to tell him how much he meant to her. What would he do with that knowledge? She had tried to say it a dozen times – in email and on the phone – but kept chickening out. Last night it had taken a monumental act of courage to drive to Pennsylvania and present herself, imperfect and vulnerable, willing to admit her wrongs and do whatever was necessary to make them right. And she had – with less grace than she'd imagined, that was true – but she'd done it.

She'd tried to talk him around, tried to dissuade or at least delay the promised spanking, but she had known all along that it wouldn't work, and it hadn't. Ty wasn't a man to put off the difficult tasks in favor of the pleasant; that was part of what made him who he was. Of course, she hadn't intended kick the couch and smash her toes up, and some of the things she'd said before and during the spanking were simply awful, but it'd turned out okay. It didn't make for a graceful end to the evening, but even that wasn't as awful as it might have been. She would gladly suffer a couple broken bones for the chance to sleep in his arms. But she really needed to tell him how she felt. He deserved that honesty from her.

She wavered between wakefulness and sleep until she felt Ty stir behind her.

He was checking on her foot before he even realized she was awake, and then they were caught up in the mundane aspects of morning routine: he carried her to the oversized bathroom, fetched her bag so she could brush her teeth and change into fresh clothes, ordered room service for breakfast, and found a bellhop willing to produce a pair of crutches on short notice. By the time he came back to help her into the other room, Ty was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, and she felt a wisp of regret that she hadn't been there to watch him, though he'd probably never have gotten dressed if she had.

Despite her noble intentions, they danced around each for the next hour. Ty seemed almost unable to sit still. If he wasn't on the phone, he was bustling about, cleaning up vestiges of last night and organizing clothes in the bedroom. His intent was to give her some breathing room, but she felt it only as distance. The flush of security that had been so clear on waking began to fade a little.

Mid-way through a strained breakfast, when she had to finally admit that Ty was not going to lead them out of the inane conversation about the relative merits of croissants and English muffins, Susan finally said, "Ty, I'm really not all that hungry. Can we talk about what happened last night?"

"Sure." The agreement seemed perfunctory; he continued to paw through the jelly and jam assortment. She realized how much she depended on him to guide them through these delicate discussions of emotions and felt a flash of irritation that he was not making this easy on her. Well, she'd gotten herself into it; she'd have to get herself out.

"You look tired." It was a valid observation, but even Susan wasn't sure whether she offered it in sympathy or out of a futile attempt to let him slip

out of a difficult conversation. Like that would ever happen.

He said blandly, "Lack of sleep will do that," and popped some grapes into his mouth.

"Maybe if we went over to the couch," she suggested, anxious to get his attention off the food so she could look in his eyes. His gaze seemed to be everywhere but on her, and she was beginning to feel the return of anxiety. Despite her insistence that she could walk if he would hand her one of the crutches, Ty carried her – but not to the larger sofa they had used the night before. She found herself settled on the red loveseat, which had its own compensations: Ty was very close. She sighed in contentment, but that was not to last. Ty finally took the lead.

"I feel really awful about last night," he said earnestly. "All I can say is that I'm sorry, and it will never happen again." She felt a pang of disappointment at that, but before she could even begin to figure out why, Ty continued, with an apparent non sequitur. "That was Kent on the phone. I asked him to come down."

Well, that was bizarre. "Why?" Her voice quivered with bewilderment.

"Well, there's no way you can drive with your foot sore and bandaged."

"How could you *do* that?" Her voice, still unsteady, reproached him, but it was her next words that singed his heart. "I really though you liked me." She leaned against his shoulder for what she was sure would be her last time and said in a quavering voice, "You're just like everyone else, though."

"What's that suppose to mean?" he was instantly stiff – angry and defensive – which she took as confirmation of her worst fears. Reluctantly, she pulled away, but iron-strong arms did not allow much of a retreat. She managed only a couple of inches' separation, and that wasn't

enough for her to bring the roiling emotions under control. She said nothing.

Ty took her shoulders and shook her slightly. "I asked you a question."

"What?" she spat out petulantly.

"You'd better watch that attitude, young lady. Or we're going to have a repeat of last night's demonstration. Clear?"

Instead of an answer, though, he was stunned to see her burst into tears. She fought his arms and tried to pound his chest, but his tightening grip effectively subdued her movement. The tears, though, intensified, and her unsteady breathing dissolved into frantic, shallow breaths verging on hyperventilation.

His voice took on some urgency, but never lost its calm. "You need to settle down, honey. You're not going anywhere so stop fighting me. Just settle in. That's better. Hold onto me. I'll keep you safe."

Wrong thing to say, he realized an instant too late. Susan renewed her struggles but this time was able to sputter, "Safe? You won't keep me safe! You *hurt* me!"

"I know and I'm sorry. It's all my fault. It never occurred to me you could hurt yourself by kicking. I should have restrained your feet right away. You'll never know what it does to me to see you in pain like this. I'm sorry. But I'll take care of you now. I'll try to make it all right. Please don't be mad at me."

Something in his frantic apology permeated her brain. She stopped struggling, though the tears continued to course down her face. Her words were muffled by his chest but Ty *heard* them clearly enough; he just didn't *understand* them. "Then why are you sending me back with Kent?" she asked her voice rife with betrayal that he did not comprehend.

"I'm not. What do you mean? I need someone to take my car back. You're in no condition to drive. I'll see you back to Baltimore, make sure

you're okay, stay with you as long as you need me. And Kent is going to fly down on Thursday or Friday and take my car back to Boston." He finally relaxed his hold, sensing her struggle was over, though he still didn't understand it. "I imagine he'll use it as an excuse to bring that blonde he's been seeing, so he'll probably stay the weekend. Whatever. That'll save me a day on the return trip. What made you think - "

He stopped, bits of the morning finally falling into place. Struggling to subdue his own guilt and sure that Susan would be nursing righteous outrage, he had ignored all evidence to the contrary. He had made assumptions just as dangerous as hers. Time to start over. He smiled then, his face softening for the first time since he awoke, and drew her close. "C'mere, you. How could you think I'd send you back with Kent? In the first place he's an incurable ladies' man and I wouldn't trust him alone with you," he teased, humor and affection clear in his voice, "and in the second place, you couldn't pry me from your side with a crowbar. I'm stuck to you, lady, like it or not."

"I like it," Susan admitted, with a watery chuckle, pleasure and relief nudging her back to the security she had felt on waking.

"Good. So do I." Could it be this simple? Apologize and move on? "How're your toes? They look pretty black and blue."

"So do you. I think maybe that upset you more than it did me."

"I don't know. You seemed pretty upset last night," he reminded her gingerly, but she rushed to minimize it.

"Well, you know how it is when you get a paper cut or jam your finger playing basketball. It seems much worse than it actually is. It hurt last night. It's not so bad now. If it starts to throb I'll take some aspirin."

"There's Tylenol in the other room. Want me to get it?"

That prompted a smile. "No. I saw it when I woke up. Thanks. That was really thoughtful of you. You're a really thoughtful guy. Don't think I don't know that."

He grimaced. "Last night was not one of my finer moments."

"Last night was more my fault than yours. Don't beat yourself up over it." That is, in fact, just what he'd been doing, clubbing himself with guilt, lashing himself with "what ifs" and "if onlys." Her words eased much of that self-recrimination but didn't take it away entirely.

"Well, I kind of feel like I was sitting here in ambush for you."

"Only because I gave you reason to."

"I suppose that's true."

"You were right that I was lying to you. I didn't think of it that way, but you're right. I was trying so hard for you not to think anything was wrong that I made up excuses and avoided you. I was sure that if we talked – really talked – you'd see right through me."

"Why didn't you want to come last night?" His voice was hoarse with emotion. She didn't know whether it was anxiety or anger that was behind the question, but she resolved to answer it as honestly as she could, regardless. But she couldn't look at him while she did so, sure she would see contempt in his eyes.

"I was afraid to face you, knowing everything I'd done. You've been nothing but patient and indulgent with me, and I know I threw it all back at you. You called it manipulation, and I guess you're right. That's what I was trying to do, but it didn't work. No matter how much I tried to push you away, you just kept coming back, being nice. Calling me. Sending me poems." The tears were back. "So I thought that if I just didn't come, you'd realize that I wasn't worth the effort. But then I

was sitting at home last night, I knew you might see it differently. You might think *you'd* done something wrong, and in the end, I just couldn't let you think that. So I had to come."

A crooked finger under her chin forced it up with gentle, constant pressure. She would have to look him in the eye after all. "Point one: you are *definitely* worth the effort." Much of the tension went out of her shoulders. "Point two: I *did* see it differently. I guess I still do, but thank you for being honest." She nodded her acceptance of his thanks. "Point three: If you had not shown up last night, I'd planned to be at your door by daybreak." God, he really was a compulsive list maker, she thought through grateful tears. "Point four: If you ever do anything like that again, you'll get a paddling that will make the spanking you got last night seem like love taps."

