

Stand Up All the Way

By Kathryn Jay

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Part One

Chapter One

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

But then, those things always did. "It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt," her father used to say. This was right up there with "You'll put someone's eye out" as a warning universally ignored. She should have listened to the little voice that warned this might be too far outside her comfort zone.

Now, instead of spending a quiet Friday night in front of the TV watching Monsters' Inc. or Spiderman with her son, Erin was headed to some godforsaken hole in the ground in West Virginia with a guy she barely knew. Not her finest moment, she would have to acknowledge. But it could be worse. In fact, it was bound to be.

Just two weeks earlier, she had been sitting at a conference table with a dozen other people in the newly-formed single parents' support group when the subject had turned to weekend activities that would bring the group together outside office hours. Started by their company's employee services organization, the group met twice monthly over lunch to exchange ideas and offer support to each other, and somehow Erin had become one of the unofficial leaders – making reservations for the conference room and sending out the meeting reminders to a growing but largely apathetic membership. Everybody seemed to think it was a good idea to have a support group, but no one had the time or inclination to plan a program. And without a program the meetings tended to degenerate into male-bashing by the largely female and recently-divorced attendees. Deadbeat dads and restraining orders were hot-button issues, and there was little to be gained by griping en masse, as far as Erin was concerned. It also meant that the occasional dad that showed up didn't return to a

second meeting. Nobody needed that kind of hostility.

So Erin had arranged for a demonstration of relaxation techniques, a visit from an official with the county daycare licensing board, and a display by an employee who sold Discovery Toys as a sideline. She also had a short list of topics to redirect discussion when it began to degenerate. So, in a sense, it was all her fault. Erin herself had been the one to say, "So, does anyone have any ideas about weekend activities so we can get to know each other with the kids we've heard so much about?" There were a handful of suggestions – a picnic in the park, bowling, a museum visit -- but it was the one that came from Cokely Tanner, the custodial parent of an 8-year-old little girl, that brought her to West Virginia.

Tanner had mustered the nerve to come back to a third session, outlasting any of the other men who had made an appearance, and he seemed to be trying to make a constructive contribution, so when he suggested a Saturday caving trip, Erin jumped on it. Sure, it sounded like a great idea! Several of the other women agreed, too, and the details went out in email the following day. There was an organized tour of an undeveloped cave, perfect as a novice trip and suitable for kids as young as 6. It would not be especially demanding physically, and it was one Tanner had been in before. "You can stand up all the way through," he assured them, as though it would have occurred to them otherwise. "Oh, and it's in West Virginia. I know that's a long drive, but there's a cabin nearby that we can stay in. If we go out Friday night, everyone will be well rested and ready on Saturday morning. We enter the cave at 8 a.m."

In the two weeks that followed, the other participants dropped out one by one until there were only four left. She wished she had bailed early on, before the excuses had begun to sound so lame, but by the end, she couldn't do that to him. She

knew too well the frustration of planning an activity only to have other people take it for granted – as though they were doing you a favor by accepting your hospitality.

Well, she was committed now...Or should be committed, she thought wryly.

They were now 45 minutes into a drive that was bound to be at least 4 hours. By the time they met for what should have been a caravan of four cars, two more families had dropped out, leaving just Erin and Tanner and their kids. With just the four of them, it seemed silly to take two cars. She had to agree that it made more sense to travel together in his Explorer. The final 10 miles or so were over rough ground, and her little sub-compact wasn't built for that. On top of that, trying to follow him for miles in the dark would have added more difficulty than necessary.

She had no real fear for her safety. They both worked for the same Department of Defense contractor, and she knew the "top secret" level clearance he held made it unlikely that he was a serial killer or kidnapper. The background checks they did for those projects were far more detailed than she could hope to duplicate. And, with a discrete call to a friend in the personnel department, Erin had confirmed that he'd been employed there for 10 years without any negative remarks in his file. There was no safety reason she should not go with him.

Yes, it made good sense, and that's why she had agreed, transferring their few bags into his Explorer in the commuter parking lot. It made sense, but she felt a queasy sense of vulnerability not having her car or the privacy it afforded. Instead, she struggled to make small talk.

"So, how long have you been doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Caving, spelunking, whatever it's called."

"Since I was a kid. My granddad had a big, sprawling piece of property up in Pennsylvania, and

I used to spend the summers with him. Mostly, it was farmland, but there was this one area that was kind of hilly and rocky. Nothing grew there, but it was like a magnet for me. As soon as chores were done, I was out there. Sometimes my cousins would come too; sometimes I'd meet kids from town. But I was always there. There were a couple of small hollows – good places to hide – and we used to play hide-and-seek and army a lot. I discovered this gap high on the wall of one of the caves, and I figured that it probably connected to one of the other hollows. I really wanted to know – I needed to know – where that led. So, we started digging at it. It took most of the summer to make that gap big enough to get through, but eventually we got it. And, I was hooked."

"So," she prodded, surprised to find herself genuinely interested. "Where did it lead?"

He laughed in rueful remembrance. "To another little hollow barely big enough to stand up in. But to me, it might as well have been Luray Caverns. I had this incredible sense of discovery. I was the first one to ever see that cave. The first one." He flashed her a self-satisfied smile, and she had a glimpse of the triumphant boy he must have been.

"I took Declan to Luray last summer," she said, glancing to the back seat reflexively. Seven-year-old Declan was scowling in concentration over the GPS receiver that Claire had shown him almost as soon as they were moving. He didn't usually have much use for girls, but Claire had probably won him over forever by offering, unasked, the one thing he would never turn down: a new gizmo. "Remember, Declan?"

"What?" he mumbled. He was oblivious to the question, busy pressing buttons to see what effect they had.

"Luray Caverns. You remember going there last summer, don't you? And seeing the stalagmites and stalactites? And the organ? Remember?"

"Mmm-hmm." That might have been agreement,

or it might have been a polite version of "Go away, you're bothering me."

Either way, Erin turned back around in her seat and said, "Well, we did, and he really enjoyed it."

Tanner's eyes left the road briefly a couple of times as he eyed her across the front seat, but it was half-a-minute before he spoke. "This isn't that kind of cave, you know. Luray, Crystal Cave, and Seneca Caverns are all commercial caves. This is nothing like that. You know that, right?"

"Sure." Of course, she did. Sort of. All those cavern systems had tour guides and paved paths and railings, and you stood in line to buy a ticket. What they would be doing was much more ... undeveloped... that was the word. This is why Tanner had advised her to pack warm comfortable clothes that could get ruined. Folded into the duffle she had transferred from her car were jeans that were just weeks away from the rag-bag, T-shirts, turtlenecks, and flannel shirts to layer over top.

It was fully dark, and the late rush-hour traffic was miles behind when he broke the silence again. "So, how'd you end up being the only one that didn't back out on this trip?"

"Um, well, I don't know. Just lucky I guess." Silence. "I guess maybe it seemed like too much of a commitment for some of the others – you know, a whole weekend, four hours away, a little too much like roughing it, maybe. I think we'll have a better turnout for bowling next month." When he still didn't answer, she continued, "But I thought it would be fun, and I really appreciate your organizing everything. I can't really seem to get anyone else to pick up the slack. They keep saying they want a program, but they're too busy because they're single parents."

That got the first smile from him. She didn't realize until he turned its full effect on her that she had never really seen him smile fully before. She'd seen his mouth quirk in wry amusement during group, she'd seen the half-smile of recognition as

they passed in the cafeteria at work, and she had seen the fond smile of a father's affection when he spoke to and about his daughter, Claire. But this, this was something else. In the fraction of a second before his eyes returned to the road, she had the feeling that they were facing the world together, sharing the joke and an innate understanding of their place in it. It was a startling moment, but it was gone before Erin could analyze it.

"Yeah, I noticed that," Tanner said casually, as though the earth still turned normally on its axis. "I'm really not too sure what some of those people want from the group. It seems like they expect you to provide everything from legal advice to babysitting."

That was true. There was no shortage of ideas for programs, but no one was willing to take point, so it was coming down to only the activities that Erin was willing to arrange. One of the women had even had the nerve to demand that coffee be provided; Erin had told her sweetly (through gritted teeth) that she was free to arrange for coffee herself but if she was under the impression that doing so was Erin's job, she was sorely mistaken. It was quintessential Erin: all the right words, said in a quiet but somehow threatening tone that left the unfortunate recipient apologizing and backing away carefully as though fearful a sudden movement might set her off. She was rarely crossed twice by the same person. No coffee was provided at subsequent meetings.

"So what are you looking to get out of the group?" Erin asked, as Tanner was the only other one to make any sort of an effort.

"Seriously?" he asked with a self-deprecating smile. "I was hoping to find some other parents of kids the same age to trade practical advice with. I tried to trim Claire's bangs last month and made a mess of it. She kept wiggling, and I couldn't cut straight. They kept getting shorter and more uneven. I thought maybe somebody else could

show me how to do her bangs, and, well, then she wouldn't feel so different," he finished softly, conscious that his voice not carry to the backseat. Between the road noise and the beep-beep-beep of the video game Claire was hunched over, that didn't seem likely, but all the same, Erin found herself dropping her own voice.

"Her bangs look fine," she reassured.

"Yeah, I know. I took her to a stylist to have them fix it. She was in tears. Said all the kids would tease her, and she felt like a freak. She's saving her allowance so when they need trimming again, she can get it done herself."

Erin stifled a smile over the thought of this big hulk of a man crouching down to meticulously snip at his daughter's curly hair. "I can help you there," she offered easily. "I'm pretty good at haircuts."

He flashed a smile of gratitude and patted her hand where it sat on the seat. "Thanks," he said warmly. "That'll help." His hand returned to the wheel. "It's the things like that that I think Claire misses. Someone to help her with her hair, to take her shopping for a new dress, stuff like that. I'm fine with supervising homework and bedtime stories and soccer practice and all the rest, but the hair-and-clothes thing is just not something I'm learning."

"How long have you been widowed?" she asked gently.

He shot her a quick look. "I'm not a widower. I'm divorced." He glanced again, curious whether that made a difference in her reaction to him. "What made you think I'm a widower?"

What was it? He had never mentioned a wife – ex- or otherwise. So many newly-divorced men tended to rip their wives apart in even casual conversation, but he hadn't done that. Maybe it was just his natural reticence that made him seem the grieving widower. Could it be something as sexist as assuming that children would naturally be with their mother, that a father would have them only if there

were no mother? That was not something she was ready to admit to a relative stranger. "I don't know. I guess I just assumed. How long have you been divorced?" Yes, much safer territory.

"Oh, about a year," he answered, oblivious to the re-analysis being conducted by the woman in the passenger's seat. "And we were separated for a while before that. Claire and I have been on our own together almost since she started school."

"That must be hard on you," Erin offered.

Tanner shrugged. "Not over-hard. 'Cept when her bangs need cutting," he said with a quick smile.

Oh man, that smile ought to have a Surgeon General's warning on it, Erin mused. Maybe it could say something like "Women are strongly cautioned that they may lose all restraint under the influence of this smile." Erin had always been a fool for a beautiful smile. A guy could be 80 pounds overweight, balding, and walk with a limp, but if he had a natural, unaffected smile that lit up his eyes, she was captivated. But she didn't want to be captivated by Cokely Tanner, she reminded herself. She was just there to be polite so he would feel his time was well-spent planning the caving trip.

She forced the thought away and pretended that he needed her help looking for the next turnoff. The conversation over the next couple hours was general and impersonal, and she gave him no reason to distract her with that smile again.

Chapter Two

He was right about the last 10 miles. Both the kids had dozed off midway there, but the "rough ground" he talked about woke them both to groggy consciousness, and Erin found herself bracing against the floor and rechecking her seat belt as they bounced over what could be called "gravel" only in the loosest sense of the word. It was really more like large rocks or maybe small boulders. Her little Mazda never would have made it up the mountain with the oil pan intact. After the jarring of the final leg of the trip, both kids were awake but grumpy, and it took a few minutes to bundle them against the sudden chill of outdoors and to sort out the bags that needed to go into the cabin.

Tanner had warned her that it was "rustic" but nothing quite prepared her for what they found inside. "There'll probably be other people from the caving club staying there," he had said. What had been left unsaid was "and it doesn't matter how many because the place sleeps something like 50 people." All in one room. A dormitory. With 25 bunk beds that saw their best days during Franklin Roosevelt's presidency. Or maybe it was Teddy Roosevelt's presidency.

No, definitely FDR. The place had the unmistakable look of a WPA project of the 1930s: wooden, utilitarian, cramped. It had running water – cold – but no bathroom. By flashlight, they shuffled the kids between the port-a-john in the parking area and brushing teeth at the utility sink before packing them off to bed fully clothed, less their shoes. Erin tested several of the rickety bunk beds before letting Declan crawl, drowsily, into his sleeping bag on the top bunk, and she wasn't sure whether she was heartened or annoyed that Tanner did the same before settling Claire nearby.

What in hell had he been thinking? It was a shack. The sky might be free of the light pollution she was accustomed to in urban and suburban life,

but surely there was a hotel or motel somewhere nearby. There had to be some sign of civilization, though she couldn't remember seeing any recently, certainly not since they had turned onto the "gravel road." She stood, watching Declan's eyes close heavily and trying to decide what to do next, when she heard Tanner's voice in her ear.

"They're both dead to the world. You want to go to bed or join me on the porch for some coffee?"

Lying on the rickety bunk waiting for sleep to come held little appeal. "Coffee sounds good," she whispered.

She dug a sweatshirt out of her duffel bag and reclaimed her flashlight from Declan's limp hand, then went looking for Tanner. There was no one on the porch, but she found him in the good-sized kitchen that took up one end of the cabin. There was a bare electric light bulb hanging from the ceiling, but it was unlit. Instead, Tanner was fiddling with a Coleman lantern that didn't seem to want to cooperate. She watched from the doorway until a sudden "poof" made him draw back and the room was bathed in light. He fiddled some more with the lantern and the light dimmed to a dull yellow, but that was apparently what he was going for because he set it on one of the two long tables that divided the room and moved on to tinker with the massive iron stove against the wall.

"I'll have this going in a minute," he said between puffs of air into the balky firebox.

"Can I give you a hand with anything?"

"Ever lit a wood-burning stove?"

"Nope."

"Then have a seat. This is one of my less-practiced skills, but I think I can pull it off," he said with a smile. God, that smile!

Ten minutes later, they were both sitting at the table as the old-fashioned coffeepot gurgled on the stove. "Something bothering you?" he asked as he watched her knot and unknot the cord on the end of her flashlight.

She looked up with a guilty start. She had no idea she'd been so transparent. "No, nothing's wrong. Everything's okay. I guess I didn't really picture it this way."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. You said 'cabin,' and I guess I got a different image in mind. This is a little –" She paused, searching for a word that wouldn't sound too judgmental.

"I told you it was primitive."

"No, you told me it was rustic."

"Same thing."

"No," she said definitely. "'Rustic' is towering oaks and split rail fences and roaring fireplaces. This is primitive." She was about to launch into a list of all the things that made it primitive – from the ready-to-fall-apart bunk beds inches away from total strangers to the large spider taking up residence between where the lantern sat and an adjacent chair – but the wounded look on his face stopped her. "Don't worry about it. I'll survive. Shoot, it's only one night. I can do anything for one night."

"One night? What are you talking about? We're not going back until Sunday afternoon. It's too far, and we'll be too tired to make the trip tomorrow." He stood to check on the coffee as Erin sputtered behind him.

"Wh – ? I don't – You didn't say anything about Sunday," she finally choked out, even as she frantically searched for a reason she would have to be back Saturday. How could she have been so foolish as to have left her car behind? She was completely at his mercy!

He turned back from the stove with a grin. "Gotcha!"

Her relief was so complete that she forgot to be angry. "You jerk," she accused playfully, but she wasn't above taking a steaming cup of coffee from the jerk's hand.

"Actually," he said filling his own cup, "we can

stay a second night if you want, but I'm prepared to take you back tomorrow afternoon if you'd rather. Either one is fine with me. Why don't we plan to go back tomorrow, but if you change your mind you let me know. How's that?"

It sounded so reasonable that she nodded, but she was intensely aware of the vulnerability of not being in control – even though he pretended she was.

But his conversation was calming, his voice a soothing rhythm as he told her about the cabin. It was, in fact, a CCC project, the camp for workers who were building roads nearby in the 1930s. It was now on private land, but the owners allowed its use to a variety of groups, from Scouts to the regional caving club, and a "host" had to volunteer to be responsible before anyone could set foot through the door. The host was responsible for the condition of the building, enforcing the rules, and ensuring fuel – kerosene, diesel, and wood – was available for the next group. A coffee can next to the stove held the overnight "rents" guests were expected to pay: fifty cents per person per night, which mainly went to pay for the fuel for the diesel generator and the kerosene heaters that were needed in the very coldest months. The electric lights, while functional, worked off the generator, and it was more trouble than it was worth to run it for just a couple of people in the kitchen. The people snoring away in the dormitory were likely going to be on the same caving trip on Saturday, and if they were asleep at ten o'clock, it likely meant they would be up by dawn for early-morning hiking.

His voice continued, low and sure, until she was completely relaxed again. She might not be in control, but Tanner seemed to have a handle on things. When he suggested they go out on the front porch, she followed blithely. His statement that they would still be able to hear the children if they called stopped her for only a second – I should have asked

that, she thought in mild rebuke – but she followed him out as he led the way with the lantern. It reminded her of traveling with her parents when she was young, when she had no responsibilities for anything going wrong. While she didn't want to rely on Tanner too much, it was nice that he took care of things, that he didn't expect her to handle all the tedious chores and responsibilities. It had been a long time since someone had done that for her.

They talked for a long time as they sat on the edge of the porch. Tanner alternately whittled on a stick (making, as far as Erin could tell, a smaller stick) while he talked and watched Erin as she talked. He talked more about the cabin, which Tanner had stayed in only twice before, and briefly about the caving trip, which he repeated was "stand up all the way."

Erin was delighted to see a shooting star, and he turned the lantern down and led her away from the cabin to point out the band of dense stars that marked the galaxy. "Oh, I've only seen it in pictures," she enthused. She wished she had looked more closely when Declan was awake, so he could have seen it too. Maybe they would stay Saturday night just so he could see the Milky Way as something other than a candy bar.

"I'm really glad I came, Tanner. This will be great for Declan. He'll probably enjoy primitive. And there are parts that even I can appreciate, like a clear sky. My gosh, I've never seen so many stars."

"I gather Declan's dad's not a big outdoorsman?"

She turned away, pretending to study the sky again. "No."

"You've never mentioned him."

"He's not worth mentioning."

"You're divorced?" God, this was like pulling teeth.

"Yes."

"How long?" The animosity was so very near the surface that he expected the answer in terms of

months. She surprised him.

"Seven years."

That was a long time to be that angry. What in hell had that guy done to her, he wondered. It seemed too soon to ask, so he went with an easier question. "What's his name?" She finally turned to face him again

"Rat Bastard."

He winced. "Don't say that."

"It's his name," she said sweetly.

He gave no quarter. "I assume that's not what it says on his birth certificate." He was still speaking quietly, but there was a challenge in his manner.

She met it squarely. "It should have."

He looked at her blandly for a time, then said, "I think it's time we both hit the sack."

She felt the sting of disappointment but couldn't quite figure out why. It should be enough that she had not let him push her around. Why wasn't it, she wondered. She had not backed down, and usually that alone was enough to let her feel triumphant. Of course, it was better if the person she was sparring with backed down, but that wasn't always possible or necessary. Tanner was just walking away. It was almost as though he didn't want to get sucked into her little drama.

Chapter Three

"He beat me up," she said to his back. And, of course, he stopped.

"I'm sorry," he said, turning around, though it wasn't clear whether he was sorry it had happened or sorry he had walked away. It didn't matter. She was back in control.

"Yeah, that's what he said, too. He was 'sorry' and it wouldn't happen again." Her voice was hard at the memory.

"Did it?" He seemed almost afraid to ask, but he took several steps back toward her.

"Nope." She ground out the word with bitter finality. "You know how they say every dog gets one free bite? Well, he got one free hit. I ended up in a hospital with a fractured jaw. I was 6 months pregnant."

"Did he go to jail?"

"What, the Teflon Kid? No way, no how. He was locked up overnight, but his daddy's slick lawyers had him out first thing. It was all a big mistake. I fell, you see. He tried to catch me, but I just fell and clipped the table on my way down. I bet they were already lining up psychologists to testify while I was still getting my jaw x-rayed."

"For what?" he asked, nonplussed. "The trial?"

"Oh, I doubt there would ever have been a trial," she said with simulated brightness. "Perhaps a competency hearing, then a swift exile to a very private sanatorium. Do they still have sanatoriums? Or do they just call them recuperative spas? Whatever, I don't imagine it would have made it to trial. The senior Mr. Callinsford would not have allowed it."

"Callinsford? As in Reginald Callinsford? The congressman?" He was fascinated and appalled.

"The senior," she confirmed. "His son – Reg, Jr. – my husband for 13 months. County councilman at 28. He has aspirations to follow his father. A spousal abuse charge might not enhance his

career." There was no end of bitterness to her tone, and her eyes sparkled with still-fresh fury as she looked off into the night.

"So why'd you go along with it?"

She swung her gaze to him, and there was sad resignation in it. "I told you. There wasn't much I could do. I could have tried to go it alone and risked losing everything. Or I could bargain my way out. So, that's what I did. I got full custody of my son, a trust set up to put him through college and enough cash to get us started."

"And, that's it?" It was a sympathetic wish that she had managed to end that sad chapter of her life.

"It was more than I had hoped for three months earlier. I figured I was going to be stuck with the bastard for the rest of my life."

She was stunned by how quickly his eyes went from sympathetic understanding to raw anger. "I told you I don't want to hear that from you."

"Or what?" she taunted.

"Or, I'll take matters into my own hands." The words were low and cool, and he studied her carefully.

"What exactly does that mean?" Her tone matched his.

He studied her for a long moment, but she had the sense that he was not unsure what to do; he was only unsure what to tell her about it. Eventually, he loosed a shallow sigh of regret and said simply, "The only thing I'll do tonight is walk away if you don't want to have a civil conversation. You can talk any way you like, but I don't have to listen to it."

The blush of shame was hidden in the deepening shadows, and she used the excuse of the chilly night when she found herself hugging her own body. "I'm sorry," she said finally. "You're right; that was rude of me." Then, with more eagerness than she meant to reveal, she asked, "Forgive me?" When she didn't get an immediate answer, she

turned to flee, her face hot with embarrassment. She did not like the exposure she had just allowed. She would not let it continue. First, she had revealed her humiliating history then she was practically begging for his favor.

Before her foot hit the top step, though, she felt a restraining hand on her shoulder. Tanner's voice, soft and cajoling, broke through her humiliation. "Hey, give me a minute, okay? I'm just not moving at the same speed you are. Don't run off." He started to turn her, rethought, and moved himself around in front of her. The uneven light of the Coleman made her look even more uncertain than she had when she asked for forgiveness, and he was startled by the vulnerability. Could this be the same spitfire who seemed so defiant earlier? "Where're you going?" Still the tone was gentle and non-threatening.

"To bed?" It was clearly a question. She still did not have a handle on her emotions. She covered her discomfort with another show of anger. "Look, it's none of your damn business where I'm going. Just leave me alone!"

"Gladly," he ground out and headed into the cabin, taking the Coleman with him.

Expecting him to head to the dormitory, she was surprised to see the light of the Coleman through the kitchen window. She debated staying outside until he retired but decided that might look like she was avoiding him, and if there was one thing she was not doing it was avoiding him. She grabbed a toothbrush and toothpaste from her bunk and headed into the kitchen, determined not to let him intimidate her.

He made no effort to intimidate her. He did something much worse.

He ignored her.

He continued to wash the coffeepot and cups, took the grounds outside for disposal, and returned to bank the fire, all without saying a word. Erin felt the tension intensify. When she could take it no

longer, she demanded, "What's your problem, anyway, Tanner?"

He turned slowly and regarded her with an unhurried appraisal. Just when she thought he wasn't going to speak, he said, "I don't like vulgar language. If you think it makes you look strong or determined, you're wrong. I'd hate to think you talk that way around your son—"

"I don't!" she declared, shocked at the very idea.

"Which is all the more reason to cut it out. If you can control it in front of Declan, then you can control it in front of me. Please do."

"Why should I have to? I can speak any way I like. You don't have to listen to me." Please, listen to me, echoed in her head. She felt a confusing urge to hold on tight even as she pushed him away.

His eyes seemed to take everything in, but he answered only her words. "You're right; I don't. But let me tell you one thing. When you talk about him like that, it doesn't make me despise him. It doesn't make me see how unlucky he is to be missing out on being Declan's dad or your husband. It just makes me think less of you." And with that, he headed through the doorway that led to the dormitory.

It was some minutes before Erin followed him. First, she scowled angrily after his retreating back, then she had to figure out how to shut off the lantern. Only then, standing in the pitch-black kitchen, did she realize she had left her flashlight on the porch where they had been sitting. The glow from vents in the stove gave her enough warning to stay away from that dangerous place, but everything else was a mystery as she groped her way to the door. Then, afraid to fall down the steps, she dropped to her hands and knees and searched for the flashlight. Crawling into her sleeping bag a few minutes later, she felt grimy and lonely and terribly sad.

Tanner's low voice seemed intimately close.

"Goodnight, Erin."

"Goodnight, Tanner," she answered, after a beat.

Erin endured an uncomfortable and mostly-sleepless night, conscious that any movement was telegraphed though the squeaking, ancient pine and the swaying of the bunk above her. She reviewed her conversation with Tanner, repeatedly, trying to figure out where it had gone wrong. She had not set out to alienate him, but she resented the feeling that she wasn't living up to his standards. Who did he think he was that he could set standards for her? Well, in a sense he was her host for the trip, so maybe he did have the right to decide some things, but that didn't mean she had to go along happily. All she had to do was get through the next 18 hours. Tomorrow night, she would be warm and safe and in her own bed. Alone.

She drifted in and out of an uneasy sleep, fraught with peculiar dreams that seemed more like memories than dreams. She saw herself as a child on a driving vacation with her parents the year she was 10: the Rocky Mountains, the Grand Canyon, and Painted Desert, and reading comics in the back seat of their Chevy wagon. She saw the Rat Bastard smile smugly at her as they sat across a table from each other in a lawyer's office. She dreamed of Declan's pudgy face as he took his first teetering steps toward her on Christmas day. She was stargazing with Tanner on a big, red patchwork quilt. It was hard to tell where dreams ended and memories began until she heard the early-morning stirrings of her de facto roommates.

It was still fully dark, but her watch said 5:30 and that seemed like morning, so she got up and began to put herself together as best she could. In these primitive environs, that meant struggling to get out of yesterday's clothes and putting on fresh ones while revealing as little skin as possible, both out of modesty and to protect against the night – well, early-morning – cold. On top of that she

layered a long-sleeved t-shirt. Then a sweatshirt. Geez, it was cold. She brushed her hair so thoroughly that she feared the snapping static electricity would wake someone.

Then, resigned to getting no more sleep, she slipped on shoes and socks and went into the large kitchen, where she introduced herself to seven people who seemed appallingly well-rested. They were nice people, though, and she relaxed quickly into the friendly banter. She was in her element there, making friends and chatting about a variety of subjects. She was tempted by their offer to join them on the predawn hike down to the mouth of the cave. She would have gone, but she couldn't leave Declan behind, and he wouldn't be up to a long and rugged hike.

Filling a cup from the half-empty coffee pot, she watched the seven stream off toward the edge of the clearing in front of the cabin. The morning sky was showing the faintest lightening, and she decided to take her coffee onto the porch and watch the sunrise. She sat on the edge, just where she had sat last night. She picked up Tanner's stick, stripped of bark and whittled to a sharp point on one end.