For that final point his voice was iron-firm, and she found herself answering, "No, sirree, it won't happen again."

"Good." He took her into a close hug again, and they sat there together, listening to the patter of rain hitting the window. They talked for a long time – about the meaning of honesty and integrity, about dreams and expectations, about promises. It was like the conversation they had had so long ago – could it really have been only three months? – on a beach in North Carolina. But this time, with both of them admitting their futures would be intertwined, it had much more significance. Words faded to kisses and caresses and, finally, to silent appreciation of new-found understanding.

Chapter Seven

If Ty had still been making lists that morning, he might have added: 1. Satin sheets are slippery. 2. Exhaustion can make anyone clumsy. 3. Banging your lover's head into the nightstand – hard – can really wreck a romantic mood.

There were compensations, of course. For one thing, it was his head, not Susan's. And although he knew it was his own ineptness to blame, she was charmingly effusive in her apologies and attentive in her care. She was also warm and soft. He did eventually get some sleep, though, and it was several hours before he could have added: 4. Making love with Susan was every bit as glorious as he had imagined. The second time was to prove it could be just as good. The third time...well, the third time was just for practice.

They eventually managed to make it out of the room mid-afternoon. The rain had stopped, and they decided to forage for a meal – lunch or dinner, it wasn't too clear – rather than going the room service route again. The restaurant was unspectacular – its chief advantage being that it was a short hobble next door – but they barely noticed the food; Ty considered it a triumph that they got through the meal with something approaching propriety. The booth was probably a bad idea. Perhaps they would have been more restrained at a table. Perhaps not.

By unspoken consent, they headed back to the hotel, where Ty was determined to master lovemaking on satin sheets – "however much practice it might take" he assured Susan gravely. She giggled, a girlish, infectious sound that made him smile every time he heard it, even when she deliberately stomped in a puddle, spraying water in all directions and drenching one pant leg. It was his own fault, he knew. She had hobbled ahead, all but skipping with excitement, and he was trying to catch her from behind when her foot came down –

splash! – in the midst of an inch-and-a-half of water. He swiped at his pants uselessly, and she apologized amidst another gale of giggles, until he could do nothing but laugh with her. *What a difference a day makes*, he reflected wryly.

"Give an old man a break, would you, Sue?" he said with a laugh. "I only brought two pair of slacks. I guess I better switch back to shorts."

She wagged her eyebrows and said, "I'll help with that if you like, 'old man.'"

Shaking his head in disbelief, he said, half to himself, "I've never seen this side of you." Tossing his arm across her shoulders, he completely missed the look of self-reproach that crossed her face, but he noticed her sudden silence and the stiffness in her posture as she fell into step with him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." It was almost a whisper.

"Susan," he said, more sternly, turning her to him, "what's wrong?"

"I – I – I don't know. I'm sorry."

He was baffled, the damp trousers completely forgotten. "For what?"

"For behaving so childish. I was feeling silly, I guess."

It was easy to forget Susan was still new to consciously acknowledging these feelings. It had been a long time since she had let emotion dominate her behavior. Some bumps were to be expected. But her voice, hesitant and innocent, melted his frustration. When he spoke again, it was with much more compassion. "I didn't mean it that way. I meant I knew you had a playful, fun side. You don't let it show enough. It's a delight to see. And I wouldn't call it childish – childlike, maybe, not childish."

They resumed the awkward walk back to the hotel, both caught in an unexpectedly thoughtful mood compared to the silly puddle-stomping bare minutes before.

"Sometimes, lately, I feel like a little kid," Susan admitted after some thought. "All fussy and whiny, like I don't even know what's right for me."

"I think everyone feels that way sometimes," he reassured. "The question is just how you express it: whether you talk about it like we're doing now or have a temper tantrum and lash out at other people."

"Like I did last night," she acknowledged. "And again this morning. That isn't like me at all."

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, regretting that his off-hand remark had stifled her mood but willing to see her through the self-reflection. "I think you've been a little overwhelmed lately," he said.

"I don't like not knowing what to do."

"What do you mean?"

"When the roles are not clear to me, I don't know quite how to be. I know how to be a boss, a mother, a retail executive, a customer. But it's different with you. I think I don't really know how to act sometimes. I know my life seems pretty boring, but I'm used to it that way: everything on an even keel. Ever since I met you . . . well, the highs are a lot higher and the lows are a lot lower. Sometimes I just wish I could get back to boring, because it felt safer. But I want that and I want you at the same time."

"That's what this is all about, isn't it?" he said gently. "You're not sure what to do, so you need someone to blame. You'd rather push me away and then say it couldn't be helped."

"Well, when you say it that way, it sounds pretty stupid." His raised eyebrow challenged her to agree but she couldn't, not just yet.

"It's this falling-in-love thing," she said wistfully. "I'm too old for it, I think."

"Never!" he objected, with a laugh. "And I know what I'm talking about. I'm the old man, remember? Angel, don't let this bother you so. I love you. You love me. The rest is details."

When they got back to the hotel, though, she was still buried deeply in thought. She finally shared it with him as he shut the door of their room.

"I want to talk to you about what you called 'the details.' I don't think you should spank me anymore. It isn't right. I'm not a child."

Shoot, were they back to that? How had it all come back to that? Aloud, he said mildly, "I see."

"And I don't think I should be treated like a child." That was her big finale, was it?

"Suppose you don't think of it as being treated like a child, but as being treated like someone who occasionally needs correcting? By someone who love her." That was an important point and he wasn't about to let her forget it. When she didn't respond, he set aside the crutches and lifted her to the full-sized couch that had been the scene of the previous night's drama. What had been passion just fifteen minutes earlier had to be subdued to warm affection. Summoning a patience he didn't completely feel, he said, "Let's try a different approach. You agree that your behavior over the past several weeks has been appalling, don't you?"

She hung her head guiltily. "I haven't been as kind as I might have been."

"Kind?" he pressed.

"Well. . . polite?" she ventured.

"Polite?" That characterization obviously wasn't any more satisfying.

"Well, I don't know what you want me to say."

His voice took on a firmness that made her pull away. "Let's see. For the past several weeks you've been jerking my chain, trying to keep me off balance, lying to me about your feelings and intentions. Trying to mislead me. Trying to drive me away. You show up here a couple of hours late, with virtually no excuse. How would you suggest I have responded?"

"Well, not with a spanking."

"Don't tell me what *not* to do. Tell me what you think would have worked. Because I think that was

a pretty effective way of putting an end to a lot of nonsense. I'm sorry you hurt your foot, and I can promise you that won't happen again, but the rest of it? I don't have any regrets. Tell me a better way to handle it." When she made no move to respond, he softened slightly, his hand cupping her face. "If the choices are us apart or you spanked, I know which one I'll choose every time. And if you can't give me a workable alternative, those seem to me to be the only options."

"But you didn't this morning," she protested, swallowing tears. "You just held me and talked to me, and then it was all over. Why can't you just do that?" she pleaded.

A light-bulb moment. She *had* had a tantrum that morning. He had been so wracked with guilt over allowing her to be hurt, confused by her assumptions, then stunned by the sudden reversal of attitude, that he had never really dealt directly with that behavior. He had been so relieved by her apologies that he had let that outburst go unanswered. He wasn't sure whether she was bringing it up because she *wanted*, on some level, to be punished for it or because she genuinely thought that should be the model for conflict resolution between them. That was a question he would eventually like the answer to, but in the short term the reason didn't matter. "You're right. I owe you a spanking for this morning."

She gasped. That was clearly not the reaction she was expecting. "No, no, that's not what I meant. I meant that was so *good* this morning. Can't you just do that *instead* of spanking?"

"No. I think part of the reason you were still so unhappy this morning was that we never really finished your spanking last night."

"Oh, you finished it!" There was accusation in her voice that he chose not to answer directly.

"No, not like I should have. When we stopped, you hadn't apologized, you hadn't admitted you

were wrong. You didn't give me a chance to forgive you."

She struggled with that for several long seconds, then choked back a sob to ask plaintively, "You don't forgive me?" Her head fell heavily to his shoulder, a sign he was still a source of strength and comfort, however miserable she might feel at the moment. He put reassuring arms around her and pulled her close.

"Oh, angel, of course I forgive you. I did this morning as soon as you apologized. But if we'd been able to finish up last night, I could have forgiven you then, and we'd have both rested a lot more easily.

He had not rested easily, she knew. And some of her easy resting had come out of a bottle. "So what are you saying?"

"I already said it. I owe you a spanking."

She closed her eyes in a desperate effort to shut out the images of what she knew the next few minutes would bring. Actually, maybe more than the next few minutes. She had no idea how far they were from "finished" the night before.