Calm, quiet, more relaxed than she had been in bed, she let her mind return to Tanner. With the detachment that came with time and space, she knew she had resented him because his manner seemed to de-claw her. She had been stung by his rebuke, and her automatic response was to hold her ground instead of apologize. Following him into the kitchen, she had hoped to corner him and watch him squirm. By refusing to cooperate in her little manipulation, he had made her even more defensive.

In the light of rapidly-approaching day, it was clear that she had been wrong. And, regardless, they were going to be together for the next 10 hours or so. She didn't want the hostility between them.

"Good morning. May I join you?" Despite her resolve, the voice behind her surprised her into open-mouthed silence, not contrite apologies. He glanced at the whittled stick in her hand and asked, "Planning to drive it through my heart?"

That got a smile. "I might have last night," she admitted grudgingly, "but this morning I'm feeling a little ashamed of myself."

"Don't worry about it," he said as he settled down beside her. "I get the feeling I touched a nerve last night, and I didn't mean to. It was just getting-to-know-you conversation. Maybe I should stick to 'seen any good movies lately?'"

She smiled back. "Or 'what's your major?'"

He clutched at his heart in mock agony. "Oh, now there's one I haven't heard in 15 years."

They were back to the easy repartee she had enjoyed before, but she still felt the need to clear her conscience. She hung her head as she did so. "Anyway, I'm sorry for being so obnoxious last night. You didn't deserve that."

A feather touch under her chin, and she was looking into deep brown eyes. "It's forgotten." His words were as soft as his touch. Just as the realization that he was about to kiss her crossed her mind, they both jumped at the slamming of the cabin door.

"G'morning!" Claire announced brightly as she draped herself over her father's back.

"Morning, Sunshine," he returned, wrapping one arm around her shoulders in an awkward backwards-hug. An instant later, he had flipped her over his shoulder so she ended up standing on the ground at his feet. "Ready for breakfast?"

"Starved."

It suddenly occurred to Erin that she had no idea what the food provisions were. There was no refrigerator, no grocery store nearby, and obviously no restaurants. As it turned out, Tanner had it all under control. The cooler in the back of his Explorer held fixings for both breakfast and lunch. As Tanner

whipped up omelets in an iron skillet, Erin led the effort to assemble and package the lunches they would carry into the cave. It was an efficient operation, and all four were fed, dressed, and ready to go by 7:15. Into the back of the SUV went lunches, a change of clothes, water bottles, flashlights, and battery packs.

Chapter Four

She should have asked more questions. She should clearly have asked more questions. The day was one surprise after another, and very few of them were good.

They bumped back down the gravel road from the cabin and wound through snakelike roads that seemed to double back on themselves. Just as Erin was about to ask if they were lost, Tanner made a final turn and they were at the end of a long line of cars perched precariously on the narrow sloped shoulder of a two-lane road.

She had thought the group would be small, a dozen or so, including the seven hikers she had met at the cabin. But there had to be thirty people milling about the roadside, people of all ages. There were kids no bigger than Declan and a white-haired couple that looked to be in their seventies. Before she could do a more thorough reconnaissance, they were all tumbling out of the car and making final preparations. Lunches and extra clothing went into the adults' backpacks.

"It's 56 degrees in there. You think you'll be warm enough?" Tanner asked, eying her long-sleeved t-shirt dubiously. She had shed the sweatshirt on the drive over. It went into her backpack as her "extra clothing," but Tanner seemed insistent that she add even more. But the only other warm layer she could really add was a heavy coat she didn't want destroyed – and he had made clear that she shouldn't take anything into the cave that couldn't be ruined.

"For God's sake, Tanner," she finally snapped, "it's not like we're going to the North Pole. Give it a rest."

He clenched his teeth, then turned away to praise Declan's layering and fit him with a plastic helmet and a headlamp; he tested it, then shut it off. The utility belt with its battery pack went

around his little waist, and a spare flashlight went into his pocket. "Always carry a backup," he advised the kids as he checked the batteries on another series of lights before passing them to Claire.

Watching them scamper off, Erin was struck by the thought that they both looked like coal miners heading into the pits: the beat-up yellow helmets, the utility belts, the ill-fitting flannel shirts. Only the excitement on their young faces challenged the image. She chuckled softly. When she turned to share the thought with Tanner, though, she was surprised to see him scowling at her. He had donned utility coveralls over his street clothes, and for him the image of coal miner was complete. He looked exactly like a miner, right down to the grim expression on his face.

He handed her the fourth helmet from the back of the Explorer and waited silently as she struggled to get the battery pack cinched around her waist. "You have a second light source?" he asked then waited until she produced the small Maglight from her pocket. "Fresh batteries?" he asked and she nodded affirmation, although she really had no idea how fresh they were. It was the flashlight she kept in the car for emergencies, but how often did she use it? Not very. They were probably pretty fresh. She'd had it on for only a few minutes the previous night.

His stare was discomfiting. "Yes, okay? Fresh batteries. Are we ready?" she demanded impatiently.

Ten seconds passed before he responded, but it seemed like much longer to Erin. She struggled against the impulse to step away. Ultimately, it was Tanner who stepped away, tossing over his shoulder, "I'm ready. The kids are ready. You're not ready."

She wouldn't run after him. She grabbed her backpack off the ground and slid it to her shoulders. She was ready. What the hell was the matter with him? The leader of the caving club was gathering

the large group, and she joined the edge of the circle. A teenager was unlocking the padlock on a large cover halfway up the rocky wall on the edge of the road. If she had driven by it, she never would have noticed it, but it looked rather like a manhole cover, hinged on one side where it was bolted into the massive rock. The heavy cover swung open to reveal a hole, no bigger than thirty inches in diameter. "We'll meet up inside," the club leader announced. "Don't leave the first chamber." With that, people began scaling the rock wall and dropping, one-by-one, into oblivion.

She was not ready for this. Erin took a step back, and her eyes automatically searched for Declan. He was already climbing up the boulders to enter the cave. Another few seconds and he was gone. She really had no choice. She joined the others waiting to climb the boulders, all the while cursing Cokely Tanner and whatever spirits had possessed her to agree to this trip. A cave she could handle. A cave meant solid ground under her feet. Dark, yes, she could handle dark, but no one had said anything about climbing rocks; no one had said anything about climbing anything. She froze partway up, working to suppress the panic. Fear of falling. It was a primal, unreasoning terror that could cause her heart to race when she so much as tripped on a step. What was she doing 10 feet off the ground on granite boulders?

Tanner called from the cave's gaping entrance. "Erin, get a move on. Let's go!" There was impatience in his voice, but he watched her carefully. There was something wrong. She was only a few arm lengths away, but he climbed back down beside her. "What's wrong?"

She took a half-dozen shallow breaths before she gasped out, "I'm gonna fall. I can't move. If I move, I'm going to fall."

"You're not going to fall. I'm right here. I'm not going to let anything happen to you." His voice, low and reassuring, helped a little, but as he spoke he

moved around her to wrap her in his body. These were boulders, not ledges, so there was plenty of room for him. She was essentially in a cage formed by the rock and his strong body. The panic began to subside. "I didn't know you were afraid of heights," he said softly, apologetically.

"Not heights," she corrected uncertainly, "falling." The distinction was lost on Tanner, but it didn't seem like the time or place for that discussion.

"The kids are already inside. Think you can make it?"

"Sure," she said, feeling anything but.

So, together, they inched across and up to the hatch, where the club leader waited for the final two stragglers. "Good to see you again, Tanner. Got a reluctant caver there, have you?"

"Undecided, I think, Tom. She'll be fine. Think you can give her a hand down?"

Tom obligingly dropped through the hole and waited for Tanner to hand down his trembling package. It was only a 5- or 6-foot drop, and kids typically just jumped. The adults usually grabbed on to the edge of the hatch, letting their height take up most of the gap. The drop, then, was only a foot or two. But between Tanner's firm grip on her hands and Tom's secure hold at her hips, she never dropped at all. She finally breathed a sigh of relief when her feet touched the mud floor.

Her eyes automatically searched for Declan. It was dark, and there were flashlights swinging all about in disorienting flashes of light. She was still looking when his voice piped up, "Pretty cool, huh, Mom?" The look of pure enchantment on his face was contagious, and she smiled back.

"Yeah, pretty cool." She would have ruffled his hair but for the helmet. Instead, she patted his back. Leave it to Declan to completely miss the terror she had felt. In fact, she had made a concerted effort not to pass on her fears to him and to hide them from him whenever possible. Her own

parents had been unusually over-protective, and she had worked hard to overcome the excessive caution they had ingrained in her as a child. While Declan wasn't foolhardy, he was brave and adventuresome. That was exactly why she had decided to go caving, and it wouldn't do to spoil his fun with her own unnatural fears.

Tom finally called for everyone's attention and laid out the rules they were to follow. They were not to deface the caves. They were not to wander off independently. They were to leave nothing behind, not so much as a Kleenex. Kids were to stay with their parents. There were a few more – about not disturbing any wildlife and what to do if you became lost – that made Erin dart a panicked look at Tanner, but he seemed blandly unconcerned. Once the preliminaries were settled, they slowly filed out of the entrance chamber into a series of narrow passageways. As she waited for her turn in line, she realized why the progress was so slow. The same teenager who had unlocked the hatch was counting how many people were coming in, presumably so they would know if they lost someone. Why wasn't that reassuring?

"How're you doing?" Tanner asked, concern clear in his voice.

"Fine," she managed with a reassuring smile. "But, I distinctly remember you saying it was 'stand up all the way.' Nobody said anything about rock climbing or jumping down holes."

"I honestly forgot about the entrance. I just didn't think. I'm sorry. I had no idea it would frighten you. This is the first cave I took Claire to when she was 6 because it's so kid-friendly. Now, you have to tell me – honestly now – are you at all claustrophobic? It's not too late to back out, now, but I can't have you fold up on me an hour into the cave. Do you have any problem in enclosed spaces?"

Indignation that he would think she would "fold up" on him faded as she remembered quivering on

the boulders out front not 15 minutes earlier. She could give him that one. "No, not claustrophobic at all." Then, in the interest of full disclosure, she added, "I sometimes get a little anxious in the dark, but I figure with all the lights around, that shouldn't be a problem."

"Then you better turn yours on." He tapped her helmet.

"What?"

He turned her to face the mud wall a couple feet away. There was the spot where his light fell, 8 inches over her head, but there was no second beam from her own light.

She reached back to the battery pack and slid the switch. Nothing happened. Her eyes widened in alarm. "It doesn't work."

"Come on, Dad," Claire said, pulling uselessly at his hand.

"Just a minute," he responded absently, his eyes never leaving Erin's. "I told you that you weren't ready, didn't I? It would make our lives a lot easier if you would listen to me." With that, he turned her around and tugged at the battery pack strapped to her waist, freeing the cord that should have been plugged into her helmet. With another snap, the headlamp flashed on, and before she knew it she was moving with the steady stream of people through the narrow passage that led from the entrance cavern. It had been an oddly intimate moment as he tugged at the battery belt and she had had no idea what he was doing. The urge to pull away and tell him to keep his hands to himself had been strong. It was only the thought of Declan's disappointment that kept her from saying she wanted out. And, damn it, he had been right. She should have checked the light before stepping into the cave. She resolved to be a better guest, to listen to his advice, and to curb her snapping tongue.

As she tromped along, though, she found herself coming back to his last statement: "It would make

our lives a lot easier if you would listen to me." Our lives? Maybe he meant his and Claire's. Yes, that had to be it. Or, maybe, he meant it would just make it easier on the four of them for the day. That might be it. It didn't make sense for him to mean anything else. "Their" lives were as coworkers who saw each other a couple of times a month and talked about childcare issues.

Most of the time, they were moving through passages that forced them into single-file movement, and she was keenly conscious that Tanner was directly behind her, just as she typically followed Declan. She found herself unreasonably anxious the few times she lost sight of Declan in the curves. She wondered if Tanner felt the same anxiety, because each time they came to a wider clearing, and the group reassembled, he seemed unusually solicitous. He checked that she was warm enough, that she was feeling no discomfort with the close walls, and that she was not finding it too strenuous.

There was a strange rhythm to the tour. It felt, to Erin, as though they alternated between racing ahead and waiting for everyone else to catch up. After the second stop in a largish cavern where they did a quick headcount, Tom announced that everyone needed to get their bearings before moving on. There were multiple exits from that cavern, and they should be able to recognize where they had come from and where they were going. A good caver, he advised, always takes time to look back. Almost as a whole, they turned back to look at the passage they had just come through, but Erin felt a surge of panic. She had no clue which entrance they had come through. Without the other thirty people, she wouldn't have had any idea which way to turn. Even once she did look at it, it looked exactly like the other entrances. They were all 6- or 7-foot high, narrow, crooked passageways. She longed for signposts or a map saying "You are here."

"Tanner," she began hesitantly, "I have a terrible sense of direction. There's no way I'd ever find my way out of here."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not going to let you get lost." And, that was that. She let go of the worry and tried to enjoy Declan and Claire's delight

As they left that cavern, though, and moved into another series of winding passages, the walls kept getting closer and the low ceiling became even lower. The effect was like watching someone walk into one of those funhouse rooms where the floor slopes up, and the far wall looks normal but is only three feet high. Ahead of her, little Declan seemed to take up more and more of the passageway, until she found herself bent over almost in half, with her chin tilted up so the headlamp would continue to light the way.

"Stand up all the way, huh?" she grouched as she finally gave up crouching and began crawling along in the clay-like mud. Now, it was clear why he had told her not to wear anything that couldn't be ruined, and she was glad her sweatshirt was still in the backpack. Ahead, she could hear Declan's excited "Oh, wow, this is so cool!" and that tempered her annoyance. He would talk about this trip for weeks, no doubt. She could swallow her displeasure. Still, "Stand up all the way," she muttered again as she banged her hardhat on the low ceiling. It was her first realization that the plastic helmets were for something other than holding headlamps.

"You okay, there?" came the voice from inches behind her prominent tail. He shook her foot to get her attention and repeated, "You okay?"

She mustered a rueful smile and looked back at him – under her arm as there wasn't enough room to twist her torso. "Yeah, I'm fine. I was just remembering what somebody told me about this being 'stand up all the way.' That's all."

The smile robbed the words of their bitterness, but he looked sheepishly apologetic as he said, "I'm

sorry. This is a different part of the system than I've been in before. I had no idea. You sure you're okay?"

And what could be done if she weren't? "Yeah, I'm fine," she answered and resumed crawling. Another thirty feet and they were at least standing again, though the passage was still very narrow. Some peculiarity of geology created a chasm in this spot, and the area voided by a millennium of dripping water went from three feet high to more than twenty almost in a step. That was the reason for Declan's awe a minute earlier. She had the same reaction as she stepped into the tall, narrow cavity. She stopped and just admired the expanse of rock and mud that went up further than her light could really illuminate. Up above, there seemed to be movement of some kind but she couldn't really tell what it was. Probably the light catching water as it dripped down. She had seen none of the dramatic formations of stalactites and stalagmites and columns that made Luray Caverns such an attraction, but there was still the relentless dripping of water that was responsible for the caves' formation. Mother Nature at her most patient.

Tanner, however, didn't have eons to wait and finally nudged her from behind to clear the entrance. "We're backing up down here," he called pleasantly, and she moved several steps further into the cavern. He stood, stretching his large frame, which must have been much more cramped than hers, but he said nothing about it, so neither did she. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" she asked, awe clear in the question.

Still examining the high, sheer walls, she was unaware that he was still looking at her, admiring the first genuine smile of delight he had seen on her since they entered the cave. "Yep, beautiful," he agreed. As more people crawled in behind them, they moved on.

Eventually, they made their way into a huge cavern, larger than the entrance area, and that is

where they spread out to have lunch. It held the first of what that looked like "formations" to Erin, and she was intrigued by the low arched ceiling along one side. The kids were all gathered at one end, and she was curious what it was that fascinated them so. She followed Claire over and had to muffle a gasp when she realized what it was they were looking at. There were bats – scores of them, maybe hundreds – hanging upside down from the ceiling. Tom stood nearby to ensure that the kids got no closer, but he allowed them to look, and he was answering questions matter-of-factly.

Erin gulped and retreated – straight into Tanner. "You okay?" God, didn't he know any other questions?

"Yes, I'm fine," she snapped, breaking her recent promise to herself to be nicer to him. She just needed a minute to herself to get past the revulsion that was her instinctive reaction to seeing bats so close. She had found it more than a little creepy to view them in a zoo, where they were at least behind glass. The few times she thought she had seen them outdoors, it was easy to convince herself they were birds – for some reason not nearly as creepy – but this was different. There was no way to pretend that those things dangling a few feet off the floor were anything but bats. Suddenly, she had the uncomfortable sensation of spiders or ants crawling all over her body. It was an itchy, unpleasant experience that she knew was manufactured by her mind. Still, she shuddered in revulsion. She was so absorbed in mastering the disturbing image that she was startled by Tanner's hands on her shoulder.

"You're not fine. Something's wrong. What is it?"

She looked into his concerned, dark eyes and felt suddenly very foolish. "Bats," she admitted, sheepishly.

His concern turned to confusion. "What about bats?"

She gestured over to the dozen children staring

in rapt fascination at the colony of bats hanging overhead. She was aware of Tom's voice talking about echolocation though she tried to tune him out. "I didn't know there would be bats," she confessed weakly.

Then he did something that really surprised her. He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her very close. "I'm sorry. It didn't even occur to me to tell you. Bats live in caves. Well, not all of them. I guess I mean 'caves have bats.' I'm sorry I didn't warn you. Are those the first you've seen today?" The realization that he meant that there had obviously been others she should have seen was a little unsettling but somehow easier to bear within the circumference of his arms. She nodded. After a minute, he eased her around so that her back was to the bat display. "You're gonna be okay," he said. It was not a question but she nodded anyway. He squeezed her shoulders briefly before his hands finally fell away from her.

"Lunch?" he asked, picking up his backpack. Before she could answer, he added conversationally, "I thought you were going to dissolve into tears there for a minute."

She stiffened. "I don't cry."

"What?"

"I don't cry."

"You mean you don't cry in front of people? You don't cry very often?"

"I mean I don't cry at all, haven't in years."

He stopped rummaging through the knapsack to stare at her in disbelief. "You're kidding!" She was clearly not kidding, but the conversation ended as the children spotted food and returned full of chatter about bats and what they ate and how they had seen two with babies clutching onto their mothers' bodies. Tanner interrupted long enough to insist Erin put on her sweatshirt, and she obeyed without argument. That was a first. He kept an eye on her during lunch, but although she seemed to be swallowing rather too deliberately as they ate their

sandwiches, she gave no other indication that the conversation was making her uncomfortable. She encouraged Declan as he spoke and seemed to enjoy his excitement. What an unusual woman, he mused.

It made him rethink their clash from the night before. He couldn't get a good read on her then, and he was having a hard time right now. Normally, she seemed strong, confident, and in control. But, twice now, she had shown him a stark vulnerability that just begged for him to step in and take over. The question was whether she was really as strong – or as vulnerable – as she had seemed. No, he corrected himself, the question was really whether he should step in and take over. She seemed to use the waspish tone to hide fear or at least discomfort, but if he could push past that tone and get to what was below, it might prove a very interesting journey.

When the children went back to bat-watching, and they began packing up the trash to take out, he was conscious of her eyes on him. She was wondering if he was going to pick up the conversation about crying, and as much as he wanted to, they had neither the time nor the privacy to continue that subject. He caught her eye. "We'll finish that conversation from earlier, but not right now."

"What conversation from earlier?" It was a feint, and she abandoned the pretense of ignorance at the challenge in his eye. "Okay."

He studied her briefly then decided to take a chance. "You're wary. I understand that. You don't know if you can trust me."

"That's right," she interrupted, somewhat more defensively than she intended, but his next words soothed her immeasurably.

"Of course, you don't. You'd be foolish to." At her surprised silence, he smiled gently and continued. "We both need time to get to know each other. But I think once we do, you'll get over the

feeling that I'm trying to take advantage of you. And, maybe," he added with a smirk, "I'll get over the feeling that you're trying to provoke me."

"I don't —" she started but was stopped by his look. And this time, she read it not as challenge but as disappointment that she would not admit her error. "I'm sorry," she finally allowed and was surprised to feel relief at the admission. He winked at her and smiled that full-on proud-of-you smile that made her feel, again, that they were on the same team.

The return to the mouth of the cave was just as bad – or just as good – as the trip in. It was made easier by Tanner's close proximity, and she often felt the reassuring touch of his hand as they navigated a difficult pass. There were two more low passages, one of which involved an almost blind drop at the end of a long cavern. If it hadn't been for the encouragement shouted at her by Declan and Claire (who had already dropped through) and the pained look of apology on Tanner's face as he held her hands as she wriggled backwards to slide her hips over the ledge, she might not have gone at all. As it was, flailing her legs to try to find purchase, she muttered once again, "Stand up all the way, huh?" just before she dropped. She missed the grimace on Tanner's face because her eyes were closed. As he followed her through the hole, stepping almost easily to the ground, she realized the drop she'd made was probably only eighteen inches. Still, her heart raced for minutes.

Also, she found that every time they entered a new cavern, she checked reflexively for bats. She found quite a few and wished she could stop looking. What made the rest bearable were the frequent stops to do headcounts and regroup. There, she could enjoy the children's chatter without racing to make sure they were okay, and she could soak up Tanner's attention, which seemed to be very calming.

It was after noon when they finally emerged

from the hatch back at the cars.

Chapter Five

Her adventures weren't over yet.

If she had thought they looked like miners when they went into the caves, that was nothing compared to the way they looked coming out. Everyone was covered, head-to-toe in the mud they had crawled through and slid through. She had seen that in the shadowy light of the caves, of course, but in the full light of day it was somewhat more appalling. They snapped two quick photos -- "for the record" she said, because she sure as hell wasn't going caving again -- but then was surprised to see people stripping off the muddied clothes.

All Tanner had to do, of course, was unzip his muddied overalls, step out of them and change his boots to tennis shoes. Done. Then, suddenly realizing the position he had put her in, he pulled Erin into the gap between the Explorer and the van parked behind it. "God, I'm sorry. I didn't even think about it. Everyone changes roadside. You'd never get the mud out of the car otherwise. We just put everything in trash bags and take it home like that. That's why you brought a change of clothes, you know."

She stood there stupidly for a moment, briefly considered whether she could just hike back with the other people from the cabin, and finally gave up the fight. Where had she thought they would change? It would do no good to explain that she was so modest that she refused to shop at department stores that had communal dressing rooms or that she hadn't changed in an open locker room since junior high. It really didn't matter what she wanted or was comfortable with. As with the bats in the cave, this was simply something she would have to endure. "Fine," she said, but it was a tight, tense agreement that he could tell did not come easily. Another puzzle piece. He dug out the children's clothes, and tossed them to the side where the kids were already shedding their grimy

clothes, then busied himself wiping down the helmets and battery packs while they all changed.

Cars began to pull off of the shoulder, and there were shouted plans to meet for dinner back at the cabin. Tanner was deliberately vague, unsure whether they were staying another night. It seemed like a really bad time to ask Erin, who was sitting, tight-lipped on the bumper furiously tying her shoes. He considered pointing out that she would probably be more comfortable back at the cabin than trapped in a car with him for the next four or five hours, but instead he opted for coercion. "Hey, who wants to stay another night? We'll go back and roast hot dogs and marshmallows on the fire and see if we can't see some shooting stars." Claire's enthusiasm was a given. She loved "roughing it" in any form, and she was an old hand at these group experiences. He could feel the daggers in his back from Erin, but it was Declan's reaction he was looking for.

"Oh, wow, cool! Could we, Mom? I never roasted hot dogs before." Declan was the unwitting key accomplice in the ambush of his mother.

"Sure you have," she argued, but Tanner could tell she was already weakening. "At camp last summer, remember?"

"No. They didn't really let us do it. The counselors roasted them for us. They wouldn't let us that close to the fire. Can we, Mom? Hot dogs and marshmallows?" he confirmed with Tanner.

"Sure. Why not?" Only then did he dare to look at Erin. They were all looking at Erin. Suddenly, she had the power to please them all or dash their plans with a word, and Tanner had no illusions about what words she would like to use toward him.

The close attention of two minors restrained her to a cool. "Yeah, I guess that would be fine." The kids whooped in victory, then climbed into the SUV and buckled up.

Tanner loaded the last of the gear into the back, trying hard to ignore her gaze. "Now who's trying to

provoke whom?" she finally said, and he winced. He closed the back up, preserving what little privacy there was roadside, and turned to face her.

"Not trying to provoke, I swear. I just want to spend some more time together. I don't want it to end like this. I know you haven't had too much fun today. Give me a chance to redeem myself. Please." He flashed his most ingratiating smile, and her scowl faltered only to be replaced by another expression that he couldn't quite pin down: anxiety, maybe uncertainty.

A quick stop at a small country store – which was not up to her suburban supermarket standards, but fully adequate for their dinner needs – and they were back at the cabin. She had stopped thinking of it as a shack. It looked like it would be nearly half-full that night. There were more than a dozen people playing a raucous game that looked remarkably like full-contact Frisbee, but everyone seemed to be enjoying it, and when she saw the gentle tackle of a 6-year-old, who giggled the whole time, she acknowledged that perhaps it was not as unmanageable as it had looked at first and grudgingly gave permission for Declan to join.

What she wanted to do, more than play, was to rinse off the top layer of grime she could still feel. Without shower facilities, that meant using the sink. Despite the fresh clothes, she could feel the caked mud on her face and neck, and her hair felt as though it had been handled by a teething toddler with a graham cracker. The thought made her chuckle. It had been a long time since she had had to clean that potent mixture of crackers, Cheerios, and saliva from the house, her clothes, and her body. This wasn't so different. Declan was just getting bigger, and the mess she had gotten into for him was clay-based rather than food-based. And Declan was still just as oblivious to the dirt on him as he was as a 2-year-old. She was smiling in fond remembrance of those happy days, when Declan had been the center of her life, and she had been

the center of his, when Tanner came upon her in the kitchen.

"You're looking better," he observed from a distance.

She laughed. "I haven't even started. I'm heating some water," she said, gesturing to the iron stove where the coffeepot sat. "Ice-cold just didn't have much appeal."

"I wasn't talking about the dirt. I meant the smile. You've stopped looking like you want to kill me. Or did you just forget for a minute? That was definitely a smile when I came into the room." His teasing tone and blunt acknowledgement of the tension between them completely disarmed her. Normally, when she snapped at people, she could count on that being the end of it. They would scurry off to lick their wounds, and she could dismiss the aftermath. Tanner wouldn't let her dismiss it, but he wasn't trying to make her feel guilty for it either. She faltered.

"I didn't want to kill you, Tanner."

"That's good to know." It was a wry, gentle acknowledgement. There was a long pause, and just as Erin was trying to decide whether he was waiting for her to say something or just studying her, he broke eye contact and asked, "Okay if I use the sink while your water's heating?"

She stepped aside and gestured to the sink. "It's all yours, kind sir."

He responded with a mocking courtly gesture of his own. It was a silly little exchange that put them both back into the distant acquaintance-level relationship, so she was a little surprised by his next words as he lathered the bar of Ivory soap against the hair on his forearms. She was absently watching the clear water turn a reddish gray as the it swirled toward the drain when he said, "What do you mean, you don't cry?"

She drew back and turned away, but his eyes never left her, though he continued to scrub his arms up past his elbows. He had planned to leave

this conversation for later, but it was always hard to predict the chances for privacy. Right now, everyone was outside playing Ultimate Frisbee. They were unlikely to be interrupted.

Her eyes were everywhere but on him. She took the lid off the coffeepot to check its progress. "I just don't," she said after a tight pause. "What's so hard to understand about that?" she challenged. Then, as though lighting on the one way to end the conversation, "Do you cry?"

Her hopes were dashed at his easy agreement. "Sure. Sometimes. When someone I love is hurt or in pain and there's nothing I can do about it. I think pretty much everyone does. But the way you said it, it was almost like a point of pride, and I can't help but wonder why." He rinsed his arms awkwardly under the frigid water, and began scrubbing at his face and neck, his closed eyes giving her a brief respite from the otherwise unrelenting focus of his deep, brown eyes. But, eventually, he was going to finish, and he would undoubtedly want an answer to his question.

She settled on a version of the truth that she hoped would end the conversation without revealing too much. "Let's just say, I've had enough happen in my life that I used up all my tears a while ago. I'm all cried out."

He dragged a hand-towel across his face and considered her words. This was the brave, almost brittle, front she had shown him several times. It begged to be shattered, and he planned to do the shattering, but not yet. They had spent the entire day swinging between tantalizing closeness and sharp, stinging barbs. She had no reason to trust him yet, and it would be foolish to try to demand that she do so. There was a lot of chemistry between them, whether she knew it or not, but he was looking for a long, slow burn, not an explosion. His answer was deceptively casual. "Oh, okay. How's that water doing?"

She had no illusion that that was the end of it,

but she was grateful enough for the reprieve not to question his motives. A sinkful of lukewarm water helped take enough of the grime off her body to feel almost human, and Tanner even helped her rinse away the stubborn clumps that clung to her hair. Primitive facilities meant that she crouched backwards in front of the sink, with most of her hair in the dingy water while Tanner struggled to break up the clumps without tangling it any more than necessary.

By the time they were both as clean as they were likely to get under the circumstances, and the coffeepot was back on the stove with actual coffee in it, and Erin was dressed in sufficiently warm clothes that the overprotective man with her would allow her outside even though her hair was still wet – by that time, the Frisbee melee had broken up into a noisy game of tag and an intense game of horseshoes.

Erin settled on the porch in what she had come to think of as her spot and was unsurprised when Tanner settled in next to her. They both watched the children burn off energy that had somehow survived the Frisbee game.

"Let me do that," he said, taking the comb from her hand. After a brief rearrangement to get comfortable, she was settled in between his legs, leaning against the porch. His left hand held a large hank of hair, while his right teased out the knots below. The result was a gentle, almost hypnotic tugging that made her neck feel more rubbery by the moment and her eyes droop.

"You're really good at this," she murmured, relaxing into the cradle of his legs.

"Took a little practice. I used to just run the comb though, and it would pull at all the knots. Claire used to cry whenever I said it was time to wash her hair." He ignored the slight stiffening he noticed at the mention of crying. "But, after a while, I learned a few tricks. Now, at least she'll ask me to help. As long as I don't have scissors in my hand."

They shared a laugh, and he could tell she was back to relaxed ease. Several minutes later, the comb was going through easily. "You have really pretty hair. It's not really brown but it's not red either. What d'you call that?"

"I call it dirty," she said with an air of feigned indignation as she turned and took the comb back. They shared another laugh, but as the moment stretched and she remained between his legs, she found herself absorbed by his eyes. The dark brown she had noticed before was deceptive. It had little flecks of lighter and darker shades that at the rapidly closing distance made his eyes dance and sparkle with humor and vitality. The kiss, when it came, was so gentle and natural that she forgot to be surprised or annoyed or anything but satisfied. His arms went loosely around her shoulders.

It was a moment of blissful peace and serenity they would both use as a touchstone during the inevitable clashes to come. For Tanner, it was confirmation that if he could just get her to let down her guard, she really could be as soft and sweet as he had hoped. For Erin, it was a reminder that there were nice guys in the world, men who wouldn't necessarily try to take advantage of her or push for their own way in everything. She lay her head against his shoulder to savor the moment, then pulled away reluctantly, with the slightest blush of embarrassment on her cheeks.

Again, he met her eyes and shook his head slightly. "Nothing to be embarrassed about."

Much of the afternoon was a blur of games and silliness and group exploration of the meadow and nearby woods. Declan did eventually get to roast his precious hot dogs and marshmallows and was a glorious, sticky mess by eight o'clock. Claire somehow managed to down as much food with far less fanfare, but both were settled in to hear one of the old-timers play guitar fireside before turning in for the night.

Erin and Tanner were back in the semi-dark

kitchen cleaning up the last of the dishes from dinner. It didn't amount to much: a pan for baked beans, a Dutch oven that had held a marvelous stew for those no longer impressed by hot-dog-on-a-stick cuisine, a dozen cups, and the ever-present coffee pot, which would probably be cleaned and refilled at least once more before the last of the adults went to bed that night.

Relaxed by the easy pace of the afternoon and the attentive care Tanner had shown – and perhaps made bold by the convenient shadows she could retreat to – Erin finally found the nerve to venture, "You said last night all you'd do was walk away. I – I get the feeling there was more to that." She left it purposefully vague, half-wanting and half-dreading an answer.

He finished drying the Dutch oven and put it on the table before answering. "There is," he said, gently. "But I don't think you're ready to hear the rest of it right now. Trust me on this one." The last, said with a smile, was a mild taunt, and she refused to take the bait.

"Okay, I will."

Back at the fire, amid the calming strains of an old Woody Guthrie song that the kids didn't understand at all, someone opened a cooler of beer. Tanner accepted an offer but Erin shook her head. "No, thanks. I don't drink."

He was intrigued. "Not at all?"

"Rarely."

Do you have a problem with alcohol?" he asked carefully.

"I'm not an alcoholic. It's just . . . alcohol lowers my inhibitions."

"So?" He taunted mischievously.

She blinked. "My inhibitions are a big part of who I am," she said with a smile.

"So, what are you like sans inhibitions?" he encouraged and was amused to see her blush.

"I get more . . . affectionate." She laughed nervously.

"You do?" he encouraged with a grin somewhere between amusement and a leer.

Again, she laughed and slapped playfully at his arm. "Stop it. Not like that. Affectionate, not promiscuous.

He pressed; she temporized. Finally, with the last of her rapidly-evaporating calm, she said, "I don't know you well enough to be comfortable drinking with you," and she was relieved when he backed off. Teasing her was fun, but he didn't want to make her genuinely uncomfortable. He did, however, store that fact away. If this relationship progressed as he hoped it would, he would eventually find out what she was like without inhibitions. He may or may not need alcohol for the discovery.

Chapter Six

It took longer to get the kids settled on Saturday night than it had on Friday. They had been exhausted after their late arrival on Friday, and there had been only two of them, after all. With nearly a dozen, the noise and silliness seemed to rise exponentially. After repeated orders to "go to sleep" from assorted parents, they were surprised to hear the "thud" of a child hitting the floor and the excited laughter and cries of "I didn't do it" from every other child in the dormitory. Tanner set down his half-full beer can in the fire circle and said with grim resolve, "I'll handle this." He returned minutes later, and they heard not another peep from the junior campers.

"What'd you do? Threaten 'em?" asked another parent pleasantly.

It was idle conversation, not an interrogation, but Erin was stunned both by his answer and by the easy laughter it prompted around the circle. "I promised spankings all around if I have to go in there again."

When the laughter died down and the conversation returned to new movies due for release, Erin turned to Tanner, and said, the concern clear in her low voice, "You wouldn't really, though, would you?"

He tried to brush it off with "I don't think it'll come to that" but when she persisted, he finally said, "Yes, okay? I meant it. I don't think we'll have any more trouble from them, but if I do go back in there, you'd better get to Declan before I do if you want to spare his butt." He regretted his harsh wording when he saw the consternation on her face.

"Hey, let's take a walk," he urged gently, picking up a small battery-powered lantern one of the children had left at the fire. His purpose was twofold: he wanted privacy for the discussion they were about to have, but he also wanted to be far enough from the cabin that he wouldn't be drawn

back into it if the children got boisterous. He would go in if he had to. Better to avoid the showdown.

As they skirted the edge of the meadow, the sound of conversation dimmed and then was gone. Beneath the racket of the crickets that had survived in the unusually warm fall weather, Tanner picked out the sound of scurrying mammals in the forest. There would likely be raccoons that would raid the fire circle in search of dropped marshmallows, but there might be foxes or skunks hanging around for the same purpose. Erin likely wouldn't appreciate knowing. Above, he saw a bat swooping after its insect prey. He knew not to mention that either.

They walked together, but she made no move to touch him, and he was reluctant to intrude on her imposed isolation. Eventually, several minutes into their silent sojourn, he said, "I get the feeling I hit a nerve again. It wasn't intentional."

"I know." Her expression held both pain and apology.

He waited for her to go on, and when she didn't he finally said, "I don't have all the information I need, and I think that's a little unfair."

"It's incredibly unfair," she declared in a tone that gave no ground.

"Well, I'm glad we agree on something."

She smiled at that, but the smile became a grimace as she struggled with how to say what she knew she would have to tell him. He made it easier. "Did your ex-husband spank you?" Assuming that was the source of her discomfort with his threat, he was surprised to see a small, wistful smile instead of the anger that always accompanied reference to Reg, Jr.

"No, my daddy used to, though. And what you said back there – I guess it got me to thinking about him and how it felt to be threatened with a spanking."

"Are your folks still in the area?"

"My dad had a stroke the week I got married." She chuckled humorlessly. "It was an omen, I think."

He never made it out of the hospital. But, my mom's nearby. She's in a retirement community. We go visit her a couple of times a month. I love her, but she never provided quite the sense of security that my dad did. With my mom, I feel like I'm looking after her. My dad was always the one to . . . I don't know . . . take care of things."

"Keep you safe?" he offered.

"Yeah." There was that same sad smile.

"You've been doing a pretty good job since then," he said reassuringly.

Her response was rueful. "It didn't seem like that for a while."

"But, you ended it. You got out, and you kept both you and Declan safe."

"Yeah, but that was after almost a year of living hell. I should have ended it earlier. But, if I had, I wouldn't have Declan, so I try to tell myself that it all worked out for the best."

"Does Declan see his dad?"

"Yes. I didn't know how to prevent it or even if I should." Tanner could see the dilemma – cutting father from child was a difficult decision even in cases of clear-cut abuse – but he was impressed with her solution. "So, I had it written into the custody agreement that he can see Declan as often as he wants, but it has to be under the supervision of his parents. So far, that's worked out to be about one weekend a month that he spends at their house in Great Falls. If I time it well, I don't even have to see him," she said, deliberately avoiding the appellation she normally used for him.

"See," he repeated, "you've done a good job keeping you both safe."

"Yes," she agreed, but it was clear she was still dissatisfied.

"But, it's hard to do it all alone." He voiced the thought for her, and it was so natural she wasn't even surprised.

"Yes, it is."

The picture she made – of a little girl

overwhelmed by the expansive sky above and dwarfed by the broad meadow below – was too much for him to stand. He set the lantern on the ground and gathered her into his arms, getting only a moment's resistance before she gave herself over to the security he offered. Yes, it was hard to do it all alone, she thought.

I can keep you safe, she heard clearly in her head, but she wasn't sure later if he had said it or if she had merely felt it. Whatever the source, safe was not something she had felt in a man's arms for a very long time.

What finally drew them apart was the flickering light from the Fisher-Price lantern, left on too long at the fire. Tanner tapped it, pulling enough juice from the waning battery to emit a dull yellow glow. The effect was of an overgrown firefly. The campfire was visible in the distance, so their direction was clear, but the uneven ground would be tricky in near-total darkness. "Do you have your flashlight?" he asked Erin.

She produced it from the pocket of her jeans with a triumphant smile – but faltered when it, too, projected a weak, inconsistent beam. "I thought you had fresh batteries?" he asked as he took it from her. The glow spread a couple of inches, didn't even approach the ground. "What's the meaning of this?" The "young lady" at the end was unspoken but clear. What happened to feeling safe?

"Maybe I had it on earlier," she offered lamely.

"*Did* you have it on earlier?"

"No, I guess not."

He considered that in the rapidly-disappearing light. "So when you said you had a second light source in the cave, you really didn't?"

"But, I didn't need it," she protested. His gaze bored into her. He said nothing, and eventually she voiced his argument for him. "But, that doesn't really matter, does it? Because you were just looking out for me, and I could have been in danger because I ignored your experience."

"Bingo," he said, touching her nose.

"I'm sorry." The apology was real and more than he could have hoped for 24 hours earlier.

Still, beginnings were significant. "I should take you over my knee for that lie."

"You wouldn't!" she protested.

"I would," he corrected. "I've been seconds away from doing it several times today. In fact, you want to know the only thing that's kept me from doing it so far?"

"There are 10 people over there who wouldn't allow it!" He noticed she didn't say she wouldn't allow it. Still, she was clearly appalled. It showed in her voice, high and anxious. His words did little to calm her.

"No. Actually, I doubt that any of them would interfere at all. And, anyway, I would take you far enough into the woods that they wouldn't hear you. No, the reason I haven't is because I know you don't really want to be here with me this weekend. I know I sort of trapped you. It doesn't seem quite fair to box you into an awkward situation, then punish you for not handling it gracefully."

"Oh, and you're always fair," she shot back, still in high dudgeon.

"I think so," he answered evenly. "If you ever notice a time when I'm being unfair, I hope you let me know. Patience is not one of my strong points, but I think fairness is. Have I been unfair?"

She did a quick review of the sparks that had flown between them in the past 24 hours: about her vulgarity, his walking away the previous night, the unplugged headlamp, and the impromptu roadside peepshow. There was, in fact, nothing unfair in any of it. She had resented the feeling of not being in control, but really he had been a pretty good sport. He had backed off repeatedly, had made no accusations, and had demanded nothing from her that he had not done on his own. In fact, except for setting up Declan to pressure her to stay when she was still uncomfortable and embarrassed about

having to strip to underwear in such a public place, he had even been very patient.

As she went over it, she realized that he had walked away from each clash; it had ended because he had ended it. Without conscious intention, she had been provoking him, and much of her own discomfort had been because she resented his restraint. Fair? Yes, he had been very fair.....and all because he felt responsible for trapping her into staying.

"You didn't trap me here," she confessed in a small voice. "I – I wanted to stay."

"Only because I tempted Declan with hot dogs and marshmallows," he responded with a smile.

"No. That's not true. I wanted to stay, anyway. It did bug me that you asked about staying when you did, but I think that was because I couldn't believe what had just happened. I was – well, anyway, I had already decided that we'd stay a second night. So, you don't need to feel guilty that you pressured me. Because you didn't, not really."

A gentle hand matched by gentle eyes caressed her face. "That's a pretty brave statement considering the benefits you've gained from my believing I trapped you."

There was strength and humor in his eyes, and she looked away as she stammered, "Well, like you say, you always try to be fair . . . I may not always be fair, but I try to always be honest."

"Even if your bottom pays the price?" Still there was humor in the challenge.

She found the will to meet his eyes. "I always try to be honest," she repeated. "And, you didn't trap me here."

For half-a-minute they just stared at each other, neither quite sure what came next. In a move that left her enormously relieved and only a little disappointed, he swung an arm over her shoulder and started them back toward the cabin in what was left of the artificial light. "Let's call it a fresh start, then. From now on, you'll know what to expect, and

I'll know you deserve it. You have a 24-hour amnesty that ends now. And, now," he leaned down and brushed his lips over her temple, "you're living on borrowed time, honey. Keep it up or you'll be standing up all the way home." He delivered a sharp swat to the seat of her jeans, but then his hand immediately went to soothe the same spot. The result was that she looked up in surprise at the spank, then relaxed against his shoulder a second later.

It was the first time, but definitely not the last.

Just before they mounted the steps of the cabin, he said, "You've got a lot of gumption, Erin." At her querulous look, he chuckled. "That's a good thing, honey, a good thing."

Chapter Seven

The drive back Sunday morning was pleasant and comfortable, with much laughter among car games and video duels. Erin became quieter as they neared home, though, struggling with long-dormant desires that had been reawakened over the weekend. She enjoyed the companionship, to be sure. Tanner was a funny, interesting man, who kept her on her toes. But, it was more than that; he had a strength – physical and emotional – that made her feel more safe and protected than she had in years. And, of course, he had a smile that could make her knees go weak. But how much of that attraction was circumstantial? She could admit, if only to herself, that she would not have made it through the weekend if she had not been stuck there. Now, returning to the less constrained atmosphere of home, would they both pull back from the nascent intimacy? Once home, there would be nothing to prevent her from walking away from him, from hanging up the phone, from driving away. And he had shown his own proclivity for walking away from confrontation. Without a common kitchen to work out their differences, would they simply drift back to distant friendship? It only took a couple of steps either way.

As she tossed the last bag into her tiny trunk in the commuters' parking lot, Erin was conscious of taking the first step away. "I really appreciate your organizing this, Tanner. I really had a good time. I know there wasn't a lot of interest in caving from the others, but I hope that doesn't discourage you from planning another outing." Slamming the trunk she looked up for a response and was surprised at the serious, intent expression on his face.

"You asked me Friday what I hoped to get out of the group, and I wasn't entirely honest." What the hell was that supposed to mean she wondered, and took another step back. He pretended not to notice.

"I told you I wanted someone to help me with

the practical little-girl things like hair and clothes, and that's true. That's why I went to the first one. But, the reason I kept coming back was because I liked watching you. I liked the way you kept things from getting out of hand, the way you wouldn't get discouraged. I liked watching you manage three conversations going on at the same time and seeing you still able to say something positive and helpful in each one. I like the way you backed the plan to go caving even though you had no idea what you were letting yourself in for. I like the fact that you came, anyway. I like the way your hair has a dozen different colors in it and looks different every time I see you. I like the fact that when I call you tomorrow and ask you out to dinner for Friday, you're going to say 'yes.'"

"Pretty sure of yourself?" It was a challenge, but a playful one.

He winked. "Yep. Pretty sure."

"We'll see," she said, but as she turned to climb in her Mazda, she was smiling.

He watched her drive off, a matching smile on his face.

The next two months had a surreal quality to them that was both keenly felt and unacknowledged. They saw a great deal of each other; they met for lunch whenever they could synchronize their work schedules, and they went out on their own at least once a week, attending a wider variety of cultural events than either had in years. But for all of the time and attention ostensibly focused on the other, there was no real meeting of the minds. There was more distance between them than there had been when they had been fighting over whether Erin was ready to go into the cave or joking about whether she should have a beer.

It wasn't that they didn't like each other or didn't want to make the effort. There was just a

persistent and growing distance that left them both feeling a little uncertain. Perhaps if they had been able to talk about it, they could have worked through the awkward period.

Erin equated it with trying to get to know someone after a one-night stand. How do you say, "Okay, we've shared this incredible intimacy; now let me introduce myself"? While their physical relationship had not progressed beyond passionate kisses and the occasional swat or gentle fondling, there was still the automatic vulnerability that went with sharing the secrets of her life story. In barely 40 hours, he had managed to find out about the incredible failure of her marriage, her legal manipulations of a powerful political family, the loss of control she felt at her father's death, her terror of falling, and her fear that she would never learn to trust again. After all that, it seemed bizarre to have to ask "How do you like your steaks cooked?" and "Do you follow college basketball?" They both tried, unsuccessfully, to push pass the awkwardness.

To Tanner, it seemed like the more he tried to make her comfortable, the more she retreated into the pleasant, efficient office manager she was on the job and the less he saw of the interesting, if flawed, woman that had so intrigued him during the West Virginia weekend.

He toyed with the idea of kidnapping her and taking her back to West Virginia as they struggled through another awkward dinner one Friday night two months later. They were making shish kabob on the grill at his house, a ploy he hoped would relax her some. She seemed unusually tense, but he wrote it off to the fact that it was a weekend Declan was at his grandparents and that separation was probably hard on her. Or maybe she had had an unpleasant experience dropping him off. Whatever it was, she wasn't likely to volunteer the information to Tanner. No, she might gripe about the traffic or rising gas prices or the network outage at the office, but she would never cry on his shoulder about the

things that really mattered to her. No, that's right, she didn't cry at all. The more he thought about it, the more irritated he became.

A clash was inevitable.

Dinner was another in a series of conversations in studied casualness, and it occurred to Tanner that Erin now knew more about Claire's day in third grade than he did about hers. They played board games for a bit, and he fantasized about being able to figure her out as easily as suspecting Colonel Mustard in the library with the lead pipe. In fact, he thought with bitter irony, perhaps it should be Ms. Erin in the den with the glass of wine.

Erin was aware of a shift in moods, somewhere midway through the first game of Clue. Tanner seemed to be watching her intently, but she didn't know why. It was disturbing. In truth, she had her own distractions that night, though she didn't want to talk about them. There had been a scene at the Callinsford house as she dropped Declan off. The Rat Bastard's threats and demands left her feeling unsettled enough; she didn't need the added pressure of Tanner's scrutiny. She had hoped to feel the reassuring warmth of his presence, but she was feeling less comfortable by the minute. They sat down to watch TV for a while but neither one relaxed.

Before he went upstairs to read Claire a bedtime story and listen to her prayers, he switched off the TV, still in the midst of "America's Funniest Home Videos," and said, his expression somber, "When I come back down, Erin, you and I are going to have a serious talk. Get yourself in the right frame of mind to produce some real answers for me, because I will have them – whatever it takes."

"What are you talking about? Answers to what?"

But it wasn't time for that conversation yet. "When I come back down," he repeated and dropped a kiss on her furrowed brow. It did occur to him that she might not be there when he returned.

Thirty minutes later, after Dr. Seuss and a glass

of water and abundant hugs, he descended the steps heavily. He still didn't know exactly where the evening was going, but it was bound to be new territory. He stopped in the kitchen and poured two glasses of wine, but only after confirming through the front window that her car was still there. *So, she hasn't left*, he thought, unconsciously adding, *yet*.

She watched him apprehensively as he descended the stairs to the rec room. She had the look of a caged animal, and he realized that warning her had been a mistake. She was very near panic. Still, something was going to happen. Might as well get on with it.

"Wine?" he offered with forced casualness.

"No, thank you. You know I don't drink." Her eyes took in the glass, his face, the stairs, and the door to the patio, all in a split second. His moved, more leisurely, to confirm that the security bar was still in place. He did not want to have to chase her into the yard.

"No, I know you don't drink with me," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said. I know you don't drink with me. Because you don't know me that well. You don't want me to see what you're like without all the inhibitions."

"I guess that's right." There was a hint of defiance in her manner, but the fear clearly outweighed it. He set her glass on the end table, sipped his own, then placed his there as well.

"Well, tonight I'm going to get some answers, and you're going to provide them, willingly or unwillingly."

Her mouth dropped open in disbelief. "You're going to force me to get drunk? You're insane!"

He remained relaxed on the couch, fingering a wineglass. "I didn't say you had to get drunk. I said I would get some answers. How you provide them is up to you."

"Answers to what?" She wasn't conceding much.

"What's upsetting you tonight?" She didn't answer, so he continued to tick off questions and her eyes grew larger by the second. "What do you want from me? What are you willing to give? Why won't you let me share your troubles? What do you feel when you're in my arms? Do you love me? Do you trust me?" Whatever she was expecting, it was clearly not this. She stood rooted in the middle of the room, blinking dumbly. "That's for starters," he finished up. "We'll see what other questions I might have as we go along."

"I don't think I want to talk to you tonight."

"That's too bad. You have a fairly limited set of options at this point."

"Options?" Maybe there was hope yet.

He counted them out for her. None of them sounded appealing. "One, you can sit down with me and have a candid conversation: about you, about me, about us." When he got no response, he said "I'll take that as a 'pass.'"

"What are my other choices?" she evaded.

"Two, you can help me polish off this bottle of wine. And then have that conversation." No response. "Or, three, you can come across my knee for a spanking and then have that conversation."

"I haven't done anything to deserve a spanking!"

"I think you have, but we'll talk about that later. Right now, you have to make a choice."

"Is there a 'four?'" She sounded so unhappy that he wanted to smile. There was a shadow of the little lost girl he had held in the dark of the meadow. He kept his voice even and sure.

"No. Just three."

"I could just leave." As a threat, it didn't have much force. He was bigger, stronger, and more determined. If he said there were only three choices, then that was that. He shook his head and held up three fingers.

A sigh laced with tension and frustration escaped. Then she did something completely

unexpected. She went into his arms of her own accord. He couldn't recall her making the first move before, and for a moment he was almost too surprised to respond. Then, he tightened his arms, securing her more comfortably in his lap. Minutes ticked by, and he was congratulating himself on having made this small gain when her voice, muffled by his shirtfront, disrupted his elation. "What did you want to know?"

It hurt to do it, but he set her away from him on the couch. "I'm not playing here, Erin. You need to tell me what's going on in your mind before I start looking for other ways to get there."

How could a threat be so reassuring? And what would he do if he knew it was? She took a deep breath and began what was sure to be a disjointed, rambling walk through her feelings. "I really like the way you take care of things. It makes me feel safe, safer than I have felt in a really long time. It reminds me of when I was a kid, and I knew that everything would be okay because my mom and dad were there. If they were in the next room, I didn't have to be afraid of the dark; there were no monsters in the attic; nobody would hurt me." She smiled up at him sadly. "I haven't felt that way in such a long time. And now I do, but it's like I can't really believe it. I keep waiting for signs that I'm wrong. I worry that I'm fooling myself." *There, go ahead, tell me I'm wrong*, her look challenged. *Do it now before I completely believe it. Now, I might be hurt, but I won't be shattered*. He said nothing.

"I guess I've got more invested in this relationship than you do."

His eyes bored into her but his voice was even. "I'm really angry that you would say that."

"You don't sound angry," she said warily.

"How should I sound for you to believe me? Should I shout and call you names? Should I curse at you? You'd've run for the hills the first time I raised my voice. You know that. But more importantly *I* know that."

"I don't understand."

"Don't mistake control for indifference. I'm hurt and, yes, angry that you feel this way. You've been pushing me away for weeks, and now I find out it's because you wanted to be closer. I don't know how I was supposed to break the code for that little secret," he said bitterly, "but I guess I have."

"I don't want to have this conversation," she said, standing and retreating a few feet.

"That's too bad. We tried doing it on your timetable, but I've probably only got another 40 or 50 years left, so I guess we do it my way." She took another step away, but he knew he could catch her on the stairs if she tried to flee.

He rose, seemingly casually, and offered the wineglass again. "Care for a drink?"

She swept the glass out of his hand with a quick backhand. For long seconds, they both stared at the wall, splattered with wine. The glass itself bounced harmlessly on the carpet. When he finally spoke, his voice was maddeningly calm. "You've just reduced your options."

Chapter Eight

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I'm sorry." It was a frantic apology and he had no doubt she was sincere. That didn't change things a bit.

"Come here." She was barely an arm's reach away.

"Why?" she gasped out, dreading the answer.

"I think you know."

"No. I don't." *God, I hope I don't*, she thought. What had possessed her to prod for such a response? She had a brief, longing look back at the past uneventful weeks, before she felt the inexorable pull of his hand on her wrist.

She shook herself free only because he let her; they both knew it.

He said, "It's your choice. And you have about 10 seconds to make it."

"I won't!" she insisted defiantly, all but stamping her foot.

"Then I'll make it for you. That, too, is a choice."

"What?" Her head was swimming.

"Deciding not to decide. That's a decision. If you decide not to decide, that leaves the decision to me. I'm prepared to make it, and I think you know what that decision will be."

She paled.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . . zero."

He was at "two" before she recognized the end of her 10-second deadline, and still she was unable to move. She remained frozen until his hand closed on her wrist again – and by then it was too late. The panic hit, full-force, and she pulled frantically against his iron hold. "No-no-no-no-nooooo!" It was a long, almost incoherent wail, but his answer was solid and unruffled, his own calm being his best hope for carrying them through the next few difficult minutes.

"Over you go, sweetheart," he said gently, even as he manhandled her into position.