His arm, already around her shoulders, guided her across his lap while her eyes were still closed. She did not resist. Her clothes were easier to manage this time, and he slipped the elastic waistbands of her shorts and panties together down to her knees. Then he paused, trying to figure out how to protect her injured foot. His first instinct was to trap her legs between his – as he should have done the night before – but then the slightest wiggling could force her foot painfully into the floor. A more practical alternative was to have her kneel on the couch facing the back; that had the advantage of keeping her lower legs stable, but it also meant he would not have contact with most of her body. There would come a time when they could do that without threatening the intimacy or control that would be key to a successful spanking, but they weren't there yet. He settled for a

compromise, sliding them to the right until her knees touched the arm of the couch and her feet stuck straight up. "Susan, I want your feet up here so you don't hurt your toes, okay? I need you to try your best not to kick. If you do, we're going to have to find a different position that won't be as comfortable."

"Comfortable?" she squeaked. "You think this is *comfortable*?"

She couldn't see the grin so he didn't bother to suppress it, but he didn't let it show in his voice. "Well, you haven't seen the alternatives."

The thought didn't bear contemplation. There were less comfortable positions. God help her! In some corner of her mind she knew she would probably find out what they were. In the meantime, Ty's hand began to rub gentle circles on her bare bottom. It was oddly calming. Her breathing, which had become a series of short, strangled sobs, settled down. She could feel both his hands: one rubbing circles on her bottom, one cheek at a time, and the other rubbing her lower back. "Are you ready?" he asked, his voice as reassuring as his hands.

"Yes." It was a little high but not the squeaking fear he had heard a minute earlier.

He couldn't hide the surge of love and pride he felt at that moment. "Oh, my brave girl!"

And, oddly, she did feel brave. It was unexpected, because as she had thought about it over the past month – right up to a few minutes ago – the feelings that had surrounded the idea all had to do with humiliation. But, while the reality of submitting to him had a lot of colorations to it, there was no humiliation. There was fear, anxiety, regret – and now bravery – but no humiliation. A little embarrassment at her exposure, but it was worth it if he would keep rubbing her like that. Could she talk him into just rubbing her like that? Probably not, she acknowledged.

"Why are you here, sweetheart?"

"Huh?"

"Why are you here, over my lap?"

"To get a spanking?" she said uncertainly, and he smiled. She would learn the pattern. There was nothing self-evident about it.

"I mean, why are you getting this spanking? What did you do to prompt it? What lesson are you here to learn?"

Never to remind you that you didn't spank me for a tantrum was the first thought that went through her head, but she said, "I had an angry outburst this morning and hit at you. And you told me I would be spanked if I acted that way."

"That's right. And we never really finished with your spanking last night, so this is about your lying and manipulation, too. Let's start with a warm-up."

She flinched, bracing herself for the onslaught, but the first several spans were surprisingly gentle. Well maybe not gentle, but certainly bearable. It wasn't the iron-hard strikes that landed faster than she could count. She could feel each one but she could breathe, too. She stopped clenching her entire body. His hand continued to fall, steady as a metronome, and eventually she began to feel an uncomfortable burning sensation building throughout her bottom. "Honey, don't kick," he reminded. She hadn't been aware that her shins had come away from the armrest as though trying to come back and cover up her smarting cheeks. She pressed them firmly to the armrest. She did *not* want to find out what less comfortable positions he could think of. His hand fell a dozen more times, then paused, caressed the calves that had stayed where they belonged, then – sweet relief – rubbed at her stinging cheeks.

"Tell me again why you're here."

She knew the answer this time. "Because I've been dishonest and manipulative and because I had a fit of temper and hit you." She looked back for the first time since going over his lap. "I'm sorry about that."

"I know you are, angel." For a moment she thought he was going to take her into his arms. Instead, he settled for smoothing her hair away from her face and wiping away a tear she was unaware was there. "Can you keep your hands in front of you, or do you need me to help you? I don't want you reaching back to try to block me."

"I won't." She hoped she could keep that promise. The fear of losing control of her arms was a strong motivator.

He began to spank again, and she could see why he had called the earlier spanks a warm-up. He had heated the skin so it was warm – stingy, but warm. Now, though, that warmth was growing into a deep, penetrating burn. He didn't seem to be going any faster, but each one hurt more and his hand seemed to be constantly moving about, so she didn't know where the next shot of pain would land. Sometimes he would strike several times in the same spot, and she wondered if she was doing something to prompt that.

Her hand went back of its own accord and was promptly trapped against her hip. "Watch the feet," he reminded and she had to focus, really focus, to feel the arm of the couch. Ah, there. If she could just think about the arm and keeping her feet together. Oh, God! There was no arm, no couch. There was just the awful, building fire that wouldn't end.

The pain reached the same agony she had felt the night before, and still he didn't stop. How far had he been from "finished" when she broke her toes? She wanted to ask the question, but when she spoke she said instead, "No, no. Please! You've got to stop. I can't. . . oh, God, no!" then dissolved into frantic sobs.

His hand continued its rise and fall, but either he wasn't striking as hard or she had lost some element of sensation, because it somehow seemed more bearable. His words, though, cut her to the core and she almost wished she could slip back into

the pure pain arena. "Susan, you are going to learn to control your temper or you'll be in this position again and again. I know it scares you to be confused, and you're frightened when you don't know what to do, but you can't lash out at me that way. You can't hit me. You need to be able to talk it out calmly."

If he said anything after that she missed it. She saw instead her morning self pounding on his chest in frustration. She hadn't hurt him, but that was only because he had trapped her arms so quickly. She would have hurt him. She had *wanted* to hurt him, wanted to hurt him as he had just hurt her by telling her he had called Kent to take her off his hands. But it had all been a mistake, and it could easily have been solved with words, not fists. Really it was an extension of what she had been doing for weeks: trying to force him to respond to her unpredictable actions. Manipulative. He was right. She'd been trying to manipulate him all along without even a clear idea of what she wanted him to do. Now, hours later, limp with pain and exhaustion, she felt shame at her actions, a shame that burned her soul, much as the pain burned her bottom. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I love you. I'm sorry." She murmured the words over and over again, a soft, sad mantra that Ty could barely hear until he stopped spanking. Then, the words, still soft, seemed to fill his head.

Now that's the way to finish a spanking, he thought with some satisfaction.

He slid them both back to the center of the couch, ever mindful of her injured foot – though if she had been more aware, she could have told him the foot was the least of her problems. He turned her gently to cradle her in his arms and felt again awash with love as he had when she first went over his lap. She was still murmuring "I'm sorry" over and over again and he moved to brush away her sadness with touches and words.

"I know you are, angel, and it's all over. You were such a brave girl, but it's all over. You're going to be all right. Don't think about it any more. It's done. It's what happens from now on that matters. I love you. I have loved you since the day I met you. You are so sweet and attentive and determined, and I have wanted you in my life since I heard you argue with that poor young kite-jockey about signing the lesson contract."

Her sobs were calmed enough that she could hear his words, but she was still keenly aware of the burning pain across her entire, seemingly huge, bottom. The word that came to her mind was "sparkly" and she almost laughed through her tears. Sparkly. Yes. It conjured up an image of pinpricks of lights dancing across a surface that exactly matched the sensation in her tail. Ty's soothing hands rubbed away the worst of the burn, but it became a frantic, tingling, burning itch that seemed to be everywhere at once but constantly moving. Sparkly.

"I love you, too," she was finally able to say. Then she said it again because she liked the way he hugged her closer when she said it the first time. The second time felt just as good. In fact, his hands felt good wherever they were on her body – smoothing her hair, drying her tears, rubbing her bottom, stroking her back. She hung onto him limply, but he seemed willing to supply all the support she needed; strong arms held and patted her, never letting go, yet always moving to soothe some new area. It was a long, silent communion that left her exhausted but relaxed.

"Now that's the way a spanking should go," Ty said gently. There was no cast of smugness there, but Susan bristled slightly nonetheless.

"I don't like it!"

"Of course you don't," he agreed mildly. "But you needed it."

"It hurts!"

"So does manipulation. So do lies. And they hurt for much longer." He had her there.

"Yes." It was a reluctant admission but an admission nonetheless.

"Which do you think was more effective?"

"At what?"

"Achieving the objective."

"What objective?" She was confused. In fact, everything seem increasingly jumbled to her. Who did what and why was pretty fuzzy. All she knew was her ass hurt and she had screwed up royally, but for some reason she was still in Ty's arms.

"Well," he said patiently, "you used lies and manipulation and fits of temper to drive me away, and I used a spanking to settle you down. Which was more effective?" The obvious answer did not seem like a smart one, so Susan hesitated, trying to find a way out of his trap. She knew she was almost out of time when his left hand, which had been making soothing circles on her bottom, tightened menacingly.

She winced and said promptly, "Your way, I guess." The hand resumed its soothing pattern.

"I think so, too." He nuzzled her hair and added, almost to himself, "I'll have to remember that for future reference."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She tried to pull back from him, but he wasn't quite ready to relinquish control yet. She stayed tight against his chest and heard his words through the filter of her hair as he continued to nuzzle it.

"I mean just what I said. I'll have to remember, in the future, that even you agreed that a spanking was the most effective way to get what we both want."

"I don't think that's quite what I said." It was a protest, but a weak one. It didn't sound exactly like what she'd agreed to, but the argument seemed all but lost anyway. She surely wasn't going to convince him that lying and manipulation was a good strategy. And besides, she was awfully tired.

Talking things out sure was exhausting. It was a good thing Ty was there. She drifted off to sleep, oblivious to the transition.

Additional practice on satin sheets would have to wait awhile.

Chapter Eight

The rest of their vacation was far less dramatic but no less important. There were the moments spent curled in front of a flickering fire until, glistening with perspiration, Susan had finally broken into giggles and admitted maybe that wasn't such a good idea in July. But then, a nice cool bubble bath was an incredibly sexy way to revive them – even if Ty did insist that she hang her right foot over the edge so they wouldn't have to re-tape the toes.

They picked at room service and feasted on each other until Susan realized with a guilty start that she was glad Kent was coming down to pick up Ty's car because it meant she would have him all to herself for probably another half-day – more, if she played it up a bit. No, she told herself, sharply. That was dishonest and unfair. And liable to earn her a spanking if she wasn't careful. She intended to be careful.

So they talked and flirted, talked and made love, and talked and teased the better part of next two days away. Over yet another room service meal during their last evening at the resort, Ty stretched, commenting that he needed to get back into his exercise routine; she was wearing him out. It wasn't something she felt particularly bad about, though. Instead she needled him about their five-year age difference.

"So, old man," she teased. "Have you had a mid-life crisis? Bought a convertible, tried to recapture your youth? Oh, wait," she chortled, "that's what the hang-gliding was all about, wasn't it? That was your mid-life crisis, huh?"

She expected an answering chuckle, but his eyes were intense and serious when he said, "*You* are my mid-life crisis. The answer to it anyway. I never expected to fall in love again. I wasn't even looking for it. Maybe the hang gliding was a last grasp at youth, but you, you're a whole handful of

it. You make me remember I have as much ahead of me as behind me. Half-empty/half-full? Now I know: half-full."

Her eyes went liquid at the unexpected words. Her whole being went liquid. She would just dissolve into the carpet. How sad for Ty!

Across the table, he watched her with mounting anxiety. It had seemed so obvious to him, but maybe it was too soon to tell her. For Ty, the love and concern he felt were clear, and the recent tussles only made them clearer. She needed someone to lure her out of the safe, dark, emotion-free box she lived in, and he clearly needed a reason to care again. Well, he had it. His reason had been waiting for him on a sand dune in North Carolina with a camera in her hand.

Right now, though, her face was blank, though there were tears glistening in unblinking eyes. Finally, she took a very shaky breath, let it out, and smiled. No, beamed! When she could finally talk past the lump in her throat, she murmured, "God, I love you," then went back to smiling at him and shaking her head in wonder. He let out the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

"You have a beautiful smile."

"Thanks to three years of braces and another four of retainers to correct an overbite," she said wryly, then ran her tongue across those now-perfect teeth. It was terribly sexy, Ty thought, more so because she was unaware that it was.

He said, "So our kids will set the orthodontist up for retirement. That's okay. At the end of it they'll have beautiful smiles."

He could ignore the look of stunned surprise, but he could not ignore the words: "Our . . . kids?" she said slowly. Carefully.

He ignored the clear implication. "Well, you don't want them stuck with your overbite and my crooked teeth do you?"

She was momentarily confused about which part of his scenario was the most disturbing. "No, I

don't want them stuck – No, wait, *who* stuck? What do you mean *our* children?"

"Well, Leslie's already finished with braces, isn't she?"

Susan continued to look at him as if he'd grown another head. She blinked repeatedly. It didn't help.

"You're two steps ahead of me again, Ty. At least two steps ahead."

"Ah, well," he said as he gathered her into his arms and carried her, bedroom-bound. "Let me help you catch up." After they'd made love once again (or maybe it was twice), they revisited the subject of children. She conceded that at 35 and 40, they weren't too old to consider it, and by the time he was penciling in the wedding for early January, she'd pretty much caught up with him. Married. To Ty. Yes, she could learn to live with that.

And to think, she almost hadn't gone to Pennsylvania!

Looking back on that tumultuous July – and particularly the three days in a Poconos hotel that had set the tone for their relationship – Susan had to laugh at her own foolishness. Afraid to reach for happiness because of the possibility that she wouldn't be able to hold onto it, she might have lost out on it completely. Like Ty would have let that happen! Most of the time she could dismiss the possibility, but in one corner of her mind she knew that she had played her own part in getting them through those struggles. By allowing Ty to take the lead – however reluctantly – she had made her own bid for happiness.

So many changes, Susan thought, then laughed at herself again. The holidays had always brought out her sentimental side, she knew, and she grabbed another box of Christmas decorations from the storage shelf.

In the five months since that July showdown there had been moments of doubt and insecurity, but the highs more than made up for the lows – and she knew it, even during the lows. Being physically so far apart could wear on them both, but she had learned to adjust pretty well, she thought. And with only one sharp instructional session.

In early September, she had suffered a bout of the blues after Ty's return to Boston. Knowing she wouldn't see him again for three weeks had an especially unsettling effect on her that time, and she didn't even know why. They had been through separations before and would go through them again, she knew. Maybe it was that second part – that they would go through them again – that was so depressing. Whatever it was, she found herself pulling away, crying more when she was alone, and being somewhat elusive, even evanescent, when Ty tried to talk to her.

Unable to get a straight answer out of Susan, Ty had resorted to pumping Leslie for information. When she agreed that her mother seemed snippy and out-of-sorts for no particular reason, he took a personal day off work and the early flight into Baltimore, arriving unannounced and with a ping pong paddle in his hand. The conversation that followed made it very clear that he considered emotional isolation every bit as serious as actively pushing him away. She didn't need that lesson repeated, but he left the paddle in the top drawer of her nightstand – "just in case," he said. And though Susan wouldn't admit it out loud, she did occasionally take it out and caress it, touching it gently and affectionately as she would its owner, if only she could.

She had been amazed when he showed up at the house that day, green eyes sparkling with anger, more than two weeks before she expected to see him. The gray cloud that had been hanging about her for days was gone in a heartbeat, but she was very aware of a threatening black one taking its

place. Ty was angry and there was little question what it was about. Months before, as they worked out the "details" of their relationship, he had listed the only two things that he would paddle her for: doing things to hurt herself or their relationship. Her negotiator's mind had tried to get him to clarify the point; she was sure he meant if she *deliberately* did something to hurt herself or their relationship. But Ty, being Ty, insisted that he had meant just what he'd said: even if not intentional, he would take breaches very seriously. He repeated that he expected Susan to take care of herself (or answer to him for it) and he would take care of *them* (and Heaven help her if she worked against him).

Those broad categories covered a lot of ground, but she had no illusion what he would think about her sullenness over the past few days. She had known she would have to pull it together before they talked on the phone because there was no way he would miss it there. She thought she had covered it well enough in her emails, but his unexpected call on Wednesday had taken her totally off guard. What was he doing calling on a Wednesday? The man was predictable (sometimes maddeningly so); he *always* called on Friday. Unprepared to fake normalcy, she had made excuses about dinner needing attention and passed the phone to Leslie. To see him standing in the living room barely twelve hours later was both heartening and ominous. Heartening won. She went to him with a wan smile and hugged him snugly around the middle. And she was relieved to feel his arms around her as well.

"I'm sorry," she said through tears.

"I'm sure you are," he sighed as he held her close. "You know what's coming anyway though, right?" With that the ping pong paddle had made its first – albeit very light – acquaintance with Susan's bottom. Yes, she knew. She knew what was coming and was only glad that he didn't take

her over his knee without giving her a chance to catch her breath.

And she would accept it, though she couldn't really have explained why. It wasn't as though she thought she wanted it or needed it . . . or even deserved it. But she accepted it as part of her life with Ty, just as he accepted parts of her: her crazy work schedule, her difficulty opening up, her fondness for pineapple on perfectly good pizza. And she had to agree with him that a spanking had a sense of finality to it, a closure that she could appreciate. He had told her once that among his failings was a very long memory for un-righted wrongs, and she knew that to be true; but there was something very right-ing about a spanking that let them both put the problem to rest and move ahead unencumbered. For all the embarrassment that might precede it and the pain that might linger, the benefit was always a fresh start, a day dawning bright with promise.