There would be other times for finesse. That first

time, they blundered through together: she, thrashing frantically, desperate to regain some small measure of control; he, determined that she would relinquish it to him. She fought, groaning and grunting, as he methodically stripped her of the gray wool slacks that had looked so professional in her midday meeting. She'd have to replace the clasp before she wore them again because it was broken in the struggle. Still, he managed to keep her more or less face down and her upper body more or less on the couch as he continued to grapple with her clothing. It was a courtesy she wouldn't appreciate until much later, but he was concerned she not feel the uncertainty of falling and that she not hit the coffee table in her frantic efforts to escape. He used a foot to push the table out of range, and then brought that same leg down behind her knees, effectively trapping her legs between his.

If he had thought she was panicking before, the renewed frenzy was beyond name. It took all his considerable strength to keep her under control enough with one hand that he could finally begin to spank with the other.

Twenty hefty, square, full-armed strokes fell in less than 10 seconds. She couldn't even keep up with the sensations. She went from fear and indignation to terror to full-on pain so quickly she could do no more than gasp. Another 10 seconds and she found her voice. "No, no, no, no! You can't do this! It's not fair!"

It was no more effective than it was earlier. She was in no position to appreciate the gentleness of Tanner's voice when he answered. "I'm pretty sure I can. And, we'll talk later about whether I should." Slap-slap, spank-spank. He fell into a comfortable rhythm of two in a row, one cheek and then the other. In less than a minute he could see the pink of her bottom through the sheer nylon of her underwear. Her cries could not keep pace with the tempo he set: quick, deliberate, relentless.

He didn't say another word, but he continued to

spank until he felt the resignation in her upper body. When the "oohs" and "ows" outnumbered the "stop its" and she had given up trying to hoist herself up on the arm of the couch, he knew he was making progress. She still struggled, but her efforts to pull away from his scorching hand, meant she arched her back, pressing her pelvis more firmly into his leg, and that was clearly better than trying to free herself. There were no lectures this time. It was an experience beyond words. He paused, stretching the muscles in his hand and giving both cheeks a rough massage. It was painful in its own right, but such a relief from the metronomic impact of the spanks, that she groaned in appreciation. Thank God, it was over! Her breathing – dry sobs, interspersed with ineffective squeals of protest – settled down to simple panting. She slumped over his leg, exhausted by the turmoil in her head and in her body. Pain mixed with anger, fear, and gratitude.

The gratitude was gone in an instant when she realized he wasn't finished. Her underwear, the last barrier of modesty in a situation that screamed for concealment, were gone, tugged down below her cheeks as far as Tanner's restraining thighs would allow.

He knew from his brief rubbing of her buttocks, that the skin was radiating warmth, but the color was a surprise once the undies were gone. There were two bright crimson spots, practically palm-sized, on the crest of each mound and extending under each cheek to the juncture with the thigh, but really there was still quite a lot of pale – or at least only slightly pink – skin. Not for long.

The renewed assault was much more painful, not so much from the loss of the paper-thin nylon shield, but because the break had allowed the numbness to fall away and the true sting and burn to come to the surface. Her resistance resurfaced, too. If he had not liked the way she referred to her jerk of an ex-husband, he clearly didn't like the way

she referred to him in the next several minutes. Threats gave way to curses which gave way to pleas and then only to screams.

He continued to spank. It was going to be a long night.

He switched hands, securing her upper thigh with his right hand and slapping across the top of her globes. It was mostly untouched territory, but his fingertips hit the bright, shiny red of hard-punished skin with every stroke. It was those spanks, with the exquisite punishing of already tender skin, that pushed her to tears. The first few she brushed angrily from her eyes, damning Tanner and herself for letting this happen. He knew right away that something was different, but he couldn't see her reaction; it was the absence of the strangled screams and cries that alerted him. Her jaws were clamped tight, and her throat worked to control the urge to cry. It was just the pain; that's all it was, the pain, she kept telling herself. It just hurt so damn much!

He had released her legs and was turning her gently to him before she realized he had stopped spanking. Her body picked that moment to begin the first true crying jag she had ever experienced. The tears became a flood. At first, she was angry with Tanner for reducing her to that, but as the minutes wore on and the tears and the shaking wouldn't stop, she gave up the struggle against everything – the tears, the emotions, Tanner's calm implacability. It all went so far beyond a painful spanking and the loss of control over the crying. There were tears of regret that she had let the Rat Bastard dominate her life for so many years, first physically but then in absentia for another 7 years. There were tears of grief over the lost time and lost possibilities. There were tears of apology for so underestimating Tanner's resolve, for questioning his intentions. There were tears for Tanner himself and the fact that he was stuck with the botched human being in his lap.

It was this last thought that she finally gave voice to when she was eventually able to speak. "I'm sorry I'm so screwed up," she sobbed as she tried to mop up the fluid that streamed from every orifice.

To his credit, Tanner did not upend her again, though later in their relationship such self-denigration would cost her dearly. This time, she lucked out with only a verbal rebuttal, delivered in the same calm, reassuring voice he had used from the beginning of the spanking. "You're not all screwed up. You've been through a terrible experience, and it left you a little distrustful, maybe more than a little distrustful. That's understandable. I've been giving you the time and space for you to get used to me, get to know me, maybe even fall in love with me." The last was half-statement, half-question, and he was heartened by the enthusiastic bobbing of her head. "I think we both knew that it would come to this, because I'm too stubborn and you're too determined for us not to come to loggerheads every so often. But, I think we just showed that we can get through those walls and be stronger for the experience.

"I don't feel very strong," she said in a small voice.

He considered that. "Do you think I am?"

"Yes." Her voice showed no hesitancy.

"Then lean on me. I promise you I will lend you my strength as long as you need it. But, really, you're very strong already. Look what you've been through. You've managed to build a good career and raise a wonderful, active, well-mannered kid. You've shown tremendous strength of character by insulating him from your bad experiences. How could you think you were anything but strong? And I think once you calm down some, you'll see that you feel a lot better for having let some of this go. You've been holding it in for so long."

She began to feel the return of equilibrium as he spoke. He was right. In the 7 years since she'd left

the Rat Bastard behind, she had maintained iron control on expressing emotions, but it didn't actually change who she was to let the anger and fear and loneliness out. She knew it wasn't all gone – she wasn't that naïve – but already she felt more certain about her relationship with Tanner. He had seen her at her defiant worst – make-up dripping down her face, tears and screams, emotions all over the floor – and he had gathered her to his chest and held on. If that wasn't proof he could see her through the inevitable bad times, what was?

She burrowed more deeply into his chest as the tears finally began to ease. Eventually, absorbing the reassuring, centering sound of his heartbeat, she found herself breathing in cadence. She could see, from her position curled in his arms, the wineglass still on the floor. The wall was completely dry. It was a good thing it had been white wine. "I'm sorry for knocking the wineglass out of your hand."

"Consider your debt paid."

Long minutes passed as she replayed the events of the last 90 minutes in her head. It was a confusing, chaotic mélange but what finally came out was surprisingly simple. "I was afraid you would be angry with me."

"I was angry with you."

"I know. But not angry the way I thought."

"I know. You were afraid I would hurt you." He rubbed her still-smarting bottom, but they both understood what he meant. She had feared the kind of uncontrolled rage that could devastate her.

"I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about. We both learned a lot today."

"I think I love you." Ever the coward, she stopped short of what she knew was true.

"I know I love you. That's one of the things we both learned tonight."

She rolled the words around her mind. He loved her, and he was right that she knew it. It was a

warm, comfortable feeling in her chest that balanced the hot, uncomfortable one in her tail. After the big step she had taken unwillingly by going over his knee, the small one didn't seem so scary. "I love you, too." He had hoped, but not expected, to hear those words. He hugged her a little tighter and sighed against her hair – auburn, he knew the word for it now. She had auburn hair and bright green eyes and tiny little feet, and she loved him. She had a feisty temper and a thousand unacknowledged vulnerabilities, and she loved him. She had a tendency toward vulgarity when she was mad, and she loved him. She was in his arms, and she loved him. It all seemed a lot clearer than it had when they were playing Clue.

He relaxed into the feeling of warmth and comfort, and enjoyed the play of Erin's hands and lips across his chest. But when her hands eventually tried to extend their explorations below his beltline, he gently recaptured her hands. "No, babe, we're not going there tonight."

"You don't want to?" she asked, surprised and a little hurt.

"I do," he sighed, and one hand roamed to a full and luscious breast even as his other hand kept hers under firm control. "I do. But, your emotions have been in a whirlwind all night. I don't want to do something you'll regret."

"I won't regret it. Really." She tried to free her hands but was stopped by his direct gaze.

"I'm telling you 'no.' You don't want me to get angry again, do you?" There was an edge of humor to the taunt, but the memory was too recent for her to ignore his meaning.

"No," she said in a small voice as she resettled herself in his embrace. She still needed those strong arms around her. If that was all the physical comfort she was going to get, she would take it. "No, I don't want you to be angry."

"Good decision. See, I can be strong enough for both of us."

Eventually, she slept.

There would be time enough for him to find out what happened when she dropped off Declan, time enough to break through more of her barriers, time enough to explore the physical delights that lay ahead of them. Hopefully, there would be time enough for her to put on some clothes before Claire came down for Saturday morning cartoons.

Chapter Nine

Erin stretched contentedly and opened her eyes, apparently unsurprised to see Tanner's brown ones looking back. "Is it morning, yet?" she asked with a small smile.

She was tousled and sleep-worn. And his. He smiled. "No, honey, just a little past midnight. How do you feel? That kind of crying can leave a headache. Are you okay?" He saw the flush of embarrassment and turned her head back when she tried to look away. "Nothing to be embarrassed about," he reassured. "Are you okay?" he repeated. "Need some Tylenol?"

"No, I'm fine." Her arms went around his chest, and her head snuggled into him. "I'm sorry about last night."

"I'm not." He answered her startled look with a quick kiss and the words, "Last night was one of the most special nights in my life. I don't want to forget it, and I'm not going to regret it."

Looking at it that way, Erin wasn't sorry either. She couldn't help but notice that his hand rested on her bottom – still very sore and somewhat swollen – after he was finished repositioning her. The location of her slacks was not immediately apparent, but he had pulled an afghan over her half-naked body and that helped with both the chill and her modesty. She drew it a little closer, still aware of Tanner's hand on her bare skin. "You're right. I'm not sorry it happened, but we still have some unfinished business." She had his attention now.

"Unfinished business?"

"You had some questions I didn't answer before I fell asleep. Do you want to have that conversation now? Or are you too tired? We could do this tomorrow if you'd rather."

"Who are you and what have you done with my girlfriend?" An affectionate smile robbed the words of any sting.

She teased back in the same spirit. "Well, I

figured I better produce the answers before you tried to take them again." They both studied each other, the words fading away as soon as they were spoken. Looking into his eyes, feeling his arms around her, she relished the changes the last few hours had brought. How could she have thought he was not invested in their relationship?

He sampled her full lips and said, "Tell you what. I think my legs have gone to sleep, so let me get up, get some circulation going, and I'll try to find you something to sleep in. I'll check on Claire and get some sheets to make up the couch. You have your choice: my bed, which is more comfortable, or the couch, which is less likely to have a sleepy 8-year-old crawl in it at the crack of dawn." They shared a laugh of recognition.

"I'll take the couch. I'm not sure I'm up to that conversation on my own and it sounds like you wouldn't be there to help me with it." Hey, it never hurt to ask.

"I would not," he confirmed resolutely as he set her on her feet, amused to see her clutch the afghan protectively around her waist.

When he returned a few minutes later with a new toothbrush from the medicine cabinet, a set of mismatched sheets, and an odd assortment of shorts, sweats, and T-shirts for her to pick through, he heard the shower running in the downstairs bathroom. "Are there towels in there?" he called when the water went off. There were and he passed the pile of clothing through a strikingly small opening. He chuckled as he returned to the couch. She was a funny lady. A few hours earlier she had been anxious to make love, before that she had been . . . well, fairly fully exposed to his eyes and hands, and now she was being positively Victorian lest he catch a glimpse of her towel-clad body. No wonder she had been so angry – or was it unnerved? – about having to change roadside outside the cave. He would have to remember that, however fast he wanted to push things, his pace

was no more perfect than hers. It would have to be a series of compromises.

Click. The door opened, and he could do nothing but grin. The lady had style. She was wearing the black nylon soccer shorts he had snagged from Claire's dresser. He had no idea why they always came in men's small even for the little kids' teams, but they did. Removal of a safety pin was all it took for them to fit Erin. And did they ever fit! Over them she was wearing a yellow T-shirt, the provenance of which he could not remember, tucked into the narrow waistband of the little black shorts. But what gave the whole thing élan – which was the right word, even if he didn't know it – was the flannel shirt layered over the both of them. It was soft and comfortable and though he had worn it a hundred times, he had to admit it looked a whole lot better on her. She was covered more fully than propriety required, but the effect was as though she were half-undressed. Or maybe it was just that he wanted to undress her.

If he hadn't already told her there would be no sex tonight . . .

Her hair, swept up for the shower, was pinned invisibly, leaving her neck an open invitation. The words came out without conscious thought: "God, you're beautiful."

The smile on her face said she knew it, but she blushed at the compliment all the same. That was not her only physical response to his scrutiny, but she fought down some of it and went easily into his arms. He was the one who claimed to be strong; let him struggle with it. She nuzzled his neck as he caressed hers then worked his hands over her back and shoulders, assiduously avoiding more intimate areas. Finally, when he could bear it no longer, he let his hands fall to her bottom. Brushing away the flannel, all he could feel was nylon and skin moist from the shower. No sign of heat, but a slight gasp in her kiss told him she could still feel the spanking, even if he couldn't.

He stopped while he still could.

"You still ready to talk?"

She smiled a private smile, well aware that he was having at least as much trouble controlling the lust as she was. "Sure. But really, if you're tired, we can put this off. I promise I won't renege."

He had, in fact, wondered if she would change her mind in the few minutes he went upstairs but decided not to mention that. Instead, he settled them comfortably on the sofa. "We have all day tomorrow to sleep in if we want. What is it you wanted to tell me?"

She took a deep breath. "Not really wanted to tell you," she stalled. "It's what I need to tell you. You were right that something was bothering me. When I took Declan to his grandparents, I got into an argument with the Ra—" she corrected herself with some difficulty to "with Declan's father" and was rewarded with a quick kiss. "Anyway, I guess he left me a little shaken. I don't usually see him, and it was upsetting."

"Why didn't you want to tell me about it before?"

"I don't know. Partly because I don't want problems from my past to affect us now and partly because you can't do anything about it, and I know that would bother you. And partly," she added in a small voice that told him this was the crux of the difficulty, "because he makes me feel so bad."

"What did he say?"

"I don't want to talk about it." There was no defiance there, just wishfulness. He waited. "He wants a change in the custody order."

"Can he do that?"

"I don't know. He knows a lot of lawyers. And judges. Maybe he can." She wasn't really thinking it through yet, not concentrating on the problem, and he recognized that was what he had seen at dinner and during games: Erin working so hard not to deal with a problem that the refusal to deal with it became a problem in its own right. It was the road

to depression.

"Have you talked to your attorney?" She couldn't have. There wasn't time.

She shook her head. "No, but I don't even know if he's still in practice. He was an old man even 7 years ago. I guess I should find out." The vagueness was still there, but at least she was thinking.

"I know a guy who's really good. We'll call him. If there's a way out of this, Eliot will find it. Do you have any idea why he wants to change it? After all this time?"

She sighed heavily and leaned into his warmth. "What he said was that he wanted to spend more time with Declan and that he shouldn't have to go all the way to Great Falls to do it. But I don't think that's it. He always loved having an excuse to stay there. Even when we were married, he kept his apartment over the garage, and I know he stays there sometimes even when Declan's not visiting. Maybe he's just afraid that the need for supervision will come out in the press, and with elections next year, he wants it resolved. It could be as simple as that."

"Erin," Tanner asked carefully, "has he ever done anything that would make you think he'd hurt Declan? Either in a rage or to get back at you? What made you press for the supervision in the first place? Are his parents that much better?"

"His parents are okay, a little straight-laced, a little stodgy maybe, but basically good people. His grandmother dotes on him; the congressman isn't around as much, but Declan loves to see him. I know what you're asking, though. The thing is that – I'm going to call him 'RB,' okay?" At Tanner's raised eyebrow she said sweetly "His name is Reginald Bryan Callinsford, Jr. So the initials are R – B." At his reluctant nod, she grinned in triumph. She didn't want to call him "Reg," which carried with it the baggage of betrayed intimacy, and Tanner had clearly rejected her more appropriate

moniker. So, out loud he was "RB," though in her thoughts he was still "Rat Bastard." She could grind out "your dad" when speaking to Declan, but these small acts of separation from her past made her feel stronger. She was glad she had Tanner's grudging approval, and she suspected even he appreciated the joke though he wouldn't show it.

"RB is different around his parents. Maybe it's that he's still looking for their approval or that he just turns up his manners when there's an audience. Maybe he just wants his father's political connections. I don't know. But I don't worry about Declan there. Without witnesses? I'm not as comfortable, but I guess I don't really think he'll hurt Declan. Certainly not now, because Declan is too young to really oppose him. So it's like he's no threat. When he gets to be a teenager and we all get to experience those little struggles," she grimaced, "I don't know about that, but, no, RB's not going to fly into a rage and hurt him. And Declan still looks forward to his visits. I guess I just want to be in control of whether – and where – he goes. And I guess I'm a little uncomfortable with erasing that last bit of legal validation that he was wrong.

"Maybe it's childish, but even after almost 8 years I can't forgive him. That's what he said yesterday: that it was a long time ago and I should just forgive and forget. But I can't. It isn't just that he beat me up and that I was afraid I would lose the baby," she said, her hand unconsciously reaching down to rub the belly that had protected the unborn child on that horrible night. "But it's everything that went before: the anger and the accusations and the control. He wouldn't let me keep in touch with any of my old friends or –"

She shook her head as though trying to dislodge the memory. After a deep breath, her voice got stronger, moving from the lost, dejected soul he would always associate with standing in a dark meadow against an expansive sky. It took on the

strength and vibrancy he knew normally resided behind those vibrant green eyes. His Erin was back. "And now that it's all over, when I've finally pulled myself together and made a credible start on a new life after 8 long years, he thinks I should 'forgive and forget'? Not on your life. If it takes every dime I've got, if it takes going to the press and laying out every sordid detail, he will not win this one. He's not getting Declan or the house!"

Tanner frowned in confusion. "What house?"

"I didn't tell you about the house?"

"No. What house?" Patience, he reminded himself.

"My house. Well, where Declan and I are living. It's actually a rental, but we've been there since he was a toddler. I think of it as ours."

"And what happened?" Somehow the conversation – or Erin's thoughts – had taken a turn he could not follow.

"The Rat Bastard bought it." The sharp report of Tanner's hand on freshly spanked skin made her wince. "I'm sorry," she said automatically, but they both knew she wasn't, not really.

"He bought it? Why?"

"To torture me. I don't know, really. Maybe to give the illusion that he's supporting his family, maybe just so he can come over whenever he wants. I don't know. I didn't even know the house was up for sale. I might've bought it if I'd known. I imagine it wasn't and he made an offer that couldn't be refused. I've got another few months on the lease, and he has to honor that, I think, but then I don't know. Is he going to try to move in? Evict me?" She burrowed deeper into Tanner's arms. "I just feel so out of control. Like he's pulling the puppet strings and I don't even know what the show is. I've been through this before, and I don't like it."

"No, I don't imagine you do." He cuddled her protectively. He had almost begun to feel some sympathy for the guy as Erin had been talking

about the custody issue. While he was willing to stand by Erin to help her get what she wanted, he could appreciate the frustration of a father not being allowed to see his son freely or frequently. But buying the house she was renting had a creepy feel that made Erin's discomfort understandable. If control was RB's game, he had just made an opening move. And there was no way Tanner was leaving her to play this out alone.

He was puzzled why she would focus on the custody issue over the house, when the house seemed like a more manageable problem – she could always find somewhere else to live – then realized that that was probably why she focused on it. RB brought out the feeling of helplessness and vulnerability that could lead to immobility. Tanner had seen her steel herself for the inevitable before, and sometimes it could be a strength, but sometimes it seemed to blind her to alternatives. The "inevitable" was not as inevitable as she sometimes thought.

"I'm going to help you with this. Don't worry. We'll work it out. If that means you get out of the house, then we'll handle that. If it means buying it back, we'll do that. We'll find a way to cut those strings, okay?"

She looked at him, the admiration clear in her eyes, and said softly, "You know, I think you will." The morning would be soon enough to explore options, to call Eliot and begin the legal machinations, to help Erin install new deadbolts or maybe a security system. For now, it was enough that she felt safe in his arms. Well, almost enough.

Tanner took a deep breath. "Can I ask one more question?"

"Anything." It was a blanket invitation. Who would've imagined, a day earlier, that he'd ever see that level of openness?

"You said earlier that I wasn't being fair." She grimaced. She'd said a lot more than that. "I told you then that we'd talk about it later. So, here we

are. Later. Do you think I was being unfair?"

She squirmed. "I guess fair-unfair, that's not the right measure. It wasn't fair, but it wasn't unfair either." He clearly didn't follow and she confessed, "I just said that to make you stop."

"It didn't work," he observed wryly.

"No," she agreed with a rub to her bottom. They shared a smile, but she dropped both the smile and her eyes before admitting, "And I also wanted to hurt your feelings."

"Well," he conceded, "that worked a little better, but not enough to stop me. But, now that we're both calm and settled, let me ask again: was I unfair?"

She tried again. "It's not a question of fair or unfair; it's a question of being right."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, if you ask me, in the abstract: Is it fair for a man to demand a woman be emotionally responsive to him when he requires it? And if she isn't, should he reasonably be allowed to beat it out of her –"

He flinched at the characterization but remained silent.

She continued. "If you describe it that way, I'd say, 'No, of course it's not fair.'" She studied his face, taking in his closed expression, and she cradled his face in her hands. She had hurt him in that statement; she knew it immediately and was surprised how clear that knowledge was to her. She erased it completely with her next words. "But that's in the abstract. The reality is that this is us. And you didn't 'beat it out of me.' And you gave me plenty of warning, and I'd have to be crazy not to know it was coming. And, as much as it scared me, I knew it was going to happen. I guess what I'm saying is it may not have been 'fair,' but it was 'right.'" A half-minute passed as they both absorbed the truth of those words.

"Good. Because it's likely to happen again," he said with a smile.

"No doubt," she said, snuggling closer. "No doubt."

Dealing with RB turned out to be both simpler and more complicated than either imagined. A meeting with Tanner's lawyer, who also happened to be an old friend, turned up nothing solid. There were futile meetings in legal offices where Erin was not supposed to open her mouth, and she and RB listened to their lawyers discuss who wouldn't provide what. It all seemed to be leading somewhere, but it was hard to tell where. After weeks of feigning and posturing by both legal teams, all Eliot could tell them was that the house had been bought suddenly but legally, at well above market value. It was being offered to her, gratis, if she gave up custody. Joint custody was hinted at as a possible compromise. Compromise? The man had a lot of nerve.

What it all meant for Erin and Tanner was a lot of sparks and tension that ended, more times than not, in tears and apologies from an overwrought Erin in what was beginning to be a familiar position over Tanner's lap. There was almost a routine to it after the first several times, and although she dreaded the pain and the humiliation of it, she had come to look forward to the cleansing aftermath. She invariably felt calmer and better able to deal with kid-problems, work-problems, and even ex-husband-problems. She still fought and resisted, but it was almost a token resistance. She refused to consider the idea that she might be instigating these clashes accidentally-on-purpose, but Tanner did not suffer from the same mental block. He was keenly aware that her feelings of frustration and vulnerability had a way of intensifying over time and often came out as anger – directed at him because he was a safe target. In many ways that knowledge made it easier for him to persevere because he didn't take her provocations personally. He also

didn't take them passively.

They came to a turning point one difficult evening when she seemed to be itching for a fight that Tanner wouldn't give her. It took Claire's worried comment that her dad seemed awfully tired to wake Erin up to the fact that he really didn't look well. Had she been so determined to vent her own frustration that she had become inured to his? She watched him across the room as he answered the phone. Claire was right; he did look tired. Eyes that typically danced with wry humor seemed glazed and even his breathing was labored. When she finally pushed aside her own selfish desire for a reaction, it occurred to her that his constant efforts to rein her in were wearing on him.

Instantly contrite, she tried to approach him when he got off the phone. "Tanner, I'm sorry. I've been on a tear since I got here. It's over. Promise. You look like you've had a rough day, too. What can I do for you?" He turned away from her attempt to kiss him, and she swallowed the pain of that. He did, however, take her into his arms, and she tried to be satisfied with that. Standing with her head tucked under his chin, though, she became aware that his warm hug was exceptionally warm. She eyed him apprehensively. "You feel okay? You seem a little warm." She put a hand to his forehead then pulled it back as though scalded. "Good Lord, Tanner, you're burning up! What's the matter with you?"

It was a rhetorical question, but he answered it anyway. "Flu." Standing up seemed like a lot of work, so he sank heavily into an armchair.

"Flu? You have the flu? Why didn't you say something? You should be in bed. Tylenol, orange juice, plenty of rest. Any of this sound familiar? What are you doing walking around like everything's normal? You should be in bed."

Ten minutes later, he was in bed. With a fever of 103 degrees that the Tylenol should bring down and an irritated Erin fluffing pillows and rearranging his

nightstand to accommodate water and juice cups. "I can't believe you didn't say something," she muttered, not expecting an answer.

She was as angry at herself as she was annoyed with him. How could she possibly not have realized he was sick? He was practically gray with fever, and it took an effort to focus his eyes on her, but he made the effort. "You seemed to need to talk," he said vaguely. "You need me. I'm good for you. Even sick, I'm good for you."

"Oh, for pity's sake!"

"See, I've even cleaned up your expletives. I'm good for you." There was the ghost of his smile.

"Stop that!" she demanded.

"What?"

"Stop smiling like that! It makes me forget that I'm angry with you. Stop it!"

His grin broadened, still tired but very much his, and she could feel her resolve weakening. The next statement had much less force. "Stop it," she whispered, just before she went to him. Lying down next to him, she felt his heavy, overheated arm settle her to him. "You are good for me," she agreed. He fell asleep moments later, achy, tired, feverish, for sure, but contented with Erin in his arms. She slipped out of his bed only after she was sure he wouldn't reawaken.

Chapter Ten

That night as she worried over him, Erin began a serious reevaluation of her relationship with Tanner. In an irony only she could appreciate, she knew that he had become the whipping boy made to pay for the other problems in her life. When she had difficulties – legal, professional, or personal – she automatically dumped them on Tanner and let him sort out the mess. How that had gotten to be such a habit in the few short months they'd been dating, she wasn't sure, but she vowed to put an end to it.

She brought him no problems during the time he was sick. There were no problems, only solutions. She installed cots, later to be replaced by beds, in the spare room in the basement. It took a Herculean cleaning effort on Saturday to free it from storage-room-syndrome, but when they were done it would make an acceptable temporary home for Erin and Declan while Tanner recovered. It meant she could be close to him in case he needed help and close to Claire who definitely did. At 8, she was too young to take over for her dad but old enough to want to. With Erin there she could feel like she was helping without being overwhelmed. Come Monday, Erin shuttled both kids to school and put in a half-day at work before returning to fuss over Tanner.

It was an odd experience – tiring but invigorating – and it gave her a better appreciation for Tanner's role in her life. He did this all the time; organizing, soothing, de-stressing for them all. As she had told him the night of her first spanking, she felt safe and comfortable in his orbit. It was time she contributed to that safe aura she so appreciated. It was a conscious effort that got easier over time. The most noticeable difference, and Tanner was aware of it once he was completely himself two weeks later, was that Erin no longer seemed to push for a reaction. She was still spirited, unpredictable, and occasionally sarcastic,

but she recognized reasonable limits readily, and was more solicitous of those around her. It almost made it worth getting the flu, Tanner considered. Almost.