So she had tried to talk him out of it (as she always did) and he shot down her arguments (as he always did), and twenty minutes later she was watering the floral pattern of the bedspread with her tears and coming to appreciate how much *stingier* a plywood paddle was than flesh and muscle. It seemed like a small price to pay to see Ty though. So she apologized for not being more honest, apologized for not sharing her worries, and apologized that she was still glad that he was there. It took a little more talking to reframe that last apology into something acceptable to Ty. It finally ended up as, "I'm sorry I didn't trust you enough to tell you when I needed you, that I didn't trust you enough to believe you'd come." And still she was glad he'd come. It was a new day dawning bright with promise.

And, really, other than that brief lapse, she had held up pretty well.

Curled on the bed after that paddling, eyes still red from crying, she had tried to explain. "I've

done things on my own for such a long time that I just don't think about sharing the load. It's not that I don't trust you. I just don't think of it as a solution. My problems are just my problems. Something needs to be done and I do it. Or worry about it. I thought I'd get this under control by Friday and I wouldn't have to bother you."

"First off, it's not a bother. Or, it is but it's just the kind I want. I *want* to be able to give you that support. It's important to me to give it. It's important to me that you take it. I *want* to know when you're feeling blue or unsure. Even if I can't help, I have to know. If you don't talk to me about the real stuff, I can come up with all kinds of other explanations in my mind, and believe me, I'd rather deal with the truth, even if it's hard." For such a forceful, definite statement, there was an air of sadness that made her sit up to study at his face. She didn't miss the haunted look that told her he was somewhere else, though she didn't understand it.

"What kind of other explanations does your mind come up with?"

He blinked and the look was gone. "Oh, don't worry about that."

"I want to know."

"Now's not the time, honey. Trust me on this, okay?"

"Okay," she said uncertainly, but it was still on her mind. Something was bothering him and he wouldn't share it with her. Where was the fairness in that? Worse, what was he concealing?

He chuckled her under the chin and smiled at her, but there was a ghost of sadness in that smile. "I asked you to let it go, angel."

"You also asked me to tell you when something's worrying me, not to keep it to myself."

"I did."

"Can't do both."

The smile then was genuine – wry but genuine. "You got me there, Sue."

She wasn't a good contract negotiator for nothing. She eyed him levelly, waiting for an answer. When he frowned fiercely as though struggling through an argument with himself, she said, "Are you going to tell me about it or just lie there and grind your teeth?"

"Today is really not the right day to have this discussion," he said with enough pain in it that she was momentarily speechless.

When she got past that, her response was very soft. "Not the right day because it would hurt me? Or because it would hurt you?"

He all but launched himself to his feet and began to pace the room, rough fingers raking through his short hair, more agitated than she had ever seen him. His demeanor was both alarming and fascinating – alarming because she had never seen him so unnerved, fascinating because it did not seem directed at her. He blew out a hard breath and said sharply, "Don't push me on this!"

"Okay."

"What?"

"I said 'okay.' I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable. I didn't mean to. You've asked me to stop pushing and I will. I hope you will be able to tell me about what's on your mind eventually, because I think it's important to you, but I won't bring it up with you again." He stopped pacing but still seemed uncertain, his expression apprehensive. She kept her tone easy and inviting.

"Can you come here and hold me for a while? I imagine you have to go back this afternoon." His nod confirmed it. "Then come over here so I can get my fill of you. As if I could ever get my fill of you." She stretched out on the bed, an invitation he was unable to decline. He was still irritated with the direction the conversation had taken, irritated he'd unintentionally raised the specter of the past. He would have to tell her eventually, he knew, but not when she was still rebounding from her loneliness. And not when he was still shaken by the

overpowering love that had forced him onto an early-morning plane when he should have been checking specs on the new Hanover job.

He dropped heavily to the bed and wrapped her in his arms, where she was warm and safe and satisfyingly soft. And there.

She had promised Ty that she wouldn't raise the subject that he seemed to be avoiding *with him*, but that didn't close all avenues. She had maintained a casual email correspondence with Kent, reinvigorated when they met again in the Poconos. Jokes and stories had flown both ways as had a few pictures of Ty and Leslie. The email that Susan drafted a few days later, though, was completely different.

Kent –

I need some help, and I hope that you can provide it. Ty was down here on Thursday, but I suppose you know that as you were probably covering for him. If so, I owe you a big "thank you" because his grumpy ole face was just what I needed to see. I love him more than words can say, and it really lifted my spirits to see him midweek like that.

But something came up when he was here. He seemed suddenly very remote and talked about wanting me to tell him what I was thinking because otherwise his mind comes up with awful possibilities. When I asked what he meant, he just sort of shut down. I've never seen him do that before and it worries me. I told him I wouldn't push him on it – and I won't – but it occurs to me that you know him better than anyone, and you might know what's going on here. I don't want you to betray any confidences, but I get the feeling that whatever it is, it's

hard for Ty to talk about it. Can you give me any insight?

She read it, re-read it, tried to look at it from Ty's perspective. If he should read it, what would he think? Was she pushing? Would he resent it? Would Kent? She added another paragraph.

If you can't, either because you don't know or because you can't tell me, I'll understand. I'm sure Ty will eventually come around on this. I just want to make it easier for him. If there's something I'm doing (or not doing) that could ease his mind, I want to do the right thing.

That was better. And very true. She hit the "send" button and logged off. Ten minutes later, the phone rang.

"Susan, what are you trying to do?" came Kent's deep voice, humor mixed with exasperation.

"Oh, Kent, I don't mean to put you in the middle. It's just that you know each other so well. I was sure you would be able to give me some clues."

"You should be having this conversation with Ty, not me."

"He won't talk about it."

"That's something you two need to work out, then."

"Point taken." She said it mildly and then nothing else. Kent's unease with silence would do him in. She had spent too many years dealing with buyers and sales representatives, negotiating deals big and small. She knew the value of silence. He broke first.

"It has nothing to do with you."

"I got that impression. Something happened to him, maybe a long time ago, that's making him a little uneasy with me. It's almost like flashbacks. He'll catch himself wanting something from me..."

and try to stop himself. But I don't know what it is he wants."

"You know him pretty well," he said. There was a measure of respect in the compliment, but he was stalling.

She called him on it. "You know him better."

"I do." The silence stretched for half a minute. She had a lot more practice with this than he did. "You know he was married before, right?"

"Yeah," she agreed. "He mentioned that once – that he'd been married in his 'ingenuous youth,' I think he said," Susan said with a laugh. When there was no answering laugh, no answer of any kind, she went suddenly serious. "That's it, isn't it? It didn't end well?"

"Does it ever?"

"No," she agreed, thinking on her own failed marriage, nearly 11 years in the past and still a raw spot on her heart some days. "So that's it? A bad marriage?"

Kent snorted. "It was more than a bad marriage. She ripped him to pieces."

"In what way?"

"You really ought to be having this conversation with Ty. I get the feeling I've already said too much."

"Well," she said sweetly, "since you already have, you might as well finish the thought. How did she rip him to pieces? You don't mean she hurt him physically?" Susan couldn't imagine any woman being able to land more than a scratch on Ty before he could overpower her.

"No. It probably would have been easier on him if she had. No, she had a more devious mind than that. She was as deceitful and conniving as they come," Kent said bitterly. "And he just couldn't see it. For Ty, loyalty is everything. Once he's given you his, it's yours. To do with as you like. And what she did with it was betray him."

And he's afraid I'll do the same thing, Susan realized. But rather than confront her with that

thought, he was berating himself for the comparison, unwilling to lay the burden of his past at her feet. That was Ty, through and through. Susan asked for no details, sensing that would be beyond the pale. Kent had his own loyalties to Ty; it wouldn't do to test them. "Thank you, Kent. That clears up a lot for me. We'll eventually talk about it, I'm sure, but it helps to know where the mines are planted." He chuckled in commiseration and relief that she was not going to pump him further.

Having promised not to make a frontal assault, she launched a much more subtle campaign. She didn't push Ty directly, but she took every opportunity to give him an opening. She found herself talking more about her own failed marriage – the whys and hows and the feelings that bubbled up. She told him about the "year of hell" she had experienced in 1992 in more detail than she had ever admitted out loud: of the self-imposed isolation and the questioning of her own value. Ty, delighted with the apparent breakthrough achieved in the wake of that paddling, reveled in her honesty and openness. And though he shared much of his inner life in response, Susan was keenly aware that the subject of his own first marriage was never raised. If she hadn't talked to Kent, she'd have believed that she knew him very well.

Determined to make headway, she picked movies to share with a view toward the discussions they would prompt. There were very important talks of values and principles, which gave Susan the reassuring feeling that they were uniquely suited to each other, but didn't answer the mystery of his first marriage.

Oddly, her approach had exactly the opposite effect from what she intended. Instead of convincing Ty that he should tell her, her actions allowed him to put his past aside and focus on the present. And the future. He was delighted with the new candor between them but made no connection with the taboo subject of his odd reaction following

Susan's paddling. Their energized relationship pushed the negative thoughts that had haunted him further away.