Also, in those long days of forced inactivity, when Tanner really wanted to get up and Erin really wanted him to rest, she tried to distract him with conversation. In a move she knew would tempt him, she put any topic on the table. They found out more about each other and their pasts in those late night talk marathons than she could have predicted. In fact, Erin discovered more about herself in those discussions than she would have expected.

Several days into his confinement – the fever controlled with medication, but still gripped by exhaustion – Tanner was stretched out on the couch with his head pillowed in her lap as she stroked and massaged his shoulders. They had talked about so many things, and she was hoping he would fall asleep. But he managed to keep going, so she did, too. By the time he asked the question he'd been burning to ask since they had first argued in the West Virginia meadow so long ago, she wasn't even surprised. That's why he put it off so long.

"Why did you marry RB?"

Where she once would have been defensive or sarcastic, she became thoughtful. "It was the thing to do – a stage-of-life kind of thing. I was 24. That's what you do. You get married and have kids. And he was very smooth, very polished." She drifted off as her hands went to caress Tanner's hair.

"Did you love him?" It was a completely non-judgmental question, softly asked and, she suspected, meant to make her think more than make her admit. So she did – think, that is.

"In a way. Really more a young girl's awe; he was exciting and sophisticated." Her eyes fell, unconsciously, to Tanner's well-used hiking boots sitting in the adjacent mudroom.

"Well, if there's one thing I'm not," he said with a rueful smile, "it's sophisticated." It was ironic,

really, that he had maintained such an unaffected air. His own upbringing was solidly upper-middle class. But for him, winter ski trips and an Ivy League education had been balanced by summers on his grandparents' farm as a boy and later working as a roofer to help pay the bills for his education. It left him able to mix with a broad range of people easily. And while he preferred the grubby comfort of jeans and a sweatshirt, he also had a well-tailored tux in his closet. He wondered whether to share that little tidbit.

Her next words made the subject moot. "But that just shows how little I knew about what's important. I guess I've grown up a lot in the past 8 years, because now I realize that doesn't matter at all. I fell in love with you covered in mud and talking about bats" – she shivered at the memory and he smiled – "and every time I see footprints in the foyer, or disassembled car parts in the garage, or topographic maps in the living room, I just realize I love you more. And honor and responsibility can be surprisingly sexy. Smooth and sophisticated has very little appeal in the long term." She sighed.

"But, anyway, he didn't love me any more than I loved him. I was there to serve a function, and as long as I did that properly, I was tolerated. If I stepped outside the narrow bounds he defined, there was hell to pay. It had to fit his script, his timetable. He needed to control everything: the money, my time, my life. I realized I couldn't live like that."

Tanner sat up slowly to control the dizziness, but he had something important to say, something about his rules and the purpose of limits. But, before he could organize his jumbled thoughts, she continued, unknowingly making his argument for him. "But, you're very different. I don't get the feeling you want to control me. You want to help me control myself."

"Yes, that's it exactly," he said fondly and would

have smothered her with kisses but for the fear of contagion. "I love your spirit, your self-possession. I could do without the bitter sarcasm, sometimes, but it's all a package. I love the package."

As he got better, she resisted the temptation to slip back into letting Tanner buffer her moods and act as her safety valve. She still shared her thoughts and feelings with him, but she found it easier to accept his sympathy without redirecting her anger toward him. She could finally absorb his support without pushing for a stronger reaction. She had been a self-reliant and independent woman for the past several years and rediscovered those strengths again, handling the daily obstacles with something like her old confidence.

The one problem Erin could not tackle on her own was RB. It was to her credit that she did not try, for that would surely have been a doomed effort. The seemingly pointless consultations with lawyers and therapists and a variety of people she heard about but never met, continued, but it was not until an unexpected call from the Rat Bastard himself – proposing coffee and a meeting free of lawyers and their agendas – that they finally had an opening.

She agreed to meet him, then immediately called Tanner to ask if he would come as well. It was one thing to meet with RB without her lawyer; it was quite another to meet him alone.

As always, she had his instant support. "I think it's a great idea. Maybe we'll finally get some answers. When and where?" She told him and was met by a long silence before he said, carefully, "I didn't realize you meant today. I can clear the afternoon easily enough, but I have two meetings this morning that I really can't get out of."

"Oh, God," she whimpered.

"Erin, hold on. We can make this work." It was harder steadying her by phone than it would have been in person. "I don't think I can be there by 11:00, but that just means I'll be a little late. I will

be there. If we can wrap things up here in 45 minutes, and if the traffic isn't too bad, I can be there by 11:20, maybe 11:30. Do you think you can keep him talking that long? Or maybe you can call back and reschedule."

"No, I can't reschedule. He said the reason he wanted to meet today was because he'll be downtown to give a speech at the Press Club and another at Howard University, and he's flying out of National this afternoon. He made it sound like he wanted to get this resolved before he went. Of course, that could all be a load of garbage. It wouldn't be the first time he fabricated schedule conflicts to back me into a corner." Her voice got stronger as she talked, and Tanner grinned on the other end of the line. "I bet he thinks he can catch me off-guard, and I'll just crumble to his will. Fat chance. No way. But I do want to know what's behind all the legal maneuvers. You'll be there by 11:30? I can talk to him until then. 11:30, right?" There was the hint of indecision behind her bravado.

"Yes, Erin, guaranteed." It was a promise he would keep if he had to walk out of the meeting and leave it to someone else. In the meantime, he reminded Erin of the key points. "Hear him out. Don't agree to anything. Don't sign anything. Keep him talking until I get there. If you can't take it anymore, get up and leave, but don't agree to anything."

"Of course, I won't sign anything," she snapped. "What do you take me for? An idiot?" The silence gave her a chance to reconsider. "That didn't come out right."

"I didn't think so. What you meant was 'Thank you for your concern, Tanner. I will do my best to keep a level head.' Something like that, right?"

There was no frost in his tone, and she knew she wouldn't pay for it later, but the guilt of ingratitude washed over her. "I'm sorry." The quaver in her voice was a clear barometer of her

current insecurity, and he did what he could to bolster her by phone.

"I know you are, honey. Don't worry about me. You have a lot on your mind, and I am not one of your problems today. You do what you can; do what you must. You never have any trouble telling me when you think I'm off base," he reminded her. "Feel free to tell RB the same thing. I will be there, but I will probably be late. If I say anything that surprises you, try to play along."

"Like what?"

"I can't explain right now. I only have half the story, and I don't want to mislead you. Just don't let him get to you. I can handle it."

"Okay." She sounded a lot more confident. He had deliberately distracted her with the hint of a solution. It would be enough to keep her grounded without tying him down to a script. What he had was the glimmer of impropriety on RB's part, but no proof. That would make their meeting one of hints and subtle accusations, and he didn't want Erin to inadvertently tip their hand.

"Take care, honey. I'll be there as soon after 11 as I can. And, Erin, 'hang tough.'" They both laughed. It was Declan's latest expression from the playground, said with the faux-cool that only a 7-year-old could don.

"Sure," she agreed, still chuckling. "I'll hang tough."

It was a little harder to summon her sense of humor sitting across the table from RB. He had a way of pushing her buttons that had her vacillating between defensive and gutless, with brief flashes of fury. It was not a steadying experience. Nervous and uncomfortable, she reminded herself that Tanner was confident he could "handle it." In the meantime, she found herself snapping nastily at RB's repeated assurances that he knew what was best for both Erin and Declan. If ever there was

someone who did not have her best interests at heart, Erin seethed, it was her ex-husband.

They were onto the second round of lattes – and probably fifth round of sparring – with Erin's composure stretched very thin, when Tanner walked through the door. Just knowing he was nearby was fortifying.

He headed toward the counter in the back then diverted toward her table, appearing surprised and delighted to see her. "Erin!" he called, with his wide, bright smile directed just at her. "I hoped I'd run in to you here."

Having no idea what playbook they were using, she said nothing, but smiled her gratitude and stood to take the hands that were outstretched. He surprised her again by taking not only her hands in his but her mouth in his in what was clearly a claiming kiss. For a moment, oblivious to RB 18 inches away, she allowed herself to enjoy the rich, hot sensations Tanner could stir up in her in an instant. When he released her, the wide smile that replaced the pinched, victimized look he'd seen through the front window told him he'd been right. The kiss may have been a little over-the-top for mid-morning in a crowded coffee shop, but it was just what Erin needed, he confirmed as he studied her flushed face for a moment.

He still held her hands, seemingly unaware of anyone else in the place, until Erin dragged her eyes away from him to stammer, "Tanner, I'd like you to meet Reginald Callinsford."

Before she could complete the introduction, Tanner interrupted, feigning awe and gushing in a way Erin had never heard him speak. She watched, intrigued by this new side of him. Who knew he was an actor? "*The* Reginald Callinsford? Really? I've followed your career." RB preened as only he could when his ego was being stroked, and he seemed to forget his irritation at the interruption and the familiar way this clod greeted Erin. He offered his hand, and Tanner pumped it enthusiastically.

"You have?" RB oozed. "Well, thank you very much."

"Oh, yes," Tanner said. "Quite remarkable. You were the youngest man elected to the County Council – "

"Well, not quite the youngest," he corrected. Erin had warned him that was a sore spot. It still galled RB that he was less than a year from being the youngest.

But Tanner was still building him up. "Well, the youngest elected on his own merits. And certainly the youngest to head the budgeting committee. I was impressed with how easily it all came to you. And, of course, the masterful election to State Senate. A symphony to watch. 'Calling forth Reg Callinsford.' That's the kind of thing you don't forget. It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Callinsford."

"Call me Reg."

"Oh," Tanner looked at Erin in surprise. "I thought he was 'Rat Bastard' to his friends."

She wanted to kiss him again.

RB's face fell. "What?" The voice was deadly cold, losing all the animation it held when discussing his favorite subject: himself.

"Oh, Erin, I'm sorry. Is that just a pet name? I'm sorry, Reg. I didn't mean to be so familiar. It just seems to fit so perfectly. You know how old nicknames stay with you. You can meet a 'Skinny' or a 'Butch' or a 'Tex' and it just seems to fit. And Erin is right," he smiled, "you're definitely a 'Rat Bastard.'" He said it so pleasantly; Erin wondered how he could spank her for the same thing. He had no trouble getting the words out. To Reg's open-mouthed dismay, Tanner snagged a chair from the table behind them and joined them at the small table for two. "So," he said pleasantly, "what's going on?"

"Who the hell are you?" Reg finally said in disgust.

Tanner offered his hand across the table again. Reg shook it out of a political habit, as Tanner knew

he would. "Cokely Tanner, Erin's fiancé." It was all Erin could do not to gag on her coffee. Fiancé? Only if a bare-bottomed spanking was some kind of bizarre tribal engagement custom. The thought made her smile and blush, a reaction that delighted Tanner, who had feared she might contradict him. He was playing it by ear, and his sense was that RB was someone who needed to know the lay of the land. If they could both establish the limits clearly enough, that might just solve the problem of Reg Callinsford, once and for all.

"Fiancé?" RB asked with barely-concealed hostility. He glared at Erin, and despite Tanner's presence, she flinched. "You didn't say anything about being engaged. I don't see a ring."

It was fear more than confidence that kept her from hiding her hand at that, but Tanner took it lovingly in his own and said, "No, it's an old family heirloom, and I'm having it resized. Nothing but perfection for my Erin." She could get lost in those eyes, and that's just what Tanner was trying to do: get her lost in his eyes instead of in RB's plans and insinuations. She smiled an easy intimate smile, and Tanner knew he had her.

"So," he repeated pleasantly, in a back-to-business change of tone, "what's going on?"

"Well, Reg, here has just been telling me that our case has no merit. And that, if he chose to, he could get full custody. He seems to think that any judge would rather see a child being cared for by family rather than in 'institutional care.'"

Tanner laughed and turned back to RB. "Institutional care? Is that what you call it? Miss Penny and Miss Linda? Institutional? They bake their own cookies and hug Declan goodbye at the end of the day. He's learning to play baseball, and it's his job to feed the gerbils. What, exactly, is the problem with the 'institutional care' he's getting for two hours every afternoon?"

Reg's eyes burned with malevolence. "He's growing up and he needs a father."

"I'd be glad to step in."

"Not necessary."

"No, I'm sure you don't think it is. I'm just trying to figure out what your game is, what you really want and why."

"I want my son."

"You have him, one weekend a month. And that's at Erin's discretion. Because if you drag her back into court over this, she will retain full custody, and we will remove that silly little proviso that you can see him whenever you want. Count yourself lucky that she's been so flexible. She's doing it only because, so far, it's worked out for Declan." His voice dropped to a steely tone that she knew was a warning, whether Reg got it or not. "Make it difficult for her or drag Declan into it, and you will find this cushy little arrangement over in a flash."

"Don't be too sure of yourself," RB said with the smug confidence Erin had always found galling. It was somehow easier to take with Tanner's reassuring presence at her elbow. "I know people. I can make this work."

"You think just because your old college buddy is now in family court that you've got an edge here? Don't be naïve." Erin saw the alarm on RB's expression as he drew back slightly. What was Tanner talking about? "You think you're the only one with old friends? It's a small world, Reg." He emphasized the familiarity of the name. "Small enough that when I mentioned to an old friend of mine that you seemed to be anxious to get your ex-wife into court after 8 years of leaving well enough alone, he got a little curious, too. And he turned up one new appointment to family court: one Brighton Devoreux. Have I got the name right?" He seemed to be struggling for the memory, but he fooled no one.

Erin, fascinated with his handling of RB and baffled as to why she was hearing all this for the first time, finally interrupted Tanner, "Who's Brighton Devoreux?"

Tanner's gesture offered RB the chance to answer, but at the look of mute hostility, he turned to Erin and said, "He's new to family court, but not new to dear old Reg. They go back to at least prep school days. That's a different sort of institutional care, isn't it Reg? I can't get a clear enough reading on Devoreux to know if he knows that Reg is using him or not, but I guarantee they'd both be painted with the same dirty labels if it ever came out in the press. That can't be good for a newly-frocked judge. I'm a little fuzzy on the exact words for this here, but I'm guessing the press will use words like influence-peddling, corruption, dirty-dealing, wife-beating – stuff like that. Course, I've just begun. Maybe we'll turn up some hefty campaign contributions Devoreux made to the congressman. That could liven it up even more."

RB fixed Erin with a murderous stare. "You leave my father out of this. He's got nothing to do with our problems." And she knew instantly that the congressman didn't know at all. He was probably unaware of the entire episode. He would be horrified that Reg's machinations could end up discrediting him.

Tanner's hand settled over Erin's, but his eyes never left RB's face. "You have friends who are lawyers and politicians. I have friends who are private investigators and reporters. Let's see who's willing to stick it out longer. And I bet when we lay out some 8-year-old medical records and a copy of the custody agreement on *Capital Edition* or in the *Washington Post* you'll find your next campaign a bit more challenging than the last. What do you think?"

Erin finally found her voice. "I think, Tanner, that this is all over. I think that Reg doesn't want Declan or his father hurt by this." She was deliberately generous in assessing his motives. "I think he will be glad to have Declan visit once a month. And I don't think this subject will come up again. Besides, the lawyer has all the

documentation and our instructions, in case anything should happen. Nothing will happen, will it, Reg?"

She watched, with unfamiliar satisfaction, as he stomped out of the coffee shop. It had been a long time since she had come out of a confrontation with RB feeling confident. She shared a triumphant grin with Tanner.

Five minutes later, they were back on the street as well, and she still felt the adrenaline surge of victory. "Oh, you were wonderful, Tanner. Thank you," she said, leaning into his solid strength. "I've never seen him back down like that from anyone but his father. I'm not sure I knew it was possible."

"So, shall we stop by the jeweler's to see if the ring is ready?"

"What? I thought that was just something you told RB to get him to back off."

"Heavens, no! I meant every word of it."

"But you never proposed." She protested, but there was no heat behind her words, only bewilderment.

"Do you think I'm in the habit of taking casual dates over my knee and into my bed?" He had a wicked smile.

"Then I was right," she said, grinning back. "That was some bizarre tribal engagement ceremony!"

"Say again?" Now he was the confused one.

"Never mind," she said, taking his hand and continuing down the street. "I think I'd like to take my fiancé back to my house for a quick roll in the hay before my afternoon meeting. Think you could fit me in?" She had a wicked smile of her own when she wanted to employ it.

It was an hour later, amid rumpled sheets and a light sheen of sweat that Erin was methodically kissing off Tanner's chest that he said, "I really did intend to propose the old-fashioned way, you know. Flowers, dancing, on bended knee, the whole thing. We can still do that, honey. I just felt like I had to

make it clear to RB that he needed to keep hands off, and that seemed to be the best way to do it."

She giggled. "Well, I think you got the bended knee part, and I was definitely dancing over it. I don't remember any flowers, but there was wine. Think that's good enough?" There was, however, a sanitized version of the story suitable for retelling at family gatherings.

Chapter Eleven

She was still adjusting to the idea of marrying the man – and fighting down inevitable comparisons to her first disastrous foray into the land of happily-ever-after – when Tanner gave her the opportunity to test her commitment.

"It's supposed to warm up some this weekend. I was thinking of taking the kids camping. You'll come, won't you?"

"Oh, Lord, camping? Why do I have to be in love with an outdoorsman?"

"Do you hate it? Tell me you don't hate it."

"Is this one of those 'Love me; love my dog' moments?" she asked ruefully.

"Yes," he said with a flash of his trademark smile.

"Then no, I don't hate it," she returned. They had talked about it before, and she knew he enjoyed camping as a time to slow down and savor the moment. Free of the distractions of telephones, pagers, TV, and radio, these little forays into the woods invited reflection and communication. He had mentioned before that his best bonding moments with Claire had been spent hiking and camping. Erin could appreciate parts of the argument and remembered clearly the value of that environment during the caving trip where they had first become close, but she didn't see why bonding had to be so damned dirty and bug-filled. Couldn't they get a cottage by the beach or something? Something with running water? She sighed. "Yes, of course I'll go."

Three days later, though, she was beginning to regret the decision. There were a couple of packed duffle bags by the door, but Tanner was nowhere to be seen, and Declan was practically crawling the walls with excitement. She finally sent him out back to practice casting with his new fishing rod, so she could think more clearly.

It was unlike Tanner to be late, and she was worried about him. She tried to recall if he had

mentioned an afternoon appointment, but nothing came to mind. She left a message on his office voicemail, but knew he wouldn't get it until Monday if he had already left work for the day – and he should have left hours ago. He didn't have so much as an answering machine, and the troglodyte had never owned a cell phone. She did confirm that he had picked up Claire from her after-school program, but that had been nearly two hours earlier. Her imagination began a dangerous journey. Traffic accidents were a daily occurrence. Of course, everyone hoped they wouldn't be affected, but clearly someone had to lose that roll of the dice. People were killed in accidents nearly every day. It didn't even make the news it was so common. Thanks to TV cop shows, she could picture his strong, solid body on a morgue gurney.

In an effort to displace the worry about him being hurt, she tried to think what else could keep him from either showing up or calling to tell her he would be late, but that led to a place just as dark and scary: the insecurity that she just wasn't important enough for him to think about. No, that couldn't be right, she admonished herself. Damn it! Where could he be? Her reaction wavered between concern and anger with an underlying constant fear.

The concern was wiped away when he pulled into the driveway, obviously unhurt. By the time he got to the door, she was beyond furious. "Where on earth have you been?" she demanded in an icy whisper that hid the worry that had consumed her over the previous 90 minutes.

He started, surprised at her tone and misattributing it to some other stressor – perhaps a call or visit from RB; she had needed him for something, and he had not been there. He felt a pang of guilt. Leaning down to kiss her hello, he was surprised to have her turn away. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" she demanded, controlled fury clear in her voice. "What's wrong? You're two hours

late, God damn it, that's what's wrong! Why can't you get a damn cell phone like the rest of the world? Then at least I could call you to find out what's going on. But, no, I'm supposed to sit here, ready and waiting, so that whenever you show up you won't be kept waiting."

He studied her quizzically. In fact, he had been about to apologize for being late, but her furious tone had distracted him, making him think there was something else going on. Her anger seemed completely out of proportion to the situation. It wasn't as though they had theatre tickets or dinner reservations where the timing was really critical. "I'm sorry I'm late. I didn't mean to keep you waiting. I would have called if I could, and I got here as soon as possible. Are you ready to go?" His calm, quiet manner should have been a warning to her. Instead, she read it as evidence that he was dismissing her well-justified outrage.

"Ready? I was ready two hours ago! What's the matter with you? You're the one that wanted to go on this stupid trip, not me! You've got Declan all excited that he's going to be able to catch a fish, and he's been practicing with his rod all week. I rearranged my schedule, so I could leave work early. And then you don't even show up. Damn it, Tanner, what am I supposed to think?"

"You're supposed to think that if you don't watch that mouth, you're going to end up over my knee," he warned. To the renewed look of outrage on her face, he continued, "You're supposed to think there was probably a pretty good reason I would be so late and maybe you should give me a chance to apologize and explain before you jump down my throat. You're supposed to think that we have a whole weekend to sort this out, and maybe we don't need to settle it in the first 10 seconds I'm through the door. I'm sorry I was late. I didn't mean to be inconsiderate. Shall we hit the road or would you rather stay here and fight? Or maybe you'd rather stay home while I take the kids camping."

She was stung by the suggestion. Would he really leave her behind? What about camping as a bonding experience? It took her only a moment to know that if she stayed alone in the house while they were all in the lake, she would be the one to regret it. They would all come back amid stories and laughter, and she would be sitting at home with tears and regret. "You're not going without me," she declared, but it came out as something of a threat.

Tanner sighed and picked up the two duffle bags by the door. He had been looking forward to seeing Erin all day, but this was not how he had thought it would go. They had missed having lunch together as they both juggled busy schedules, so they could leave a little early. After a crisis-filled morning, he had managed to clear his desk of the most crucial items and was out the door only a few minutes late, picking up Claire almost as soon as she arrived in her after-school program.

It looked like he might even make up lost time until he had witnessed a relatively minor accident on the parkway. He felt obliged to stop and offer assistance, and it was a good thing he had. One of the drivers sped off, and the other car was undrivable. After confirming that the teenaged driver and her passenger weren't hurt, he began the practical matter of moving the car from the travel lanes, setting out flares, and assessing the damage. The driver, near hysteria, described how she'd been forced onto the shoulder, where she hit an abrupt change in pavement that made her lose control. The impact had been hard enough to bend the wheel rim, and the tire was rapidly losing pressure. Between changing the tire and giving his statement when the police finally showed up, he had been delayed well over an hour, putting them on the road at the beginning of Friday rush hour. There was nothing to do but crawl along in first and second gear. He had made the best time he possibly could.

And, as dirty and tired as he was, he had been looking forward to seeing Erin. It was hard being

away from her for a couple of days at a time, but this was not the reception he had anticipated. Worry, he could have pacified; the anger, he didn't understand. It was with a sense of resignation and disappointment that he stowed Erin and Declan's gear in the back of the Explorer.

"Come on, guys!" he called in an invitation that included the children and a scowling Erin.

As they wound their way through traffic, Tanner reached over to cover her hand with his. It was a peace offering that was resolutely rejected. She snatched her hand away with a snort. He did not try again.

The silence didn't really become noticeable until they were out of town and on the relatively empty country highways. At first, Declan had bubbled on about the various fish-catching strategies he had read about in *Boys' Life*, and Claire had described, in vivid detail, her awful lunch in the cafeteria, but gradually, both became silent as they received very little encouragement. Finally, Declan asked, in a stage whisper, which would have been funny if she had not been so unsettled, "How come nobody's talking?"

Erin produced an answer – some drivel about how everyone must be too tired to talk – and turned on the radio. Tanner sent her a sideways look that she could not decipher, and Erin found herself choking back both anger and apologies. It wasn't fair. She had been the one who had been wronged, but somehow she was being made to feel like she was responsible for the tension. On top of it all, it was frightening how much even the possibility that Tanner was hurt had unsettled her. She knew she should be grateful he was okay, not angry that he had caused her to worry. But the thoughts and emotions continued their turbulent journey through her mind, unable to find voice. She stared off into the darkness, jerked back to the present only when tree branches began to scrape the sides of the car as Tanner turned onto the dirt road to the camping

area.

He had expected it to be empty, and it was. Come summer, these isolated spots would be taken up by the lucky early arrivals, but in January – even on a mild weekend like this – Tanner would have been surprised to have to compete for space. The mechanics of setting up the site in the dark involved everyone for the next 30 minutes, and Tanner was beginning to have some hope that a smidgen of pleasure could be extracted in spite of the rough start. He assigned jobs – laying out ground covers, unpacking the tent, and gathering firewood – and all three set off readily.

The main tent was up in a trice. It was a large, domed, family tent that could sleep three comfortably, four in a pinch. The question was whether there might be one too many hostile people in close proximity if he and Erin were both in the tent as he had planned. There was another small tent in the back, an "emergency back-up tent" he always carried but rarely used. It had been put into service mainly for other campers or last-minute additions, but it was perfectly serviceable, as long as it didn't rain.

The kids went off on another search for kindling and firewood, and Tanner arranged to be back at the car the next time Erin returned to off-load more gear. "How many tents shall I set up?" he asked mildly. At her blank look, he clarified, "I thought the blue one was big enough, but if you'd rather not be that close to me right now, I can set up a little pup tent I have."

Her eyes stung, and her throat worked. He was planning on putting her as far away as he could? It was like being exiled to the "children's table" at Thanksgiving when you feel like you're grown up: a humbling, even humiliating, experience. "I should have just stayed home!" she said bitterly.

"Maybe you should have." It was his mild, unruffled delivery, as much as the words that got to her.

"Take me home! I don't want to be here. I never wanted to come. It was stupid of me to let you talk me into it, and you don't want me here, anyway." She turned to stalk off, determined to salvage whatever dignity she could, when Tanner's hard palm cracked across her bottom.

"Ow!" It was more protest than reaction to pain, and she glared at him. His arched eyebrow conceded nothing and made a fresh challenge of its own.

Her eyes burned with injury far out of proportion to the pain. She opened her mouth to speak, but he silenced her with a feather touch to her lips. "Stop it," he said firmly. "I don't know what's really behind your anger at me tonight, but I've had about as much as I can take. You will not ruin this trip for the other three people on it, and I will not take you back home tonight, so you just better get that thought out of your head. You're here for the duration, so get used to it." He softened a bit, seeing her take a ragged breath. "The only choice you were being offered was in sleeping arrangements, and you just lost the option there. I'll make that call for you. Right now, you are to plant that pretty tail of yours on this camp stool," he said, opening the contraption with a snap. "And you are not to move out of it until I say you can. Clear?"

There was another sharp swat to her bottom, and she produced the mandatory "yes" before he led her over to the fire circle and plunked the camp stool down. Realizing that she would end up there willingly or unwillingly, she opted for the path of least resistance and sat down gingerly, her eyes on her lap and the first faint stirrings of reassurance in her heart.

With a snort of pure annoyance and a final admonishing look at Erin, Tanner dropped to his knees and began to build the fire from the first several loads of wood the children had brought back. Declan returned to the clearing, dragging a

branch with one hand while the other struggled to hold his flashlight so he could see. "Hey, Mom," he said brightly, "I found a really good log. Wanna help me drag it back? It's too big for me."

Before she could answer, Tanner said smoothly, "Your mom's learning how to build a fire, Declan. Maybe Claire can help you. If it's bigger than you two can handle, leave it for tomorrow, and we'll cut it up where it is." She fell in love with Tanner for the thousandth time. As angry as he obviously was, he was still looking out for her. With a single sentence he had shielded her from embarrassment and freed her from the difficult choice of obeying him or maintaining her pride.