Eventually, as fall gave way to winter, Susan shelved the matter deliberately, reminding herself that she had felt, and Kent had confirmed, that whatever his concern, it did not directly involve her. She had told him she wouldn't push, and having exhausted the alternatives, she could do nothing but leave him to raise it or resolve it. She stopped working to encourage him, but by then the communication had become a habit – and a comfortable one at that.

So she focused on pre-Christmas sales at the store and putting in 80-hour weeks and found herself surprised more than once when Ty flew in to spend the night with her. There would only be five weeks of this chaos, she assured him – from Thanksgiving to New Year's – then she could ease off. Come mid-January they were taking ten days for a small private wedding and a relaxed, very private honeymoon.

But that was almost four weeks away, Susan sighed as she hauled down another box of decorations. For now she had to get the house in shape and the ornaments out, if not on the tree. It was a little depressing to be doing it alone, but Leslie was at the library working on a research project, and Susan had so few free evenings that it would be crazy to waste this one. If she sat around and sulked – and she felt a niggling desire to do so – they might get to Christmas Eve without so much as a stocking hung by the chimney. And that just wouldn't do.

She was facing the front door, struggling to get the wreath attached without obscuring the peephole, so she missed the cab that paused out front, and its passenger made no effort to warn her of his presence until he was two feet behind her. She was cursing the slippery plastic ties when Ty's

voice made her jump. "Not quite the Christmas spirit, is it?"

The wreath hit the ground as she wrapped her arms tightly around his midsection. While she had not dared hope he would make it down to Baltimore before the following weekend, there was no one on earth she would rather have seen. She hugged him tighter and tucked her head against his shoulder, uncomfortable with her own reaction.

"Hey, hey, hey," he cajoled. "Why the tears? Please don't cry. I thought you'd be happy."

"I am," she sniffed, but the spasm in her chest told a different story. She was alarmed at how out of control her emotions were. In ten seconds, she'd gone from mundane thoughts about decorating the house to realizing how desperately she missed Ty. Now, she was standing on the front porch crying like a baby.

Ty, apparently with the same thought, eased her inside and pointed her toward the living room while he rescued the wreath and dropped his coat and overnight bag in the foyer. He was back by her side before she even got to the living room, scooped her up and had them both settled in the recliner before Susan knew what was happening. His easy rocking rhythm was extraordinarily calming, and in less than a minute she had pulled herself together enough to be embarrassed by her overreaction.

She scrubbed at her eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't know what that was all about."

Ty guided her head back down to his shoulder and continued to rock. He should have called to warn her, he thought. They always discussed the regular monthly trips he scheduled. Those were weekend visits or multi-day trips designed to take advantage of Susan's days off. The overnight trips he consulted her about only sometimes. The one in September, when he'd arrived paddle in hand, he had wanted an unguarded reaction, so he had deliberately not warned her. But the others had been mostly spontaneous affairs that depended on

whether a meeting was cancelled, suddenly freeing up an afternoon or morning, or whether the traffic cooperated when he raced to Logan hoping for a standby seat. He had not wanted to get her hopes up when he wasn't sure he could make it; then, too, he enjoyed the surprised delight when she saw him unexpectedly. Once, she had gotten home from work so late that he was in bed – her bed – when she arrived.

But it occurred to him as he rocked her, that he might be doing her a disservice by "protecting" her that way. By taking away the predictability, perhaps he was leaving her perpetually on edge, anxious and hopeful that he might come through the door on any given night. The pleasure he got from surprising her wasn't worth that. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I should have called you from the plane to let you know I was coming. Are you okay?" She nodded, but he still had very little information. "Rough day? Did something happen? You seem a little shaky. Is it more than just me scaring you to death on the front porch?"

She smiled at that and wiped the last straggling tears from her eyes. "Oh, it's nothing. You surprised me, all right, but it was a good surprise. I guess it's just ...oh, this is silly. I was putting up the decorations and sort of thinking what a sad thing that was to do all alone. I wanted to wait for Leslie but she won't be back until late, and I don't know if I'll have another evening free before Christmas, so I've got to do it now, or ask Leslie to do it by herself and I couldn't do that." She caught herself rambling and took a breath. "And then you showed up like an answer to a prayer I hadn't even known I was saying." She took a deep, calming, satisfying breath. "Thank you."

He dropped a kiss on her head. "Why is it sad to put the decorations up by yourself, sweetheart?"

She was surprised at the question. "It's a family thing. Otherwise, there's no one to listen to the

stories of where everything came from, what everything means."

"What it means?" he prompted, clearly perplexed.

"Well, sure. Where the ornaments came from – who bought them or made them and why. We have a little wax Christmas village that I remember playing with when I was no more than six. And I bet Leslie could tell you the story of how my little brother ate the wax baker from that set when he was four, because I've told her that story every year as we set up the village. The angel that goes on top of the tree is made from the head of a china doll that belonged to my grandmother."

She chuckled, just as she had when telling the story to Leslie each year. "What happened to the rest of the doll has always been steeped in mystery, but the head became our angel. Almost everything has a story," she continued, "even if it's just to recall a time or place. That music box," she said, pointing to a wooden box topped with a ceramic reindeer, "was the first Christmas decoration I bought for myself after I moved out of my parents' house." She paused, then admitted, "It's kind of tacky, but it's mine, and it reminds me of when I was first on my own and feeling very independent."

Getting nothing but a sort of amused bafflement, she tried to turn the question around. "Don't you have special holiday decorations that mean something to you?"

"There were always decorations, but they never really meant anything special, I guess. It was always fairly formal, very tasteful. In fact, I'm pretty sure that my mother hired a professional decorator to design it at least a couple of times."

The thought did not compute for Susan. A professional decorator? Formal and tasteful? It sounded ...sterile. She tried a different approach. "Yeah, but how about now? You're an adult. How do you decorate now?"

How had this conversation turned so quickly? Mere minutes before she had been limp and snuffly; now she seemed fine but he was feeling a little defensive. "Decorate? I have a tree. Sometimes I put it up, sometimes I don't. I won't bother this year because I'll be down here. But I've got a couple of boxes of ornaments – red and green balls, I think, and some snowflakes." The concern in her face made him uncomfortable and he set her on her feet. "It's not a big deal, Susan. It's just a tree." He dropped a kiss on her forehead and said, "You're looking better. Let me get my things settled and I'll give you a hand."

Like a dog with a bone, Susan persisted, following him down the hall to the bedroom. "But you've been out of your parents' house for twenty years. Don't you have things from your adult life? You don't have things that are special, that you feel sentimental about? Things that help you remember the past?" His forehead was furrowed, though whether with thoughtfulness or irritation she wasn't sure. Without pausing to consider her words, she continued, "You must have had Christmas decorations when you were married. Don't you still have them?"

"We never had a Christmas. I have nothing from then." His face was a mask. Brow smooth now, there was no expression. His voice was coolly impersonal. "Do you want me to hang that wreath?"

"Yes. Please. While you do that, I'll make you something to eat, okay?" He nodded agreement and left the room.

Oh, God, what had she done? She cursed herself as she moved around the kitchen putting together sandwiches and putting some soup on to simmer. He'd been there less than an hour and now he probably wished he'd stayed in Boston. She *knew* he wasn't as sentimental about things as she was. There was no crime in that. She'd been to his apartment only once but she'd been struck by how

utilitarian – even austere – it was. At the time she'd teased him about it looking like a typical bachelor pad. There had been no little knickknacks, no snapshots stuck to the refrigerator. The only photo she'd seen, in fact, was one of her on the nightstand. She should have known better than to press at all, but raising the subject of his marriage was just plain stupid. Her own nostalgia had gotten the better of her for just a moment. She took a deep breath and went off to find him.

The wreath was up and Ty was reading (or pretending to read) the newspaper. She came up from behind, rubbed his shoulders until his breathing, if not his muscles, relaxed. She touched the ends of his hair where it almost reached his collar, now open at the neck. The tie was gone, but instead of looking relaxed, he just looked exhausted. She went back to rubbing his shoulders and said, "Ty, I'm so glad you came today and I'm sorry that I ruined the mood."

She saw the wisp of a smile as he turned to gather her to him. "C'mere, you," he said and with those words she knew everything would be all right. He still had that slightly haunted look, but he wasn't shutting her out.

She settled in his lap, determined not to ask for more than he was prepared to share. She had his present and his future. The past was largely irrelevant. She was struggling with how to say that, when Ty surprised her. "I should tell you about my first marriage. You've a right to know."

Suddenly it was very clear to Susan. "No, not really. If you *want* to tell me, I'll be glad to listen, but I don't have a *right* to know. It's your choice, and I won't hold it against you either way. I know what kind of man you are now, and the past is only important if we let it be. If you prefer that subject," she said obliquely, "to be off limits indefinitely, then it is. No questions."

He smiled then, a genuine smile of affection, before hugging her almost painfully tight. "I love

you," he said. And for a minute it seemed like that was all he would say. Just as she was about to offer to see if the soup was ready, he set her next to him on the couch and began to talk.

"I told you I married in my youth, but I guess I really wasn't as young as all that. Twenty-eight. Old enough to know better. I was the hotshot young engineer just given my own project to manage and very full of myself, I guess. She was the office manager for the support section. Everything seemed to fall into place very quickly. We were married six or seven weeks later. At first everything seemed fine, or maybe I was just too busy with the project to see what was right in front of me. I can be a little single-focused, I know." He got to his feet and began to use his nervous energy to pace.

"The first sign of trouble I saw was at work. Money began disappearing. First from petty cash, then they called in an outside auditor, who found all kinds of other problems. We were all questioned and it was uncomfortable enough that I talked about finding another job, but Melinda said that would just make us look guilty. We should just hold our heads up and do our jobs. That sort of made sense, so I stuck it out. A month later, she was arrested. I was astounded. There had to be some mistake. She was my wife, not some common criminal."

He ran both hands through his hair, a clear sign of frustration, then let out a bitter laugh. "No, not some common criminal," he said to himself. "A fairly uncommon one."

"Picking up where I left off," he said with a forced brightness that made Susan all the more aware of how deeply hurt he'd been. "So, we hired lawyers to figure out how to get us out of this mess, fired one who wanted her to plead guilty, hired another who seemed almost as sleazy as the lowlifes I was trying to get her away from in the jail. Every time I'd see her she'd cry and beg me to get

her out. They'd set the bail exorbitantly high, and that didn't make sense either. Nothing did. It was sort of an Alice-in-Wonderland experience."

He sighed and forced himself to continue. He unconsciously slipped into present tense, a clear indication of just how vivid those feelings were. "So I'm trying to get a second mortgage on the house, and my parents are selling off their stock portfolio, and I'm still working at a place that thinks my wife is an embezzler. And I'm hanging on by my fingernails trying to figure out when the world stopped making sense. The lawyer keeps talking about all this evidence, but I know it can't be true. There's got to be a mistake. That's when Kent suggested that I hire a private investigator – like I didn't have enough people on the payroll." He laughed at that – almost a genuine laugh, though Susan suspected that it had more to do with Kent than with the payroll.

"What do I need with a private investigator?' I say, and Kent says it's just another tool. Maybe he can find out what's behind all this – who set her up and why – without getting involved with the court case directly. Plus – and this is the point that convinces me – it might lay the foundation for a suit against the company when it's all over: slander or defamation of character or something. So I hire this guy. It took him only four days to uncover what I hadn't caught onto in eight months."

He stopped there. After what felt like an eternity, and with a great deal of trepidation, Susan asked the question that had to be asked. "What?"

Chapter Nine

He seemed not to have heard her, he was so deep in the memory. Susan repeated, "What did the private investigator find? Evidence that she *had* been stealing from the company?"

Ty looked briefly confused as though he'd lost the thread of the story. "The company? Oh, yes, she'd been stealing from the company. It was the rest of it." He stopped again, and Susan almost wanted to tell him not to go on. She didn't want to know the rest. She didn't want to know he'd been hurt any more. But, of course, she didn't stop him, and after a deep breath Ty continued, in a tone both remote and dazed.

"The rest of it was that this wasn't her first little scrape with the law, not even her first acquaintance with marriage, though I think I was the first to insist on the formality of divorce. Her entire life was a series of lies. One swindle after another. She just always managed to slip away just before it caught up with her. I gather her year in Boston was the longest she'd ever stayed in one place. To this day, I'm not completely certain what her real name was. Could be even *she* doesn't know. She'd been so many people, and for almost a year she was Melinda. For eight months she was Melinda Reynolds."

At last his voice lost some of the stunned shock and he looked at Susan as though he could really see her. "So I confronted her with all the evidence that the private investigator gave me, and I guess, in my heart, I was still waiting for her to explain it away."

"But she didn't?"

He snorted. "No. She said if I would just get her out on bail, she'd be out of my life. Yeah, that's what I needed. Not enough to drive *me* into bankruptcy, she wants to wipe out my parents' retirement savings too, by skipping out on bail."

"The next month or so is still a little hazy," he said with a wry grin. "Kent tells me I was drunk for most of it. He's probably right. Somehow I managed to keep myself from getting fired, and eventually things got a little clearer. I sold the house, got an apartment in the city. Eventually, I found another job without quite so many reminders of my idiocy, then talked them into bringing Kent on board as well. The divorce went through when Melinda was still in prison. I assume she's out now. I really don't know. She's probably scamming some other gullible sap." He sat heavily on the couch, drained by the recitation, exhausted by the memories.

Susan curled against him wordlessly, one hand massaging the corded muscles in the back of his neck, lightly at first, then more firmly. When she saw the sudden relaxation of his shoulders as he gave in to her touch, she relaxed a little as well and guided him to lie face-down on the couch. Both hands worked on his neck and shoulders, rubbing in love, soothing away tension.

Whatever she had expected the story of his first marriage to be, this was something else. It made her own experience – and her ex-husband's "I've fallen out of love with you" explanation – seem positively tame by comparison. It also made it clear why lies and concealment were such hot-button issues for him. It was to his credit that he did not make overt comparisons, but it must have stung when she hid her feelings or pretended something that wasn't true.

She could recall his anger and wounded pride when they faced off in the hotel room in the Poconos five months earlier. There were surely levels to that she would never understand, but it made his commitment all the more precious because it was made in the wake of such pain. She moved down his torso, kneading stiff muscles, never losing the physical connection. She didn't know what to say to him, but she could do this.

Susan let her mind drift over the months since they'd met, a mental photo album of places they'd been and things they'd done. The dunes in North Carolina, sitting on a beach, restaurants, theatres, a hotel in Pennsylvania, a satin-covered bed, his apartment, her house. And in all those places was Ty, strong and supportive, determined and steadfast.

When the silence was finally broken, she was so deep into her memories that Ty's voice surprised her. "I thought we were going to get the Christmas decorations up."

"Don't worry about it. This is more important."

But he sat up anyway, drawing her to him, wrapping her in the warm comfort of his arms. His voice, too, was warm and loving. "You apologized earlier for ruining the mood. But I'm the one who did. I'm sorry for that. I guess I needed you to know all about what happened, but I didn't mean for it to be tonight."

She shushed the words with a kiss – a technique she'd learned from him – and suggested he turn in for the night. Before he could so much as answer, they heard the front door open, and Leslie called out, "Mom? How come the wreath is up? Why didn't you tell me we were decorating tonight?" By then she was in the doorway. She rolled her eyes at the intimate position she'd caught them in, but only said, "Hi, Ty. I didn't realize you were here. Are you staying through Christmas?"

"No, just for the night."

Leslie's eyes swept the room. "Well, it looks like I'm in time after all. You haven't gotten very far with the decorations. Were you waiting for me?" There was a glimmer of hopefulness beneath adolescent nonchalance that neither of the adults missed.

"Well, your mom tells me it's a family thing, so we couldn't really do it without you, could we?" Ty said with a smile, setting Susan on her feet. "I put

up the wreath before I really understood all the implications."

So Leslie put on some Christmas music and helped Ty bring down the rest of the boxes while Susan made hot chocolate. (The soup, left on the stove for nearly two hours, was a complete loss.) And the three of them spent the next several hours in the intricate, delicate, vital exercise of reminiscing. Susan had been right that her daughter knew all the stories, and they shared a private smile as Leslie began to describe fate of the baker in the little wax village. When the last of the ornaments were hung on the tree, and Ty had stood on a chair to secure the china angel to the top, Susan slipped away, returning with three small packages. Two went under the tree to be opened on Christmas Eve and added to this year's ornament collection. The third, with a tag for Kent, went into Ty's hands.

"I'd planned to mail this, but as you're going back tomorrow morning, would you mind taking it to him?"

"Not at all," he murmured absently, "and my flight's late afternoon, not morning." His eyes were focused on the packages under the tree, though. One exactly matched the box in his hand, and he knew instantly what they were: the two hang gliders dangling in glass balls that she'd bought in Kitty Hawk. But the third package, the size of a deck of cards with a tag that said "To: Ty," was what fascinated him. What would she pick to remember this year between them? He fought a childlike urge to ask if he could open it early and caught Susan's smirk that said she knew the direction of his thoughts.

"Why not 'til afternoon?" she asked, picking up the last of the abandoned cocoa cups. "You know I can't take the morning off, right?" The warning in her tone was clear. Yes, he knew. The weeks before Christmas were her busiest time. He would no more expect her to take a morning off in mid-

December than he would expect a tax accountant to take a vacation in early April. It wasn't something he would waste his breath on.