"Okay," Declan said agreeably, and they watched his light drift off into the trees again as he went back in search of more firewood.

She watched in silence as Tanner assembled a complicated-looking structure around a handful of pine needles. He struck a match, dropped it in, and sat back to survey his handiwork. He was a man who saw things through. He did what had to be done and took care of those around him. He might not like it at any particular moment, but he did it. And he was taking care of her now. Against the background of the crackly beginnings of the fire, she said softly, contritely, "I'm sorry."

They shared the first warm look of the day.

"I'd like to talk about it after the kids are in bed. Can we wait until then?" he asked. It was a sincere question, and she knew that if she had said that she couldn't wait he would have heard her out right away. The thought was a fortifying one.

"Yes, I can wait. Shall I stay here?" Her hands touched the camp stool, and he smiled as he nodded. It was a tender, loving exchange, but they both knew she was still being punished, and she accepted the restriction in the spirit in which it was made. "Okay." Her voice was still soft, almost a whisper.

Dinner was cooked over the fire, and if the kids

noticed that Erin had not moved in more than an hour, they said nothing. When Tanner offered to show the kids the lake they would be fishing in come morning, he made Erin's excuses for her by asking her to watch the fire, then reminding all three never to leave a fire unattended. She could hear the excited voices as they climbed the quarter-mile down to the lake and then the echoing calls of "hello . . . hello" as they tested the sound-propagation, no doubt at Tanner's urging. He was so patient with them. And her. In the 20 minutes they were gone, Erin had enough time to fully regret her childish fits of temper over the last several hours and come up with a plan to right things with Tanner.

By 9:30, both kids were settled in on opposite sides of the tent trying desperately to get to sleep so that morning and fishing would be upon them. Twenty feet away, next to the dying fire, Erin and Tanner studied each other. Their earlier truce was still valid, and they both clearly wanted to understand the other's position, but they were not there yet. Beneath the love and desire, there were still unresolved issues. The conversation was hushed and intimate.

"Tell me why you were so angry."

She bit her lip. That was a hard one to start with, but she had to give him credit for going right to the heart of the matter – in fact, right to the heart of her. "It didn't start out as anger. At first, I was just worried about you. Really worried. I tried to track you down, to see where you'd been and when, but all I could find out was that you'd left Claire's school on time and then disappeared. I had a thousand awful thoughts. And then you walked in like everything was normal, and. . . well, I guess I lost it," she confessed. "I was looking for apologies, and you didn't seem to care that I was hurt." It hurt again just to think that.

"I intended to apologize. It was inexcusable to be that late without calling. I'd have been upset

with you if the places had been reversed."

She felt a surge of resentment at that; it was a thought she had fought not to acknowledge consciously, but it was clearly behind much of her anger in the car. "That's right," she whispered furiously. "You would. You'd've had me bare-assed and spanked before I could have said so much as 'hello.'" She was met with a silence long enough to make her regret her rash words. The fire crackled, and Tanner busied himself putting another log on. This would not be a short conversation. He was settling in for the long haul.

"Have I ever spanked you without giving you the chance to explain yourself?"

For an easy question, she sure took her time about answering. "No."

"No," he agreed, "I haven't, and I won't. It wouldn't be fair." She flinched at the word, and her conscience stung.

"You're right. I'm sorry. If I had given you the chance to explain, what would you have told me?"

He studied her again as if trying to decide if it was the right time to explain about his lousy afternoon. Well, she had asked, and even if he didn't get the full measure of sympathy he deserved, maybe she would at least stop looking at him with the focused hostility he had felt repeatedly. He would not give in to her anger, but it was draining all the same. He gave her the condensed version, stripped of his own frustration and the anxiety he felt being out of contact so long. "I witnessed a hit-and-run accident on the parkway. Nobody was hurt, but the car that got hit needed a tire replaced, and I had to wait for the police to give my report. I got a partial license plate and description on the car that left the scene, and the two young ladies in the car were pretty shook up."

The irrational flash of jealousy – that he had chosen to help some other woman instead of going to her – was erased by his next words. "And I thought how I would hope someone would help you

if you were ever in that situation." In fact, she had been in the situation before – an accident, a dead battery, out of gas – and every time, some considerate stranger had helped bail her out. She had never really thought of the rippling effects. She had merely thanked the good Samaritans and gone on, oblivious to the people in their lives who might have been affected by the delay.

"I'm sorry. I should have let you explain."

"Yes, you should. I'd been looking forward to seeing you all day. I'd been missing you all day, and when I finally got there I almost wished I'd gone home." He sighed at the trembling chin that betrayed her tenuous hold on her emotions. "And it seemed like every time I opened my mouth, you were determined to misunderstand me." At her protesting look, he began to list them out. "I asked you if you would rather stay home, and you made it sound like I was dis-inviting you. I offered to give you a little space by moving into the small tent, and you reacted like I'd slapped you. I talk to you, and you tell me to shut up. I don't talk, and you think I'm ignoring you."

"I don't remember telling you to shut up," she said softly, conciliation clear in her tone and manner.

There was still some heat in Tanner's response. "You may not have said it, but you thought it."

"Yes." He knew her too well. Whether she verbalized it or not, he had read her resistance and obstinacy clearly. If it was a step short of defiance, it was a small step. "And I was thinking," she continued with as much bravery as she could summon, "that I probably earned myself a spanking."

Surprise kept him from agreeing. In fact, he thought she had, too, but he kept coming back to his own contribution to their misunderstandings. He could have insisted she listen to an explanation at the house; he could have asked the police to relay a call to Erin; he could have left 10 minutes earlier

and he'd have been to her house on time. But he had to weigh that against her reaction, her words, and even her own judgment. It was a balance, always a balance. He needed to bring them back into balance.

"I'm sure I could find us a switch somewhere around here," he said thoughtfully.

"A switch?" she gasped, clearly horrified. She had volunteered for a spanking, not a switching. The idea of being hit with a switch was terrifying. It seemed more like violence, somehow, than a spanking.

"Yes, a switch," he continued, oblivious to her anxiety. "It's much quieter than a spanking. But I'm not sure how quiet you could be, and I don't like the idea of going far enough from camp that the kids couldn't hear you. I don't like leaving them alone, and I won't leave the fire burning."

"Well, I'm certainly glad everything gets considered except me!" The bitterness was clear even if the fear was hidden.

Chapter Twelve

"Excuse me?"

His voice was deadly quiet, and though she knew it was a mistake, she couldn't stop herself from firing off, "Everything else gets considered: Declan, Claire, Smokey the Bear, for God's sake. You don't care at all about me."

From his seat on the ice chest, he leaned into Erin until only inches separated their faces. There was no mistaking his words or the tight anger behind them. "I am thinking about nothing but you. I think you need a spanking to get past this nasty mood. Until you do, you won't enjoy any part of this weekend. But I don't want you to be embarrassed in front of the children. I don't want them to see you out of control, but I also don't want them to have to tip-toe around you all weekend. Unfortunately," he stressed the word, "I can't find a way to meet all your needs right now. You need a good hard spanking and we don't have the privacy to do it yet."

"I guess we just have to wait until we get home then," Erin said, enormously relieved.

"I guess we do."

They were back where they started: respecting a civil truce but not at peace. "May I get up?"

He sighed and stood from the cooler. "Yeah. I think you better get some sleep. I'll try not to wake you when I get the kids up for fishing." He sounded tired.

"You're coming to bed too, aren't you? You've had a long day." She wanted to go into his arms. It would be easier in the tent. She would be practically on top of him. He would hold her and pet her, and it would have to look better in the morning.

His words dashed that hope. "I think I'll set up that other tent." Dry lips pressed a vacant kiss to her forehead, and he turned away.

"I thought we settled this," she lied, forcing him to turn back.

"Settled what?" Oh, there was room for breadth in that question! What had they settled?

She chose to keep the span as narrow as possible. "I apologized for being so mean, and we agreed that I deserve a spanking when we get home."

"Okay." The word was more an acknowledgement that he heard her rather than agreement with her words.

"But now you don't want to be near me." She might have been six crying over a lost dolly. The pain and loss were clear in her voice, and he fought back the impulse to take her into his arms.

"It isn't that I don't want to be near you. But you seem very . . . volatile tonight. I don't want to get into another argument inches away from the children. You can take the little tent if you prefer, and I will sleep in the blue one. Don't blow this out of proportion, Erin. We will settle things at home. Don't ruin the weekend for the kids."

She hadn't meant to ruin the weekend for any of them and felt a moment of shame at the realization that she could. "Will you be mad until then?"

He considered the question. "I'm not really mad, but you're right that things aren't settled. I will try not to show it, but it will still be between us."

"Isn't it enough that I asked you?" Plaintively.

He returned evenly, "Is it enough that you asked me?"

"No."

"Well, then. . ."

"You used to be able to just walk away from these clashes," she remembered wistfully.

"Is that what you want me to do?" How could such a mild question have the power to frighten her so? What would she do without his calm determination, his clarity of purpose? Even knowing it was not a real prospect – he was not offering, merely asking her to examine what she wanted – she found herself unsettled.

He could see the trembling chin in the firelight

and kissed her gently. "We'll take care of it at home." That should have been enough, she knew. That's what she'd been angling for since the beginning – a reprieve, a delay of reckoning. It was a hollow victory because it was not what she had really wanted; it was only what she thought she wanted.

"No. Please. Tonight. Can we handle it tonight? Please?"

"Like I said, we don't really have the privacy."

"I can be really quiet. You'll see. I promise. I won't open my mouth. And you're right about a switch; it probably would be quieter. Or, you know what else?" The ideas, once she began to seriously consider possibilities, came in a torrent. "We could use the car. That's a lot more soundproofing than we need. I could take a pillow to cry into, but I promise you I won't scream. In the car you wouldn't even need to use a switch. You could use your hand or my hairbrush." Even in her enthusiastic lobbying for her own spanking, she wanted to avoid the switch. Acceptable if he insisted, but there was no reason not to remind him of other possibilities.

The hairbrush. In the car. The idea had merit.

"If you're sure."

"Oh, yes, please. You're right. I've been an absolute witch all night. I'm sorry and I do deserve a spanking. Please do it now." Her arms were around his waist, and the words were spoken into his chest as though they could penetrate his heart by the force of her will.

Maybe they did, because his arms settled gently on her shoulders, and his words were soft. "Okay, sweetheart, we'll settle this tonight. You get yourself ready for bed while I secure the camp. I'll meet you in the car in a few minutes." He caught her hand as she turned toward the tent. He met her eyes – hopeful, expectant, nervous – and added, with more than a trace of humor, "Don't be late."

Under the cramped domed ceiling of the tent, Erin struggled anxiously out of her jeans and into a

well-worn pair of sweatpants. She stripped to skin from the waist up and layered a clean T-shirt and hooded sweatshirt over that. It was warm enough against the cool night air that she decided to leave her jacket behind. Stuffing it back in her bag, her knuckles connected with the wooden back of her hairbrush. He hadn't said to bring it, but he also hadn't said not to. After a brief hesitation, she tucked it into the front pocket of her sweatshirt. Tennis shoes went back over bare feet and she was out of the tent. The entire operation took less than five minutes. Why was she so anxious to get her bottom blistered?

Half-aware that she was stalling, she knelt back down in the doorway and unpacked first Tanner's sleeping bag then her own, smoothing them out across the tent floor. She had been right that it would be a tight fit. She could snuggle up to him and feel safe again. She had been far too unsettled all day. Tears seemed to burn her eyes, but they wouldn't come out. After a moment's hesitation, she grabbed the small striped travel pillow packed with her sleeping bag. There would undoubtedly be tears.

Time to settle things. She zipped the entrance and headed toward the car. There was a faint interior glow, but it did not come from the cargo lights. Tanner must have one of the small battery-operated lanterns in there, she realized, with some appreciation, because, while the car was only twenty yards away, it was lost in the shadows beyond the fire circle, and she had no light of her own. She picked her way across the clearing, careful of her footing, and (truth be told) a little apprehensive about what she was walking into.

From 10 feet away, she heard Tanner's voice, still rich with love and humor, say "I was beginning to wonder if you'd changed your mind."

Her voice was half-an-octave too high. "No, just getting things ready so we can go to bed after." After *what* was clear.

He opened the back door, and the area seemed suddenly very bright and the impending punishment very close. Her breathing quickened. Tanner slid into the back seat, and she followed wordlessly. The door closed, and they were in near-darkness once again.

"Tell me what's going to happen here," he said. She gulped and silently cursed him. In many ways, the sudden spankings over which she had no control were easier to tolerate. This expectation that she voluntarily submit was a difficult hurdle to pass, but she knew that was part of her penance tonight. Usually, he did not require self-analysis or verbalization until after the spanking, if at all. Unsure of exactly what he wanted, she tried to cooperate as fully as possible. They were ending this tension tonight whatever it might cost her. She took a deep breath.

"You're going to spank me." She stopped and restarted, anxious to do it right. "I'm going to take down my pants and go across your lap, and you're going to spank me. Hard. I've been very inconsiderate tonight. You've had a rough day, and instead of making it better, I made it a whole lot worse." Her eyes stung again, but there were no tears. "I made this all about whether you loved me and not enough about whether I loved you." That statement took him by surprise, and he knew it would require more exploration. "I'm sorry, Tanner. Please just do it." She knelt beside him on the seat and shoved her sweatpants and panties down in a single push. As she started to lean forward, she felt the weight of the hairbrush in her pocket. A moment's hesitation and she sat back on her heels. "I brought you the hairbrush. I wasn't sure if you would want it. Or if you'd have a switch." She handed him the brush and ducked back under his arm to lay herself across his lap. Hiding her face in the little pillow with the striped case, she tried not to think about what she must looked like or what Tanner must be thinking.

In fact, she would have been very reassured if she could have known what was going through Tanner's head and heart. She also would have been shocked to see the smile on his face as he lay his hand across her plump cheeks. Besides love, what he felt most strongly was pride. It had been a difficult day – a difficult separation and a difficult reunion – but that was all about to be swept away. And Erin was so determined to win back his favor – as though it had ever been in doubt – that she was putting herself in his hands, literally. He would have his own apologies to make for allowing her to doubt his love and affection, but the fact that she admitted her responsibility and sought out a means to make it right was something that warmed his heart. And, in return, he intended to warm her bottom. It was all a balance.

He set aside the brush and used both hands to massage her cheeks and get the blood flowing. It was a cold night, and she had been exposed for half-a-minute, he rationalized. But, really, it was more than that. He just wanted to touch her, softly, warmly, and lovingly. He did not want their first real contact in days to be a spanking. But that, too, was part of their relationship, and it was not the time to change that. It had been too hard for Erin to make this offer, to open herself up this way. If he did not accept her submission, take it respectfully and treat it as the gift it was, it might not be offered again. She would feel, rightfully, that she could manipulate the situation, and the next time she misbehaved she would expect to be able to avoid a spanking by volunteering for one. It wouldn't work then, so he couldn't let it work now.

His right hand came up and descended with a smack. Erin jumped at the surprise and the pain, but true to her word, she did not make a sound. He spanked for a solid minute, hard and fast, anxious to get it over with as quickly as possible, so he could take her in his arms. The yellowish light from the lantern at his feet gave the car a peculiar hue

and made it hard for Tanner to judge the color of her skin, but her squirming body told him they were approaching some kind of edge. She was silent, if not still, and he had to admire her fortitude.

His left hand traced circles on the bare skin of her back, reassuring and calming her, as he picked up the brush. "We're almost done, sweetheart, almost done." She was gripping the little pillow so hard and had it pressed so firmly against her face that if he could have seen it he would have wondered how she could breathe. As it was, he was focused on her bottom. It tried to clench with each sharp blow of the hairbrush, but he was spanking too fast for her nerves or muscles to keep up.

Twenty or thirty solid thuds later, and he could hear the muffled screams in her throat and her lower body was wriggling enough that, for the first time since she went over his lap, he had to use his left hand not just to steady her, but to hold her in place. She did a remarkable job of keeping herself there until the end. He dropped the hairbrush on the floor deliberately so she would know it was out of reach. Before he gathered her into his arms, he brushed away tears from his own eyes. There were only a few, and he didn't want her to see them, not because she would think less of him, but because he didn't want her to bear the additional guilt of his being hurt. That was his burden, and he would bear it stoically. Part of the balance.

When he lifted her into his lap, the pillow came with her. He pried it out of her hands and resettled her head against his shoulder. "Cry all you want, sweetheart. No one can hear you but me." His hands and voice soothed and caressed as she composed herself.

The first minute or two after a spanking was when Tanner was most likely to doubt himself. He would find himself wondering if he had been too hard or not hard enough, whether he had said the right things to help her through it. This time, he suffered none of those doubts. It had been a good,

hard spanking, just as she asked for.

The provocation had been relatively minor; he knew that, too. In fact the entire spanking might have been unnecessary under other circumstances. She had been a little rude and sulky; that was all, really. His own bad mood had figured as significantly as hers. It was the added stress of trying to put up a placid façade in front of the children and being unable to retreat to neutral corners that gave the situation its special charge. But, her back against the wall, Erin had acknowledged what he'd always hoped to hear: that his opinion and his love were her guiding beacons. She would follow where he led because she trusted his authority. It was an awesome responsibility but one he would accept readily. He slipped the striped cover off the pillow and used it to mop up the tears and saliva and mucus. She might not cry often, but it was an elaborate and soggy affair when she did.

Her first words were the same as always – "I'm sorry" – but somehow seemed more heartfelt than usual. Or maybe he had just come to believe them more fully.

He nuzzled her head and whispered back, "I know you are, sweetheart, and it's all over. I am so proud of you." That was it, all he could say for a minute, or she would hear the tears in his voice. When he could talk again, he offered the same reassurances that always helped her: that he loved her, that he knew she had learned what she should from the experience, that she was back in his good graces and there were no lingering reservations. That was, in fact, the driving factor behind her asking for the spanking. She knew that however awful it might be, when it was over, it was over. He bore no grudges, and it was not in him to torment her with the memory of her humiliation. If she could get past it, that was the only barrier. And through dreadful, painful, damnable repetition, she had learned to get past it.

Finally calm, she offered him the explanation

that should have been easy to give when he arrived at her house several hours earlier: "I was worried about you when you were late because I thought you'd been in an accident. And I was hurt that you didn't think enough of me to call."

"You know," he said, " I think you've finally given me a reason to get a cell phone. Because I did want to call you. I knew you would be worried, but I decided that getting off the road to call would probably cost us another 20 minutes and by the time I got to a phone we could already be at your house. The traffic was atrocious, and I really wanted to get to you because I didn't want to miss this weekend. If I could have called, I would have, but I don't want you to worry like that again. I'll get a cell phone, even if it's only for emergencies."

"Thank you." Her tears were dry and most of her emotions were back under control. The love kept seeping out the edges, though. That's what she had meant months earlier when she told Tanner that she got "affectionate" under the influence of alcohol. He had verified the truth of that assertion on two occasions. She was a cheap drunk. One vodka gimlet or strawberry daiquiri and she would tell him anything he wanted to know; two and she was pretty much asleep. It was kind of cute to watch. A spanking had much the same effect. He could expect maybe 20 minutes of lucid and unrestrained speech before she would doze off.

She burrowed into his neck and said, "I couldn't sleep apart from you tonight. It just made my heart hurt. I love you too much. I need you too much. It's hard enough when you go back to your house, or I have to go back to mine. But to have you sleeping 20 feet away would have been just awful. Even if you were mad at me, I wanted you where I could touch you." She paused then admitted the awful truth. "I'm afraid if you know how much I need you you'll get spooked."

"What?"

"I don't want to scare you off by needing to see

you every day, needing to talk to you every night even if you can't come over, but I do. I've started to plan my life around when I see you. I have the fixed schedule of Declan's school and his visitations with his father and work, and everything else is you. When something good happens, you're the first one I want to tell. When something bad happens, you're the only one I want to tell. When I'm feeling lonely, you're the one I want to be with. And nobody needs that kind of pressure."

"What are you talking about? *I* need that kind of pressure!"

"Huh?" Her head came up off his chest so she could look him in the eye. She was amazed how well her vision had adapted to the dim light. She could see his eyes sparkling with love and affection, and if she hadn't known better, she would have sworn there were the remnants of tears there. "What do you mean, 'you need that kind of pressure'?"

"Just what I said. That's what I'm here for. And if you don't feel the same thing – that you're the first one I want to share news with, good and bad, that you're the one I want to spend time with – then that's my fault for not making it clear. Because it's true. Next to my daughter, you're the most important person in my life. I love you." The voice was rough, but the words and the hands that caressed her were very gentle. She wondered how had she let herself think for even a second that he didn't care about her.

He stopped for a moment to give his next words the import they deserved, cocked his head, and said, "You hear that, don't you?"

She had been so focused on Tanner, the world outside the SUV had ceased to exist. Drawn back to reality, her eyes went to the fire circle and the tents, but she saw nothing, heard nothing. "What?" she finally asked.

"Sounds like wedding bells to me."

Her smile – indulgent, loving, inches from sleep
– was all the answer he got.

Part Two

Chapter One

It had been a crazy morning, all things considered, and Erin pitched between amusement and irritation until they were finally in the car, where she lapsed into bemused silence as her husband navigated out of their suburban development.

"Come on, sweetheart, the kids'll be okay," Tanner reassured, trying (unsuccessfully) to coax a smile out of her.

"Yes, I suppose they will. I feel so unprepared, though. I wish you'd given me more notice."

"What? You didn't know our anniversary was coming up? I was sure you were there for the wedding," he teased. "You can't have forgotten."

Erin was in no mood to be teased. "Of course, I didn't forget but—"

"And you did ask me to take care of the plans," he added reasonably.

But there had been nothing reasonable about that fractious evening more than a month earlier. It had been a frightening and far-ranging argument, and at some point she had, indeed, told him that the next damn outing was on him because she wasn't going to lift a finger. When she'd heard no more about it, she had mentally added it to her "poor me" list.

Rather than revisit that tender territory, she stayed focused on the immediate situation. "I was thinking you'd make dinner reservations. Maybe find a sitter. Not ... this." His smile was warm and familiar but Erin was still left with more questions than answers. "There's no reason you couldn't have told me what you were planning. In fact, I still don't really know what you're planning." He had awakened her early, telling her that she needed to pack a bag for a five-day trip, dismissing her automatic objections that it was impossible.

"Go for casual, warm-weather clothes, one or two dressy outfits. Don't forget a bathing suit," he had instructed. She had thought Florida or New Orleans, maybe a cruise ship, but could get nothing more concrete out of Tanner.

The next two hours were filled with a rush of mundane but necessary details, and it was not until they pulled onto the highway that Erin felt the full force of the anxiety that had been nibbling at her all morning. She tried to convince herself that the uncomfortable feeling was just about leaving the baby. She had no real concerns about leaving Claire and Declan with Tanner's mother. At 9 and 10, they were fairly independent and moderately self-sufficient. But the baby, at 11 months, was neither. Lexi was a strong-willed, adventurous child who could get into mischief in a heartbeat. She required constant vigilance. Claire and Declan both doted on her and would be some help, but still...their grandmother was not a woman accustomed to trailing after an infant for days at a time. Yes, that was a safe thing to worry about.

Erin found herself looking out the back window as though she could still see the house, now miles away. "I really think having all three of them is too much for your mother. I wish you'd at least arranged for Claire to stay somewhere else, and I know I could have left Declan with the congressman. Then at least she'd only have the baby." One of the few advantages of blended families was that there were more than the ordinary number of relatives to help with such logistics. Her son could have stayed with his paternal grandparents (though she'd never have asked her rat-bastard ex-husband), and Tanner's daughter would have been welcomed among her cousins. Still, getting to and from school each day would be easier from home.

"They'll be fine. It's good for them to spend some time with my mom, and she doesn't see them enough. She's been looking forward to it."

"She's not used to having three kids underfoot all day, every day."

"She didn't seem to mind when we visited at Thanksgiving."

What a dolt! "Well, you and I were there, weren't we?" she said sharply. "They weren't her responsibility, and it was only two days. Besides, Lexi wasn't walking then. You have no idea how fast she can slip away from you now."

His look was inscrutable. "I have no idea? Of course I know how fast she can move. Stop worrying. Mom will handle it."

"Maybe we could bring Lexi along," she said, with another glance out the back window. "It would be easier for your mom," she added wistfully.

"And for you." For a moment she was so surprised at his perceptiveness that she didn't school her features. Yes, it would be easier for her, both because she wouldn't have the persistent, maternal worry and because it would give her a clear direction for her attention. She was uncomfortable with the idea of the extended time alone with Tanner. It had been so long since they'd had that. By the time he took his eyes off the road to gauge her reaction, though, she'd managed to suppress the second thought, recognizing that maternal concern was her best hope.

"Well, yes. I'll probably worry about Alexis the whole time we're away. Why don't we go back and get her? I can have her things packed up in a jiff." Tanner smiled to himself. Alexis went nowhere in a jiff. Her seemingly endless cargo included not just diapers, food, and clothing, but toys and teething supplies and enough wipes and cloths that she could be given a cleaning that was just short of a bath. Not to mention the range of gear that they called, collectively, "the restraints": for a five-day trip that would include not just the car seat, but a travel crib and/or playpen. Ideally, they'd also add either the walker or the jumper that mounted in a doorframe for the energy-rich times that she might not have

their full attention. No, she would not be packed up in a jiff. Traveling with an infant was not so much a vacation as a deployment.

"Erin, we are not bringing Lexi on our anniversary trip. If I wanted the children along, all three of them would all be in the car. Lexi will be fine with my mom."

"But—"

"In fact, if I know Mom—and I do—she's probably got a rent-a-nanny slated to arrive any minute. If we turned around now, we'd just destroy the image she wanted you to have that she could handle everything." Erin could see the sense of that. She'd been stunned at the way Mrs. Tanner (whom she still couldn't seem to call "Mom") had hustled in and taken over, herding the children into the yard so Erin and Tanner could pack unmolested. The take-charge attitude had been so unexpected—like so many things that morning—that she hadn't begun to sort through it all, but Tanner was right. It had been not a usurping of authority but an effort to demonstrate competence. Erin could hardly undermine that by going back now.

"You really think she'll have help?" she fretted.

"Even if she hasn't already hired someone, I left her enough phone numbers that she can call a different person every two hours and never hit the same one twice."

That started a new alarm. "I didn't show her where the emergency numbers are."

"I did. For heaven's sake, Erin, relax. She's a grown woman. The children are fine. They'll be no worse for wear in a few days. If it makes you feel better, I'll call from the hotel tonight, but it's completely unnecessary."

"Did you tell her not to feed Lexi peanuts? The pediatrician said—"

"Stop it," he said firmly as he took the airport exit.

"Did you?" she demanded.

"We are not having this conversation. I don't

intend to spend the next several days cycling through all the dire things that could happen. The children are fine. My mother is fine. You, on the other hand, I have some serious questions about."

Not sure what he meant by that, she directed her attention out the window. If she wasn't allowed to talk about the children or home or her worries, she decided, it was best to keep her mouth shut. If that looked like sulking, it was a coincidence. She would leave it to him to introduce an "acceptable" subject of conversation and follow his lead.

At the airport, between parking, shuttle buses, and security checks, there really wasn't much time for conversation. It was all hustle and bustle, corralling the luggage and waiting in lines. She followed wherever Tanner led, stood where he directed, and her sullenness faded to mild resentment. The resentment was displaced by confusion when she realized they were crossing into the international terminal. Her heart skipped a beat, and he had to coax her forward. "Come on, honey, we need to keep moving." If he could have thought of a way to keep her ignorant until landing, he would have, but leading her onto the plane blindfolded might have been awkward.

"Where—" she managed before her throat dried up on her. But she knew where. It was not Florida, not New Orleans, not even Niagara Falls, where they had once joked about spending an anniversary. She knew even before she spotted the United Airlines gate: Flight 1759. Bermuda. Damn him. Bermuda had been their planned honeymoon destination two years earlier, rescheduled at the last minute when a swift-moving tropical storm threatened. They'd settled in a local resort, instead. At the time they had laughed about it and blithely planned a reprise honeymoon in Bermuda for their first anniversary. With Erin eight months pregnant, that had not been feasible and neither had mentioned it again. Just when she was sure there wasn't a romantic bone in his body, he'd have to go

and do something like this. Bermuda.

"Surprised?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes," was all she could manage before she buried her face in his chest.

"A good surprise?" he prodded.

"Yes," she said again, nodding against his polo shirt.

It was a good surprise, but she found herself unexpectedly off balance, so she stayed against his chest for a minute, felt the calming stroke of his hand on her back, and tried to take comfort in it. He offered comfort so rarely these days, and she refused to ask for it. But this was nice, standing in his arms, feeling safe and loved. "Let me confirm our seats" destroyed the mood completely, and she all but ground her teeth as he walked away.

The flight itself was uneventful, a surprisingly short hop across the Atlantic, with barely enough time for drinks to be served. Erin was tickled by the luxury of flying first class, then unaccountably disappointed by Tanner's offhand comment that the upgrade was a perk from his recent, extensive business travel. Yes, everything seemed to revolve around his job and had for some time, she brooded. Lapsing into silence, she flipped through the in-flight magazine, irritated that she hadn't thought to bring along a novel.

Tanner, puzzled by her repeated fluctuations in mood, offered a lightly-thumbed Bermuda guidebook, which she took with a quiet "thank you." He slipped into his own reflections as she settled into island possibilities. The past months—he didn't care to consider how many—had been hard on the whole family, and he wanted to make up some of that to Erin with this anniversary trip. Between the demands of his job and the inevitable strain of a new baby, they'd had precious little time, and even less energy, to spend on each other. Tanner was keenly aware that he was responsible for most of the distance between them. A terrible coincidence of politics and economics had conspired with bad

timing to cast shadows over their lives.

He did not want to think about the compromises that he would have been forced to make if he didn't have Erin handling things so competently on the home front. Claire was blooming, despite his limited presence, and that could only be because Erin's attentiveness covered for his own absence. He needed to be there more for the children. A camping trip when they got back would be just the thing, he decided. He'd take both Claire and Declan bouldering down in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He'd spare Erin that trip. Bermuda was definitely more her style: sandy beaches, air conditioning, and room service. He turned a fond eye to her. "I love you," he began, but her neutral, unwelcoming expression froze the rest of the words in his throat. She wasn't going to make this easy.

How had it come to this? He wondered. And what did he need to do to turn it around? The answer would come to him, he knew, because there was no possibility that the relationship with his wife was unsalvageable. They both just needed to find their places again.

To his right, Erin was lost in her own thoughts as she pretended interest in restaurants and "island highlights." They were finally getting to take that long-delayed honeymoon to Bermuda, and even if it didn't feel like much of a honeymoon, there was no reason to spoil the trip. Still, she regretted that this trip wasn't being spent in the cossetting warmth they had enjoyed in those early days of the marriage.

They were so much in love back then, and she wasn't at all sure how they had slid away from that. The first few months they all worked deliberately to make each other comfortable. Certainly, Tanner had worked hard to forge a relationship with Erin's son, Declan. Claire, easygoing by nature, was generally a good sport about the full-time addition of two people to the house, but it was clear early on that she considered them something short of permanent.

Erin was still trying to figure out how to mold that perception when Tanner offered a solution she hadn't even considered. They would move, settle into a new house that would belong to all of them, start fresh.

It had been an ideal answer, and house hunting became the new family project. They listed needs and wants, from the mundane (at least two bathrooms, from an aggrieved Erin) to the outrageous. (An in-ground pool was on Claire's wish list.) Declan's only requirement was that his bedroom not be two floors away from where everyone else slept. It was one thing to fall asleep when people were still moving about in the kitchen and family room; it was quite another to wake in the middle of the night and know no one was near. Erin had been surprised by Tanner's addition to the list: at least four bedrooms, so they wouldn't have to move again when the family grew. They still had moving boxes to unpack in the new house when Erin discovered she was pregnant with Lexi. The baby, neither planned nor unplanned, was a delight to them both, but her arrival complicated the already delicate balance in the household.

The first several months were unusually demanding. Alexis struggled with both colic and a string of ear infections that left everyone in the house slightly irritable—and her mother chronically sleep-deprived. The difficult first months cemented the decision that they had already discussed: Erin would not go back to work as an office manager; she would be a stay-at-home mom.

The plan, which both agreed was best for all three of the children, was not without compromises. They would lose almost forty percent of their income, and the new house was already eating an uncomfortably large chunk of their paychecks. They could scrape by all right, but anything unexpected was a strain, and Tanner, worried about the vagaries of life among the "beltway bandits" of government contracting looked into what other jobs

might be available if his company lost the contract he was working on. The news was not encouraging. Although no one wanted to say "recession," the job market was tight, and a change right then would have come with a pay cut, not a raise.

Convinced it was his best hope, he redoubled his efforts on the land mine detection system being developed for the Army. It showed promise. There'd been no more than the ordinary number of setbacks, but there was pressure to bring it in not just on time but early. The world political situation—in the familiar cloak of problems in the Middle East and Africa—meant there would likely be real-world tests of the system sooner rather than later. They would not have the luxury of endless laboratory testing. They were expected to go from prototype to production in a matter of weeks, not months. Tanner's hours nearly doubled in the fall.

At home, it seemed as though he missed weeks at a time. He dropped in to shower and change, but there were days that he saw none of the children awake. It was only coffee and the promise of some relief if they met a late-December benchmark that kept the entire team focused. And for Tanner, it was Erin as well. He was so proud of the way she'd stepped up to the plate, keeping things moving under trying circumstances. The kids were happy and doing well in school. Lexi, thank God, hit a growth spurt, and the colicky bouts ended abruptly. It seemed to take a little longer for Erin to look herself again, but he had to admit he wasn't giving her much in the way of help. Even if he could steal an hour to watch Claire play soccer or take Declan out for a weekend bike ride, Erin still had one or two children to take care of. They rarely had private time together, and when they did at least one was on the edge of exhaustion. It was a lack they were both aware of. They had spent much more time together—and more satisfying time at that—when they were dating.

The inspiration for the anniversary trip was born

from that frustration. The key was whether they both wanted the same thing now.

Barely three hours after taking off from the U.S., they were checking into the hotel near Hamilton at the height of midday, an unusually warm day for so early in the year. Erin had regained her equilibrium during the flight, but her mood edged toward bitterness that she was determined not to show. Irritation, however, she made no effort to cover. The heat and humidity had hit with a blast once they left the controlled atmosphere of the plane. It was far from the breezy coolness that Erin had anticipated as she studied the green-fading-to-aqua waters during the approach for landing.

It looked lovely and clean, the sands a delightful, if surprising, pink. Coupled with that pastel freshness, the sticky humidity seemed all the worse. She plucked at her shirt, wishing it were cotton instead of a synthetic blend. "I need a shower and a change of clothes," she announced as they were led to their room.

Tanner nodded agreeably. "Okay, then what? I thought we'd take it kind of slow today. How does that sound? We could rent a moped, look around, get the feel of the place. Or we could just laze about on the beach. Or," he said, lowering his voice and nuzzling her neck, "we could laze about in the room."

She flinched—about the last reaction he'd expected—and said brightly, "Yes, let's look around the area. Why don't you see where we can get mopeds? And I'll be ready in a jiff." Erin's preparations were not as extensive as Lexi's, and she was, indeed, showered and dressed before Tanner had finished unpacking.

Tanner suffered another disappointment at the motorbike shack, when Erin, studying the rental rates, announced that she thought they should rent two single cycles rather than one double. "It doesn't cost that much more, and I'd rather see where I'm going."

The little bikes were surprisingly sprightly and after a few quick trips around the hotel's parking lot to get the feel of controls and braking, they set off down the narrow road that ran east to hook up with South Road, which ran the length of the main island, Erin repeating the mantra "On the left, on the left" to retrain her natural inclination to drive on the right side of the road. On straightaways, it wasn't too hard, but each turn meant a careful mental rehearsal so that she didn't end up in an oncoming traffic lane. In town, it was easier, as they could follow the traffic flow. But outside Hamilton, there was the occasional bus, but fewer cars and cycles by which to gauge her actions.

She thought of dropping behind Tanner as that would give her a ready model, but she dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. He was no more used to driving on the left than she, and besides, she liked the zippy feel of going slightly faster. With the rush of air across her body, the humidity was almost unnoticeable. It wasn't her fault that his bigger build meant that his moped was slower than hers. The cycles topped out near twenty miles per hour, but she consistently pulled ahead in their undeclared race.

Their turnaround point became Gibbs Hill Lighthouse on the South Shore, said to be the oldest cast iron lighthouse in the world. The climb up left them both winded, but the view from the top was worth it. They stood side by side, leaning on the railing, taking in the sea air and the distant call of birds from their elevated vantage. The reefs, hazards to seafaring men for centuries, shadowed and shaded the water as far as they could see. There seemed a tranquility about the view, soft and seductive despite the lurking dangers. Or maybe it seemed more tranquil because of the lurking danger.

Tanner put a gentle arm around his wife and felt the tranquility at an elemental level when her head tilted to rest on his shoulder. They stood together,

wordlessly, for a very long time.

Back at the hotel an hour later, though, that delicious interlude might never have taken place. As they had strapped on helmets for the ride back, he had casually advised Erin not to ride too close to the side of the road. There was, essentially, no shoulder, the edge of the lane being marked with curb or wall in most places. She tried to hug the left side of the roadway so the occasional passing car could get by, but more than once had been surprised by an obstruction on the extreme left. His heart had relocated to his throat when they came around a sweeping curve, edged with a high stone wall, only to discover what appeared to be a telephone pole in the roadway—and directly in Erin's path of travel. In the split second it took for them both to check for overtaking traffic and swerve right, he had not been able to examine it more quickly, but he realized as they continued on that it had probably been, not a telephone pole, but a tree that had been allowed to remain despite the laying of macadam. It had been startling in its own right, but just as disturbing was that Erin did not drop her speed or move further from the edge of the roadway.

Preparing for the ride back, he had suggested mildly, "Don't ride so close to the edge of the road, okay? Let the cars go around you. The locals are used to it, and they know these roads well enough not to crowd you. Do you want me to take the lead?"

Her eyes shot venom at him. "No, I don't want you to take the lead. Do try to keep up, won't you?" And with that she took off, leaving him to wonder whether he might tamper with the moped's engine to slow it down a bit. Twenty miles an hour might not be very fast, but when he was going eighteen miles an hour, twenty was just a smidgen too much. He trailed after her, losing sight of her as they traveled through Paget Parish.

He was both annoyed and relieved to see her in

the hotel room: annoyed that she had refused to wait for him, relieved that she had not gotten lost. She had a notoriously bad sense of direction, and it would not have surprised him if she'd missed the turn completely. Shoot, it wouldn't have surprised him if she'd called him from the airport asking for directions. The thought made him smile.

Erin watched him warily from the bed.

"I see you made it back all right," he observed.

"Yes."

"I thought we'd go to dinner, then maybe take a walk through town. How does that sound?"

"Fine," she said listlessly. With a grunt, she sat up and grabbed a comb to unsnarl her curls. She wore her hair shorter these days, a concession to practicality. It was easier to take care of, for sure, and less susceptible to grasping infant fingers. Having done what she could to tame the masses, she turned and was surprised to find herself under scrutiny.

She seemed so...sad, he supposed, was what worried him most. She was less vibrant, more remote. Finally, he decided to approach it head on. "What's up, sweetheart? Something's bothering you, and I don't know what it is. I really thought you'd enjoy this trip. I didn't think it would be something you'd just endure."

"Oh, this is fine." She tried to keep her tone light, bury the anger and hurt that kept trying to find a voice, and began to search for fresh clothes. "I was a little surprised by how hot and humid it was this afternoon, I guess. I feel kind of wilted. I'll take a cool shower, get a good night's sleep. I'll be better prepared tomorrow, I'm sure."

"It's not just today, and you know it."

She kept her back to him, needlessly rearranging their clothing in the closet. "Hmmm?" she asked with distracted courtesy that he didn't buy at all.

"Come on, Erin. I don't have to get you drunk, do I?" Said with a teasing exasperation, the

question had the effect of a violent threat.

She swung about in alarm, trying to gauge his mood. He didn't sound angry—but then he never did. Her heart was in her throat. It wasn't the first time he had proposed getting her drunk as a means of accessing her unspoken thoughts and intentions, but she was feeling far too vulnerable to allow it right then.

"What?" she asked, instantly defensive.

Surprised at the vehemence of her response, he changed tacks, trying for solicitude. "Are you okay?" When she didn't answer right away, he continued. "You seem awfully—" He paused, searching carefully for the right word.

"Awfully what?" she demanded, the resentment clear.

He settled for "—quiet. Like you don't expect to have a good time."

"Well, let's review. I've been practically kidnapped from my home, had to dismiss any plans I made for the next week. I'm forbidden to check on my own children. No, wait, I can't even speak of them—and now you're disappointed because I'm not the life of the party? Buy a clue, Tanner. This is your trip. I'm just along for the ride."

"I thought you'd enjoy it. It's something we used to talk about, going to Bermuda."

"Yes, back when we used to talk. But we didn't talk about this did we? You just decided how it would be, and what was best for Lexi and the kids, and what was best for me. And we're all supposed to salute sharply and do things on your blessed schedule because your time is too precious to waste. Well, I've got news for you, boss, life goes on whether you're there or not—for Lexi and Claire, for Declan, and for me. And you can't just stop by whenever you have a free afternoon and expect to find us in some sort of suspended animation, waiting for you. You can't plan an instant vacation, spring it on me at the last minute, and expect me to fall in step. Maybe I had plans for this week. Did

you ever think of that? Of course not, because nothing I have to do could possibly be as important as what you want! Right? You don't even have to answer that; I know I'm right. Well, I'm here, Tanner. You win. I'm sorry I can't be happy on command. Maybe next time you'll outline behavioral standards in a memo, and I'll be better prepared."

He hadn't moved since the beginning of her diatribe. He stood on the other side of the bed, listening, his expression blank. When he finally spoke, it was two words—"I'm sorry"—before he turned and left the room.

Chapter Two

It took fifteen minutes of angry striding before he could allow himself to see that there was some truth in her words. First, he indulged in a good bit of resentment for her ungrateful attitude, some irritation at her feminine overreaction, and bitterness over what was sure to be an unpleasant trip. When his initial anger began to fade, he culled through Erin's accusations, determined to marshal his arguments for what was sure to be an extended confrontation.

That thought alone was very discouraging. This was the second time in as many months that they had such a seemingly pointless argument. Before that, he couldn't remember the last time they'd clashed about any but the most trivial differences. There were the hormonally-driven highs and lows of pregnancy and childbirth, and even then they hadn't quarreled appreciably. He had been patient and indulgent, he told himself with a self-satisfied pat on the back. But these last two skirmishes had remarkable similarities, and he knew he'd better resolve the problem promptly before it threatened to become worse. Both had caught him completely off guard and seemed to hinge on Erin's assertion that he made family decisions without consulting her—a charge that was patently ridiculous.

She had complete authority to run the household the way she wanted to. He never interfered. Shoot, he couldn't have even if he'd been so inclined. Work took up time and attention he would much rather spend at home. And she did such a good job of running things at home that there was no need for him to second-guess. She kept him up to date with the many plans and decisions that had to be made, but she certainly wasn't frozen in indecision awaiting answers from him. So he knew what the plans were for weekend events and summer camp, knew who liked their soccer coach and who was making a salt-map of

Italy for Social Studies, knew that she'd switched pediatricians and thought they might need to replace the range in the kitchen.

He was chagrined at the realization that his thoughts revolved around Erin as mother and homemaker, less as wife, largely because he was doing less as husband than he'd like. He was breadwinner, father, and head of household. "Boss," Erin had called him, and not kindly. What had become of the friends and lovers they'd been at the beginning?

He had to acknowledge that they rarely "played" anymore—the silly, loving sharing that is the core of any relationship. It had started as a sort of codeword for sex : "Let's go play" suggesting a need for more privacy than the game table in the family room afforded. But, over time, it became synonymous with whatever private time they could reserve or steal. Practical jokes, intimate exchanges over the children's heads, friendly caresses, and shared exercise sessions had all been part of their play over time. But somehow, between the baby and the accelerated schedule for the mine detection project, their playtime had suffered.

They needed to play more. As he considered the matter, he was flooded by a wave of images: a teasing smile, tempting green eyes, clever fingers that knew just how to find his sensitive spots. He'd always said he wasn't ticklish, but Erin had uncovered a truth he hadn't known; he just wasn't ticklish in the usual places. She could be both patient and persistent, a combination that made her a delightful playmate, he thought.

The bathroom war. It made him chuckle just to think of it. Enamored with the luxury of a bathroom in the master suite, Erin had taken almost as much time decorating it as she did the children's bedrooms. Her plans were stymied only slightly by repeated delays in the delivery of the bathroom hardware: towel racks, soap dish, and most significantly, the toilet paper holder. Tanner

suggested they just buy one of the hundred other designs in stock at the local Home Depot. Erin smugly countered that it didn't matter as they'd never really settled the matter of whether the roll should feed from the bottom or over the top. He didn't mention it again, but the next time he used the bathroom, he deliberately moved the roll from the vanity to the floor. Erin responded by moving it again. Over the next several days the silent game continued. The roll would migrate to the top of the tank, behind the commode, or over the plumber's helper. He'd stretched the unspoken rule of the game that (for obvious reasons) it be within arm's reach when he tucked it into the windowsill. It was almost within arm's reach, he rationalized. Once she spotted it, she could reach it—probably.

As she brushed her teeth that night she had plotted the final move.

The next morning, wise to the game, he had looked for the roll immediately upon entering the bathroom. There was no sign of it. He did a more thorough search, telling himself the room was not that big. Five minutes later, he decided it was a lot bigger than he'd previously believed. Cabinets, trashcan, and hamper had all been searched to no avail. The small linen closet / medicine cabinet had turned up two unopened packages of toilet paper, but not the elusive roll. It was not on the windowsill, not hidden among the bath towels stacked neatly for lack of a towel rod.

He had been about to give up when he had a final wild thought. There it was, unrolled and folded back and forth on the floor underneath the bathmat, the paper core squished flat. In the bedroom Erin was taking her time putting the finishing touches on her hair, seemingly unaware of his ten-minute search. He'd had to fight back laughter as he bowed to her ceremoniously. "I concede. You are the champion." It was the end of the bathroom war, but certainly not the last playful battle.

The spontaneous, silly moments were elusive;

he had to be around enough for them to happen naturally.

He recognized that with the children. He tried to attend school events, but he knew it was more important to goof around at backyard soccer with Claire and Declan, to tuck them into bed at night if he was home in time, and to have chasing and tickling time with Lexi. Even with his project team at work he'd been known to lead a stress-reducing game of trashcan basketball at 9 p.m. But with Erin, he was expecting her to toil on independently . . . and then be fully in synch when he finally had time for her. What arrogance!

He'd been joking about getting her drunk, but walking the dark streets beyond Hamilton he knew that was what he had really expected: Erin, soft and affectionate, curled in his lap, sharing her thoughts and looking at him with open admiration. He had, unreasonably, wanted her to fall in step with him, but he'd given her no preparation.

With a sense of having solved the most important part of the problem, he headed back toward the hotel, a little surprised by how far he'd walked and with no idea how long he'd been gone. It was fully dark and had been for some time, but he'd burned off the irritation and had an approach, and that made him feel better. He would need to give her a little more time, play with her, and tune into her moods and rhythms better; that was all. A little humility wouldn't kill him, he thought wryly. And it didn't mean she was right in all she'd said. It was not that his time was more valuable, for instance, just that it was less flexible. Meetings, deadlines, delivery dates all represented external demands that he couldn't control. Surely, Erin should understand that after all this time. And whatever made her think she could talk to him the way she had, she'd better rethink. While she hadn't exactly been screaming like a fishwife, she also hadn't been as calm and rational as he expected his wife to be.

Back in the hotel, three miles away, Erin was feeling far less hopeful. "Bleak," was the word that kept running through her mind. Everything looked so bleak.

She lay on the bed, rocking side to side, desperate to keep the tears at bay. How had she managed to screw things up so awfully? *Here I am in what is as close to paradise on earth as I'll likely ever see, with the perfect opportunity to revive my relationship with Tanner, and what do I do? I tell him I don't want to be here, and I drive him out of the room.*

Yes, bleak was the word. For the first few minutes, she had watched the door apprehensively, expecting him to storm back in. Eventually, she gave that up and flipped on the TV, hoping for distraction. In what seemed like a bizarre cosmic conspiracy, though, every broadcast had some mocking significance. The current "Survivor" clone pitted divorcing couples against each other, a newsmagazine decried the deteriorating state of interpersonal communications, and a British sitcom she had never seen before had a middle-aged wife emasculating her husband for laughs. Not the distraction she had hoped for. She turned the TV off. Rocking on the bed provided some minimal comfort, though as the minutes ticked on, worry became dread.

What if he doesn't come back at all? On one level she knew the question was crazy. He would come back. His clothes and his airline ticket were there. He was far too practical to leave them behind. In fact, he had too much honor to leave her behind without a word either. But the question touched a fear deep within her, one she had struggled with for months, as Tanner sank his time and attention into work and the distance between them increased. At first, she had tried to convince herself that she was being oversensitive, that the

hormonal shifts of pregnancy and nursing were feeding her insecurities. But it was more than that, she knew. He had lost interest. After barely a year, their marriage had begun to unravel, and now it was just a matter of time before he hit the door for good.

Her first marriage, over so quickly, haunted her. Was there something about her—or being married to her—that changed a man? In both cases, a year seemed some sort of boundary she couldn't cross in happiness. Could there be something in her that made a loving, affable man become—

No, she told herself firmly. That was ridiculous. Whatever her problems with Tanner, he was nothing like the Rat Bastard. Her first marriage had been difficult almost from the start. If there was anything magical about the one-year mark, it was that she'd survived it, mostly whole, to divorce him. With Tanner, that year had been very happy, maybe even the first year-and-a-half. They had worked closely to bring the four of them together as a family, had made the first connections with extended family on both sides. They had built a future without ever trying to deny the past. When had it all begun to fall apart?

Desperate for a positive thought and a friendly voice, she called home, catching the children just before bedtime. Declan, having located their destination on a globe, was full of questions about how tiny the island was. Claire wanted to know when they would be home and asked, sotto voce, if there was something wrong with Lexi because Grandma had a nurse there. Two points for Tanner, Erin acknowledged grimly as she reassured Claire that the baby was fine, and Grandma was just a little nervous and would need lots of help.

Five minutes on the phone with them and she was somewhat mollified. She even managed a genuine laugh at Claire's vivid description of what her baby sister looked like after chocolate pudding but before her bath. Erin hung up the phone with a

smile. *At least I'm a good mother*, she thought. *At least that.*

She returned to the bed, where she rocked herself back and forth again, waiting for the sound of the key in the door. She was still sure he would be back any minute when she dozed off.

The door eventually opened, rousing Erin from a light sleep.

"Truce?" Tanner offered, waving something white—a paper napkin or a handkerchief—through the partially-opened door. Another day she might have laughed. She didn't. He dropped the improvised flag to his side. "I'm sorry for walking out earlier. I was too angry to have a rational discussion. I needed to calm down first." Not quite groveling but a good start, he thought.

"Fine." It was an acknowledgement that he'd spoken, nothing more.

"Can we talk this out, do you think?"

"Not tonight."

"You're probably right." He looked curiously at her as she lay, half curled on the bed, her face expressionless. That image was in stark contrast to the way he'd left her, nervous and on edge, a posture he should have recognized as he'd seen it many times before, though not lately. It was a plea for security that she couldn't put into words. But this new detachment was something altogether different. She seemed extraordinarily unapproachable, and he cursed himself for leaving her alone so long. He had been angry and unsettled, but the last two hours had done nothing positive for Erin. He had a cowardly desire to leave again but knew that would be the worst possible move. "Okay, we'll talk tomorrow."

No response, just that same dull, almost vacant, stare. He would have known better what to do if she had raged at him or lashed out at him in wounded pride. In the face of that, he would have known

what to do, but this. . . sadness, he supposed, maybe even depression, was a baffling new thing.

He kept up a monologue as he prepared for bed, telling her about some of the activities he'd hoped they'd be able to enjoy over the next several days: scuba diving, snorkeling, and horseback riding. She said nothing, and when he returned from brushing his teeth, she had not moved.

"Are you going to get ready for bed?" he asked directly, and she finally responded, drawing herself up slowly, taking a nightgown from the dresser, and disappearing into the bathroom. When she returned several minutes later, the sense of distance was more pronounced, which Tanner had not thought possible. She crawled under the sheet on the bed that he'd turned down, but the bed seemed suddenly extremely large and Erin very far away.

"Can I hold you?" How long since he felt like he had to ask? He took non-response as assent and gathered her tension-tight form to him. "I love you, honey, and I'm sorry," he whispered. Her body relaxed fractionally. He was surprised and a little disappointed that he did not get an apology in return. But in the semi-darkness of the hotel room, fan turning lazily overhead, he found it easier to offer reassurance when he couldn't see her rejection of it. "I hurt you, didn't I? I'm sorry for that. I would never deliberately hurt you, you know."

She knew, and the knowledge was devastating. He didn't set out to hurt her; he just didn't think about her—which was much worse. She swallowed tears.

Morning came, with a fragile sense of normalcy. Together, they went through the guidebook over breakfast, marking the things that most appealed and sketching out a rough plan for the next several days. Pressed to choose an activity, Erin opted for scuba diving, and they returned to their room to phone in reservations. The next session was near

lunchtime, which meant they had a couple of hours to kill, and she desperately did not want to be trapped in close quarters with Tanner for that long. The talk he had proposed last night loomed, but she knew that if she could keep him distracted and busy, he would eventually forget not only what they were supposed to talk about but why they were supposed to talk in the first place.

So the morning was a series of errands and excuses to keep moving. They found a drugstore, bought sunscreen and chewing gum, and browsed some shops with an eye for presents to bring back to the kids. An hour later, she solemnly loaded the wool sweaters and a book of photography in the basket of her moped for the short ride back to the hotel.

Still puzzling over how to mend things, Tanner was a little slow off the mark, and Erin had zipped away on her motorbike before he had his helmet on. He negotiated the little traffic circle near the hotel ("keep left...keep left...keep left") and parked his own moped next to hers at the hotel a few minutes later. They had a little time before they needed to be at the scuba shop. Maybe they could have a talk—or at least part of a talk, because he had the sense that everything couldn't be solved with a single conversation.

The expression on her face when he entered the room had him reconsidering his plan. She looked in no mood for talking. She was sitting on the bed, her face white with fear, clutching the bag of sweaters to her chest and very nearly hyperventilating.

"What's the matter?" It seemed an obvious question. This was not the mood he'd seen her in less than ten minutes earlier.

"Nothing," she lied.

"Are you hurt?" he asked tentatively. "Did something scare you?" That's certainly what it looked like, the heart-thumping panic when she was frightened. He did a quick, discrete inspection of hands and knees to convince himself that she hadn't

taken a fall on the moped. No scrapes. A brief trip to the bathroom produced a glass of water and a wet washcloth, and he applied one to her mouth and the other to the back of her neck. She brought herself under control quickly, her breathing and color returning to normal so fast he couldn't even take credit for it.

"I'm fine. Stop fussing."

"You sure?"

"Yes." Said with more irritation than conviction, though, the words didn't convince him.

"What happened?"