"Of course," he said easily. "I'm down here on business."

That stopped her. "Business?"

Teasing her was fun. She had teased him by putting out the wrapped ornaments. Time to turn the tables. Let her dangle on the string awhile. "Yes, I have an appointment." There, that provided no new information.

"An appointment?" She was pressing while desperately trying to appear not to be.

It was Leslie who finally stepped into the middle of their dance without even realizing she was doing it. "What kind of appointment?"

Susan and Ty shared a smile before he turned to answer Leslie. "An interview. I have an interview. A job interview." He had intended to keep it to himself until everything was settled, not wanting to get Susan's hopes up until he knew the outcome. But somehow it just seemed like the right thing to do, the right time to tell her. If this job didn't work out, he'd find another. The ties to Boston that had seemed so important were not nearly as strong as the ties to this little home outside of Baltimore. That's where he belonged. Not in Boston, not on a plane, but here. With Susan every night.

"Oh, that's super!" The words were Leslie's, but the arms that circled him from behind were Susan's. She hugged him tightly, eyes closed, then let him slide around so he could hug her as well. Sensing she'd suddenly become a third wheel, Leslie said her goodnights, tossing out a "good luck" to Ty in case she didn't see him before she left for school in the morning.

"Hey, hey, hey, why the tears?" he said gently. "I think this is where I came in several hours ago. Please don't cry. I might not even get this job. It's just an interview, angel." But, of course, it wasn't just an interview. It was a statement.

Anxious to lighten the mood, even at the cost of his own pride, he teased, "Well, now I've told you my surprise, you have to tell me yours. What's in the package?"

That earned him a smile but the answer was clear. "No way. You have to wait 'til Christmas Eve, just like Leslie." Then she laughed. "And I'm warning you: It's your chance to create the story that gets told every year as it goes up on the tree. That's quite a responsibility."

It had been a long, emotional day for both of them. To compensate, the lovemaking was slow and tender. By then, Ty had given up asking her not to cry.

With an enthusiasm he had never imagined he could have toward Christmas ornaments, Ty found himself browsing gift shops and kiosks in the mall. It was made more difficult because he didn't really know what he was looking for: inspiration, he supposed. And he was getting darned tired of the condescending way the female clerks would rush to help him as though they knew he couldn't wait to get out of there. He was typically the only man in the store, but still...why couldn't they give him a little credit? Besides, he couldn't really describe what he wanted. Something special. Something that Susan could look at every Christmas as it came out of the box and remember this year, recall the feelings. Maybe that was putting a little too much responsibility on a little doodad, but that's what he was going for.

And he found it in what seemed to be the fiftieth store he looked through: a pair of golden hearts. Each hung independently, but they were interlinked, making a light musical sound like wind chimes as they touched. Across the top, a little banner-shaped tab spanned them both, engraved with the words "First Christmas – 2002." Simple, elegant, perfect. He ignored the indulgent smile of the old

lady behind the counter, but he wasn't too proud to accept her offer to wrap it. She did a nice job.

Christmas Eve a week later took on an excitement Ty had not experienced about the holidays since he was a boy, perhaps not even then. There were plenty of brightly-wrapped boxes under the tree, but on Christmas Eve only the ornaments could be unwrapped.

Sitting on the floor, they took turns. Leslie was charmed by the hang glider ornament, and as they watched her put it on the tree, Ty teased her about how many shops he had been dragged to in the quest for one with the right color and style of kite. It seemed like a lifetime ago, in some ways. In others, it was as fresh as last week.

Susan's blinked-back tears as she held the interlocking hearts were all the answer Ty needed as to whether his own quest had been worthwhile. He gathered her to him as Leslie rolled her eyes. She rolled them again as they kissed and finally said, with some exasperation, "Well, are you going to hang it on the tree or just wait for next year?"

"Then it wouldn't be our first Christmas," her mother said primly and rose to slip the ornament on a branch at eye level. She listened to the musical tinkling until she heard paper tear on Ty's box. This she had to see.

His expression was hard to read at first, but she knew he was trying not to laugh, trying not to respond at all until he could find the words. She had warned him that he would have to come up with the story, but forcing him to do it on the fly in front of Leslie was probably not really fair. On the other hand, she rarely caught him this off balance and she found herself taking dark pleasure in it.

"So what is it?" Leslie craned to see the box Ty still held in his lap. His eyes, desperate with pleas, went to Susan as he lifted it out of the box. It was a miniature ping pong paddle, red just like the one

that rested in her nightstand. "Oh, I didn't know you played table tennis. That's neat. We had a tournament in gym class, and it was a lot more fun than I expected."

Still, to Leslie, it didn't seem quite the thoughtful, meaningful gift that the hearts had been. Or even the hang glider. Her mother must have been awfully preoccupied to have settled for a table tennis racket. Even at sixteen, Leslie could have done better. You'd think that two weeks before the wedding she'd be able to come up with something romantic or sexy. Well, that was never her mother's forte. "Thank you for the glider, both of you." As she left the room, she heard her mother giggle – a rare and delightful sound that made her recall that, however dumb the ornament was, they were both on the same wavelength most of the time so maybe it meant something special to them.

Ty's whispered threat, "You'll pay for that," was what prompted the giggle as he bundled his soon-to-be-wife into his lap.

"Yeah, that's what I figured. Worth it, though, to see your mouth drop open as you tried to figure out what to say." She was still laughing so he tickled her, sending her off into another gale of giggles.

"And what would you have said? What would your story have been?"

"To Leslie? Oh, that we rediscovered our youth and this is a symbol of the playfulness we found with each other. Something like that."

His voice was suddenly serious. "And to me? What would you say to me?"

She matched his mood in a heartbeat. "To you, I'd say that it's just as important and just as symbolic as the intertwined hearts are. It's a sign of the trust I've given to you, a sign of the trust you earned. Of your promise to take care of us, even if that means spanking me to keep us on track. It makes me think of how close I came to losing you

and how you wouldn't let that happen." She paused before admitting, "Do you know that sometimes when you're not here, I take out that paddle and hold it?" He shook his head. No, he'd had no idea. "I do, sometimes. And it makes me miss you less."

If he could have held her any closer, he would have. "Soon, sweetheart, soon. I have two more interviews set up for just after New Year's." That first job he'd looked into had not been a good fit, but he'd find one that was. He might have a new job lined up even before they left on their honeymoon. Wouldn't that be something to come home to? Four hundred miles was an unacceptable commute. And this was home. He stood and held her in the circle of his arms while she placed the final ornament.

The multicolored lights seemed to flicker against the tinsel, and he studied the paddle that now hung right next to the hearts. So many changes in the past year. He could feel the same sentimental pull to examine the past that Susan experienced sorting through the Christmas decorations. "So many changes." He hadn't realized he's spoken out loud until he heard Susan's response.

"Yes, and they're all good ones. A year ago, I would not have believed I could be this happy. And I wouldn't trade it for anything. I have everything I ever wanted. No, more. Because it never occurred to me to want you. I wouldn't have thought it possible. I love you."

"Thank you," Ty answered gently.

"What the hell kind of answer is that?" Susan responded, half-amused, half-irritated, as she drew back.

"It's a lot better answer than you'll get for that kind of question." No compromise there.

She did a quick mental rewind and knew instantly what he hadn't liked. "I just meant that 'thank you' is not quite the answer I expected," she said weakly.

There was nothing weak about Ty, not his voice, not his conviction. "And I just meant that I appreciated the sentiment, but I did not appreciate your response."

"Oh, damn," she said miserably.

"You're oh for two," Ty returned grimly as she shuddered.

There was a tension between them that surprised them both for a long moment. That's how long it took for Susan to realize that, a year ago, walking away would have been an automatic response. No more. Not even a possibility. She smiled, spread her arms in resignation, and said "I surrender, sweetheart. Do with me as you will." The irritation was gone in a second, as she suspected it would be. He had an amazing reaction to her surrender – in any sense.

"God, you know what I want to do with you?" he growled. The irritation had been replaced with a different kind of heat and a longing fed by a week's separation. A moaning sigh said she knew too.

"I love you," she repeated, and that time she got a more conventional response.

"I love you, too."

"Well, let me get you to bed. Santa won't come unless everyone's in bed," she said around his kisses.

"I thought everyone had to be asleep, not just in bed."

"Since when did you start reading the fine print?" she laughed and tugged him down the hall.

When *had* he started reading the "fine print"? His mind went through a handful of truths. It might have been as long ago as April, when he realized that anything she did fascinated him. Later, he had become a fine student of technicalities as he discovered how important terms and conditions were to Susan's acceptance of new commitment. Maybe it was more recent than that: he had become a master of the fine print when she began to let him set the terms and he knew he better get it right for

both of them. When had he started reading the fine print? He'd have to think about that.

In the meantime, he had a question of his own: "Now, where was that ping pong paddle?"

Susan giggled.