"Nothing." She hadn't actually had an accident—though it had been an uncomfortably close call. Then she had raced back to the hotel so she wouldn't have to confront Tanner on the street. Now, relief that he hadn't seen what happened mingled with anger that he hadn't been there to see it. Typical. Overlaying it all was guilt that she wasn't being honest . . . and fear of what would happen if she were. She busied herself with putting away the new purchases and returning the glass to the bathroom, all the while avoiding Tanner's penetrating gaze. Unable to stand it any longer, she announced brightly that she was going to buy a Coke at the little canteen adjacent to the hotel.

"No," he said, as though she had asked permission.

"I'll be right back," she persisted, reaching for the door.

"Stop!" he said more harshly than he intended but was surprised to see fear dart back into her face when she spun around. *She's afraid of me? Why on earth would she be afraid?* He approached slowly, still puzzled and concerned; the trapped and anxious look as her eyes swept the room confirmed his first guess. She was afraid of him. "Hey, I'm sorry. That was sharper than I meant. I just wanted you to stop. You always seem to be walking away from me. Why is that?" By then he had his hands on her, her shoulders first, and when they proved to be

rigid he moved to her upper arms, rubbing lightly in an effort to relax her. She made no move to pull away, but neither did she melt into his arms.

"Erin." He waited until her wary eyes met his. "Something's going on with you, and I want to know what it is."

"With me? There's nothing going on with me. What's going on with you?" There was the flash of anger that baffled him. His behavior had been beyond reproach, he told himself. He had been the soul of patience over the past 24 hours, while she had been moody and unapproachable.

"I could spank it out of you."

Her eyes blazed with indignation, but she knew better than to dare him to do it. And for some reason he couldn't pinpoint, Tanner found himself backing off the threat, regretting he'd said it out loud. It wasn't just that it had been a long time since he'd last spanked her; it was more that he couldn't get a handle on what was wrong between them. And he had the uncomfortable feeling that whatever was wrong was more his fault than hers. If so, he could hardly take it out of her hide. They eyed each other an arm's length apart, each lost in his own thoughts.

Finally, with a sigh of resignation, he said, "We've got five days here, Erin. We can use them to rejuvenate and rebuild, or we can use them to tear each other apart. What'll it be?"

"Do you really think we can rebuild?"

He answered both the words and the hopefulness in her eyes with a hug. "Of course, we can. Talk to me, sweetheart. What's wrong? I'll fix it if I can."

"Stop that. You're treating me like a child with that 'I'll make it all better' garbage."

"Not like a child," he corrected. "Like my girl, my love, my wife. What's the trouble?"

Standing in the circle of his arms, once so familiar, she found it hard to answer the question. What was wrong? There were so many things, and

they were all mixed up with Tanner and how she felt when he was there...and how she felt when he wasn't. How could she blame him for not spending time and attention on her over the past God-knows-how-many months when he was there, now, eager to do so? But it was hard to set aside the wounded pride that had come to act as natural armor and be what he so obviously wanted: the young woman who had once told him he was the center of her life. She regretted the admission now, resented the power it gave him, and mourned the loss of control. But it was still true.

There was a time in her life that she could have stepped neatly away and moved on. She had done so with her ex-husband, and if the divorce had not actually been neat, it had at least been final and without regrets. The list of men she'd dated between divorcing the rat bastard of a first husband and meeting Tanner was remarkably short for seven years, but she'd had no trouble backing out of those relationships either. Tanner, though, was different.

"I'm okay. Why don't we head on over to the scuba place? I'll follow you."

At his skeptically-raised eyebrow she offered, "I don't know where it is." And there were other reasons she didn't want to explain.

Chapter Three

Her agreeable demeanor lasted just long enough to get them registered and fitted for scuba gear. Taking her first barefoot steps on the sand was a reminder that its pink tint came from pulverized coral, which did not make for nearly as soft a beach as she expected. She winced at the discomfort. The flippers, which the guy at the pro shop assured her fit just fine, had seemed awfully tight. Rinsing her own spit around in the mask was just disgusting (though it had to be better than letting the instructor do it as he had offered). She slipped her tennis shoes back on, a defense against the coral.

In a peculiarly female logic train, she wanted to distract Tanner, tried her level best to do so, and then bitterly resented that he allowed himself to be distracted. *Damn it, she fumed, he's the one who wanted to talk. Has he just forgotten about last night?*

Tanner, who had preceded her through each of the fitting stations, was unaware of her displeasure until they were seated on the split logs that served as the open-air classroom near the dock. Erin was not normally a whiner, but maybe she had not realized what she was getting into, he thought with faint amusement. He had expected her to opt for something more civilized—one of the boat tours perhaps or just a lazy day sunning on the beach. (Or even, he had hoped, a lazy day making love in the hotel.)

"Well, you're in a mood today." His tone was more puzzled than censorious. "Are you not having a good time? Would you rather do something else?"

"You know, maybe I'll go back to the room and take a nap."

"Sure," he agreed. "Let's do that. I'll see if I can reschedule the session," he said as he started to collect their things. "We'll come back for a dive tomorrow."

"No, just me." She attempted to soften the blow

with a quick kiss and a flurry of words. "You've always wanted to do this, and I don't want to spoil your vacation. I won't miss it at all. I'll see you back at the hotel for dinner."

"Erin?" he said, baffled. "What's going on?"

She feigned innocence. "Nothing. Have fun. I'll see you in a few hours." She was gone with another quick kiss, leaving Tanner open-mouthed on the bench. That lasted only a few seconds, then he was up and after her, leaving their masks, fins, and other gear in neat piles in front of the bench.

He caught up to her in the parking lot, where she struggled to extract her cycle from among several others. She was cursing the row of shrubbery that complicated the task when she saw him approach. Damn. She thought she'd made a clean break of it. She tugged harder on the handlebars, causing three bikes to tip perilously—mirrors, handlebars, and pedals intertwined.

"All right," he said, determination clear in every cell in his body, decision in his voice. "This stops right now. No, don't touch the other cycles. I've got them. You just take a breath and think about what you're going to say to me because we are going to talk. No naps, no diving, no swimming, no nothing until we get this settled."

"You can't tell me what to do!" Her voice was shrill and defensive. She was angrier still when he slipped her cycle out easily and set it neatly beside his on the end. "I don't want to be here, and I'm not going to stay. You can't make me. You can't tell me what to do!"

Ah, the rashness of being cornered, he thought. If he hadn't thought she'd slug him, he might have laughed. This, at least, he recognized. She was pushing for limits and, by God, he was going to give them to her. She was inches short of the first boundary.

"Bring it under control right now, Erin." His eyes flashed a warning she chose to dismiss. He wouldn't—he couldn't, she reminded herself—do

anything there. That conviction lasted only a second before she felt his hand caress her bottom in a once-familiar warning. Then the hand was gone—only to return sharply an instant later. Smack!

"You wouldn't," she muttered in disbelief.

He very nearly laughed. "I would," he returned. "I did. I will again," he assured her impassively. "Would you like to find a more private place for this conversation? We can do it here—and I will—but I think you'd rather go back to the room. What do you think?"

Not much, as it turned out. Her mind had effectively shut down, stuck as it was on the circular thought: *This can't be happening.*

The short trip back to their hotel barely gave Tanner a chance to settle on a course of action. It reminded him uncomfortably of the first time he'd spanked her two months after they'd begun dating. Despite a promising start, their relationship had stalled to a reserved impersonal connection that he had desperately wanted to intensify. Then, just like now, he would have preferred that she just talked to him, but things hadn't worked out that way. As it was, taking her over his knee had been just the solution to get her to open up, to respond to his love rather than resist it. Oh, yes, there were some similarities to that first time but there was also a crucial difference. He had taken her over his knee the first time out of desperation; he'd had nothing to lose then. Now, though he was again feeling desperation, he had much more to lose.

And in all likelihood, she was going to end up just as sore and tearful.

He prodded her ahead through the hotel room door, closing it with firm finality. "I really thought we were beyond this, Erin." He was stunned by the look of shocked betrayal she shot him.

In the next instant she hung her head and murmured, "It won't happen again." Her tone, free of passion, sounded merely sad. What on earth was going on? He wondered.

"Is there any reason you shouldn't be punished for that little outburst at the marina?"

"Yes, but it doesn't matter. So go ahead."

His own frustration was beginning to show. "There are only two acceptable answers to that question. That's not one of them." To her continued silence he repeated, "Is there any reason you shouldn't be punished for your behavior?"

She continued to stall, avoiding a straightforward response, even when trapped between his thighs as he sat on the bed.

"You know what?" he finally said, exasperated. "We're going to do this in two stages. First I'm going to paddle you for this stubborn refusal to answer my question, and then we're going to talk about why 'it doesn't matter.' Clear?"

"No! No!" She twisted and kicked, fighting him as she had not done since the first time he had spanked her. She always resisted, was always reluctant, but she had not actually fought him since the first time, more than two years earlier. Then it had been a panicked desperation, but this was more an angry bitterness. His arms tightened, restraining the fists that tried to pummel his chest. He pulled her wrists together over her head, effectively drawing her midsection across his left thigh. One hand secured her squirming torso, the other coming down sharply on her shorts-clad bottom a half-dozen times. Then, mixed with frustrated grunts and wordless protests, she finally managed, "You're not being fair!"

And, for the first time ever, that stopped him.

She found herself righted and subjected to the penetrating gaze of a pair of brown eyes she had been struggling to avoid all day.

"Not fair in what way?" he asked.

She was as surprised by his cessation as he had been by her words, and she stopped struggling, inexplicably leaning into the chest she had been attacking moments before. "It isn't fair," she said miserably, "for you to suddenly care what I do,

what I say. I forget to screen my thoughts. I think you owe me a little more warning at least."

Startled by the change in her demeanor—for she had gone from violent to subdued in a matter of seconds—he was still more taken aback by her words. "Suddenly care what you do? You forget to screen your thoughts? Erin, what on earth is going on? You're talking nonsense."

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," he shot back with a vehemence that would have had her backing up if she hadn't been held securely, arms and legs trapped by his. "How is it not fair?" he repeated.

"Just not right. You don't usually care what I do anymore. Why should this all suddenly be different?"

She twisted under his silent scrutiny, an eternity that ended when he finally said, "I don't usually care what you do? Explain that, please."

A measure of belligerence snuck into her voice. "You don't. What's to explain? When's the last time you took an interest in what I did?" He let her pull away finally, and she stalked across the room, radiating unhappiness.

Baffled, he searched for an example. There were a thousand—or none, depending on how he looked at it. "I'm always interested in what you do. What would make you think otherwise? I know I've been busy with the project, but I thought you understood. It's an investment in our future. I have to put in the time now—"

Yes, she knew. He put in the time, and he would have success: power, respect, and bonuses. And she would have less of him because he could only be spread so thin. Her voice was dull with resignation. "I ask you when you were last interested in me, and you answer with business. That says it all, I think."

"No, it doesn't," he protested, feeling uncomfortably as though he'd walked into a trap. "I was thinking of you when I planned this trip. I took

care of everything so you wouldn't have any worries. When I mentioned the project, I just meant that I'm working hard to see that you and the kids have the kind of home and life that we planned for. Together, remember? We planned that together. Are you having second thoughts about staying home? Is that what this is about?"

"No! God, you are so dense!"

"Then lay it out for me a little more clearly," he demanded. "I'm obviously not getting the subtle hints."

"I'm not being subtle. I said it clear as can be. You don't care about me. You don't talk to me."

"I do! I know my schedule's been erratic, and I'm not home on anything like a predictable basis, but I call nearly every day so we can have at least a few minutes of private conversation. I make sure that there's a time you can tell me things—from big issues to the mundane."

She cocked her head, quizzically. "I though you just wanted to check on the mail."

He had fallen into the habit of filling the silence by asking what was in the morning's mail. How had she gotten the impression that the aim of his calls was to check on what bills or magazines had come in? "There's nothing in the mail that can't wait eight hours."

"I guess I figured you were trying to make sure that the bills were paid on time."

"You take care of all that stuff. And you do it very well," he hastened to add, realizing that he'd been dangerously short on compliments lately. "There's no need to check up on you. I know you'd tell me if there were a problem." Actually, he knew nothing of the sort anymore. He assumed she'd tell him if they were having cash-flow problems, but then he'd assumed she would tell him if they were having personal problems as well. Two days ago he'd have sworn they were very happy.

He thought frantically over their recent early-afternoon phone conversations. He tried to call, as

much as possible, before the older kids were home from school but while Lexi was still napping. Fewer distractions, more conversation. And Erin did talk to him, though lately it seemed to be reports of the children's plans and accomplishments, he realized. His own attitude shifted from appeasement toward anger. "I have been there to listen, and you've had lots of opportunities to talk to me. Why haven't you?"

"What does it matter? You don't care."

He clenched his teeth briefly, struggling to control his response. His words were mild, his tone even, when he said "Why don't you see if you can tell me how you feel and what you want without telling me how I feel."

"Fine," she answered with a bitterness that indicated that things were anything but fine. She dropped heavily to the painted desk chair on the other side of the room, a position that made him twist about to keep her in view. "I feel," she almost snarled the first two words, but then her voice revealed a pathos he found it hard to disregard as she continued, "like I might as well be the hired help: thorough and efficient, but of little personal significance." A sigh, then, "And I want you to care about me."

It was said with such dismal hopelessness that he could not challenge it. She clearly felt alone, whether or not she was. The sorrow in her tone brought him off the bed with the need to console, but there was steel in his voice when he said, "Last time, Erin. I promise you that's the last time you'll say that without paying a price." She let herself be gathered into his arms, and he resettled them both on her chair, his gentle touch at odds with the threat.

"I'm sorry. I want to feel like you care again."

That was a little better, he thought. Still baffling but at least a starting point. He waited for his heart and breathing to return to normal before pressing on. "Why do you think I don't care? Or that I care

any less than I have in the past? I love you. You're my wife. We have a family and life that we share. Or I thought we did," he muttered in an undertone, and then returned to firm assurance. "Incontrovertible fact: I love you. Start from there."

It was a good starting point. She gathered scarce courage to continue the journey. "We never play anymore, and I don't mean just the sex; I mean everything else."

On an exasperated sigh, Tanner admitted, "I was thinking the same thing last night, and honestly that's a big part of why we're in Bermuda. I hoped that with some time away, some time alone, we could do that. But you seem determined to keep us stuck in conflict, and I don't understand why. Can't we put it behind us?"

It sounded like a reasonable request, but they both knew it wouldn't work. They had lost the habit of playing with each other.

"It seems like we should, shouldn't we?" It was a feeble agreement at best.

He sighed deeply, resigned, "But you can't."

She struggled up, no longer taking comfort in his arms. "That isn't fair. You can't either," she shot back. "You're acting like this is some snit I have to work through, and you're being Mr. Patience. I'm trying to tell you it's more serious than that. I'm suffocating here! And before you say a word—" she silenced him with an open hand. "—I don't mean you're smothering me. Far from it. I feel completely on my own most of the time. No help. No support. Nothing. Just do it and shut up because nobody wants to hear it."

"Hear what?" he demanded, his own temper rising again.

"Anything I have to say, any problems I might encounter, even the simple day-to-day joys. You don't want to hear about it, and you sure as hell don't want to hear it from me. I don't know why you thought that everything would be different if we just changed the scenery. I can't just turn the clock

back two years and pretend everything's rosy."

Is that what she would have to do to be happy? He wondered. Turn back the clock to before they were married? The thought cut deep.

"So where do we go from here?"

She knew a moment of real despair and caught a sob as it tried to escape. She had been so sure on some deep, unacknowledged level that if only she could get him to see how dire things were he would fix it somehow. The disappointment at having it thrown back in her lap was overwhelming.

"I have no idea what you're going to do. I came back to take a nap." She kicked off her shoes, flinging them in the direction of the closet but not watching to see where they landed.

Tanner caught her arm as she tried to flounce past. "Just a darn minute. We're not done here. I told you before: nobody's diving and nobody's sleeping until we get things worked out."

"There's nothing to work out," she said with an indignant sniff. "You don't care, and I'm beginning to care less all the time."

"That's it!" he declared, upending her in an instant.

"Not fair!"

"Nope, you're not suckering me again. I warned you. You did it anyway. This is the result. It's fair. Q.E.D."

It was a short, intense walloping that left her red-faced and gasping but still dry-eyed.

One hand on the small of her back, the other resting on her shorts, he asked mildly, "Are you ready to have a reasonable conversation?"

"Leave me alone!"

"Wrong answer." His hand hit its target another dozen times before he repeated, "Are you ready to have a reasonable conversation?" A shaky breath from her made him soften. "I don't want to hurt you, Erin, but we need to talk. Are you ready for that, or do you need some more convincing?"

The dry sobs tore at his heart, but he kept her in

place until she could finally say, "I'll talk to you," at which point he gently helped her find her balance. The sadness was there full force, her chin quivering with the effort to contain it.

"Do you want a cuddle first?" he offered, arms stretched invitingly. The indecision flitted across her face, but she settled on "No," a bad sign he thought. She sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, both an arm span away and much further. He decided to give her a little time to pull herself together. Minutes rolled by. The only sound in the room was their breathing: hers, still erratic and shallow; his, having settled down to deep and regular.

He regarded her, an unhurried study that took in not only the comfortably familiar but also some new things he hadn't consciously marked before. Her eyes, intermittently shielded from view as she hunched miserably over her knees, were clouded with unhappiness, but he could see them clearly in his mind. They were green. Not the poetic green of emeralds, not bright feline green either. No, they were a deep grey-green that absorbed light and his interest. She had a couple of outfits in a color she called sage that made those eyes come alive from across the room. But up close like this they were always captivating. Even now, dulled by misery as she struggled with unspoken thoughts, her eyes were arresting.

Her auburn hair seemed to be shorter yet again. When they'd married, it had been well beyond shoulder length, a palette of colors. They had taken their first tentative step toward intimacy on a mountaintop as he combed through that long and varied mass of lights and waves. She had cut it to shoulder length after the baby was born, then even shorter more recently. Now it curled unpredictably, framing her face in a halo of brownish red. It was pretty, but he missed the flickering waves. "You cut your hair again," he remarked absently, one hand toying with the short curls.

"Last week," she answered with that same dull sadness. "I knew you wouldn't notice."

"I noticed."

She gazed at him skeptically but said only, "It's easier," and lapsed into silence again.

He was more troubled by her silence than by any of her words. It felt like not like tension but like hopelessness. And that fit with the sadness he'd seen on and off lately; it fit with the you-don't-care garbage she'd been feeding him for the past hour. He did care. How could he get her to see that working was his way of caring for the family? She took care of things her way and he took care of things his way. Together, they made a team. How could she not see that? The fact that he was away from home so much lately was regrettable but temporary, and she was cutting him no slack. His male pride was pricked, he knew, because she was blaming him for the one thing he was doing well: providing for the family. How would she feel if he groused about the thing she felt the most pride in? He knew the answer to that, of course: she'd be fighting mad.

Fighting mad, he thought, with the same calm conviction he had felt at the motorbike stand.

"Yeah, well," he began, "I can see why you'd go for the easy hairstyle. No point making a big effort." She sighed but seemed otherwise unaffected by the observation. "Everything will take care of itself," he offered as though in agreement with her unspoken thoughts. "There's no reason to put out a lot of time anyway. No reason to interrupt your soap operas and game shows to style your hair." That bought him a brief glare, but then she dropped her head to her knees again. Time for a more ruthless approach.

"In fact, Erin, I was thinking we should probably talk about getting you some full-time help. I know you've been overwhelmed and can't get to everything. There's no reason we can't get someone in to do the cleaning and look after Lexi. I know you don't want to go the day care route, but having a

nanny who can give her the attention she needs might be a really good idea. And that would free you up to . . . well, to do whatever it is you want to do." The baleful look might have reduced him to dust if it hadn't been exactly the reaction he was going for. He paused, trying to decide on the next line of attack.

"I'm doing the best I goddamn can, you know!" And for all the inappropriateness of her language, he was relieved to see the spark of anger. It just might be the weak spot in the wall she had built around herself, a way through the sadness.

He set a mental chisel in mortar to widen the chink. "No, you're not. I've seen your best. This isn't even close. You're sleepwalking through things, making no effort to take care of yourself, me, the kids." That was an out-and-out lie but it had the desired effect. She went red with rage and indignation, more animated than he had seen her in a long time.

"No effort? No effort!" she sputtered, coming off the bed to glower down at him. "I suppose you think the laundry fairy visits regularly, food magically appears on the table, the kids drive themselves to music lessons and sports practices. Lexi's swing out back didn't hang itself, did it? I know you know that Declan's working on a go-cart, but do you know he's building it in our basement?" she demanded. "How about Claire's Odyssey of the Mind team? They didn't have enough coaches, so I volunteered. We now have a half-dozen fourth- and fifth-graders in the house every Wednesday for two hours working on their project, but you never see the remnants. No! Because I make sure that everything's taken care of before you walk through the door." What would he have thought if he had seen them cutting up balsa wood parts with X-Acto knives on the dining room table?

"Then because you can manage to book a package with one call to a travel agent and bring your mother into town with another, you think

every day should be that easy. I've got news for you, Cokely Tanner! That's not the way it works. There are a million things that have to get done so that it all looks easy and seamless, but it sure as hell isn't. The house is clean and quiet when you walk in because I've moved heaven and earth to get it that way. It's not like the kids are locked in closets, you know." It might be easier if they were. "They're all over the place: playing, creating, destroying, exploring. Do you think that kind of thing happens all by itself?"

She was in a fine temper, and he took private pleasure at the ease with which the demolition project was proceeding. He might have started with his chisel but Erin seemed to have fully joined the project team. If he was ashamed of how long it had taken him to realize the wall was substantial, that was an issue for later rumination. "You forget," he countered in simulated defense. "I was a single parent. I know what it takes to raise a child. Hell, I'm still a parent. It's not like you're doing this on your own."

"You were a man with one school-aged child. You have no idea what it's like with three." There was a catch in her voice that told him this had gone far enough.

"Three kids and a husband who doesn't appreciate you?" he offered softly.

"That's right!" Her eyes blazed at him.

"Boy, what an idiot he is."

He could see the confusion as she was caught completely off guard. "What do you mean?" she asked suspiciously. Seconds ago everything had been her fault—she had felt it and he had seemed to agree—and she wasn't sure where this was headed now.

Chapter Four

"I know I haven't been very available lately," Tanner said calmly. "And I'm going to do better at that. I will. But I need some cooperation from you, too. Let me try to explain this. I don't mean this as an excuse, because I should be paying better attention, but in some ways it's a case of the squeaky wheel getting the grease. I have so many demands on my time it's not possible to get through everything on any given day. If you need something from me, large or small, you're going to have to tell me—in great big letters sometimes—so that I don't miss it. You're going to have to be the squeaky wheel."

"But you're too tired. You're too busy."

"I'm never too tired to listen. I might be too wiped out to do sophisticated problem solving at the drop of a hat. I may have to get back to you with a solution, but I'm not too tired to hear about things, okay? I'm never too tired to hold you. I'm never too tired to make love to you."

"Oh, like that solves everything," she said derisively. He blinked in surprise at how quickly Erin's mood changed. They had been moving toward each other; he'd been sure of it. But that last statement had been a mistake for some reason he couldn't quite fathom.

"Why is it that men think that sex is a cure-all? Like that five minutes somehow makes up for not caring the rest of the time."

"Damn it, I do care!" he all but shouted.

Erin's voice was almost a whisper, accentuating the difference. "Then you can't possibly know how hurt I am, or you wouldn't keep doing it."

"Doing what?"

"Ignoring me."

He was suddenly weary. "I'm at the end of my rope here, Erin. What you want from me?"

"Well, that's familiar."

"Meaning?"

"That's the same thing I asked you months ago. That hasn't worked too well, has it?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You said you wanted peace and quiet, and I'm doing my best to give that to you, but it never seems to be enough. The more I try to—" She gave up with a shrug of her shoulders.

He stared at her with open-mouthed confusion. Finally, bewildered, he asked "When did I say I wanted peace and quiet?"

Anger flared, threatening to boil over. How could he pretend not to know what she was talking about? It was probably the single most important conversation they'd had in six months. "I'm not making it up! Right after you met that January deadline—when I thought things would finally get back to normal—you said you just wanted to be left alone. Peace and quiet! Do you have any idea how hard it is to make a houseful of kids seem peaceful and quiet?"

He maintained the expression of open confusion for several long seconds before a flash of understanding crossed his face. At that he closed his eyes on a sigh. An instant later she was trapped to his chest in an inescapable, wordless bear hug. The hold, familiar but long absent, drew easily on her response, also familiar but long absent. Against her best efforts to resist, she could feel her body begin to relax. She felt safe, safe in his arms, safe in his heart. Much of the tension left her body, and Tanner's arms tightened still further. It was just short of uncomfortable. And she wanted it to go on forever.

"What?" she finally whispered, anxious to know what had finally made the difference, what had made him open his heart again. But, instead of answering, he scooped her up and resettled them in the armchair.

Her touch was beyond tentative, almost reluctant, but eventually her arms went around his shoulders. His arms were gentle on a still-skittish

package, and it was a minute before he felt her settle. A spasm in her forearm said she was waging a battle for control. He had no intention of letting her win that battle, but he would make the loss as easy and honorable as possible. His big hands coursed up and down her back, a familiar move, meant to remind her that she was safe in his arms. It didn't take much more encouragement for her to lay her head on his shoulder, a tremulous breath loosing the shaky remnant of control.

"I've not been taking very good care of you," he admitted among kisses to her hair.

"I can take care of myself." Said from her current position it didn't have the force of protest.

"Of course you can. Never doubted it for a second. You have before. Just because you can doesn't mean you should."

The transition, from harsh words to tender care, could not have been more abrupt. Or more valued. "This is nice. I don't know the last time you held me like this."

"Probably sometime before you started giving me 'peace and quiet,'" he said wryly.

She tensed, instantly defensive, but his hands remained gentle and calming, his voice soothing.

"I think I remember that conversation," he said. "I'd just gotten in from Nevada, and it was late, right? We were in the bedroom, and you asked me how the trip went, and I didn't really want to talk about it." That was putting it mildly. He'd been up for 36 hours, briefed everyone from a major general down to, he suspected, the private painting rocks on the roadway. It had all gone as smoothly as could be expected—until the prototype experienced a series of failures in the final set of demonstrations. He'd been frantic to iron out the problem, which turned out to be with the Army-supplied battery pack. By the time he left, the project was being hailed as a triumph, and his bosses were already talking about not just production but deployment. On the basis of a

prototype. One that had been hurried through development, no less. He had shared very little of that with Erin.

"And I asked you what I could do for you, what you wanted from me, and you said just peace and quiet." Her voice held the misery of several months, but it was easier to face held sure in his arms.

"I'm sure that's the way you remember it."

"Because that's what you said," she insisted stubbornly and was silenced with a quick, quelling squeeze as Tanner continued undeterred.

"I'm sure that's the way you remember it," he repeated, "but I'd like you to think about it again. Because I remember a very similar—but not quite the same—conversation. I think you asked me what I wanted, but either you didn't say or I didn't understand that you meant what I wanted from you. My mind was still in Nevada, still on the project, where it's been too much lately, but that's what I was struggling with. So," he invited her to follow his logic, "you asked me what I wanted and I'm sure I told you—" He waited for her to fill in the words but she was stymied. "I'm sure I said 'peace' not 'peace and quiet' not 'leave me alone.' Nothing like that." He jiggled her roughly, the loving equivalent of knocking her up the side of the head.

"I'm scared to death that we haven't worked all the bugs out of the system yet. My worst nightmare is that we send peacekeeping troops into some civil war and then we discover something that didn't show up in the testing. So, yeah, what I want is peace: in the sense of peace on earth and bless the beasts and children. Not," he emphasized with another rough jiggle, "in the sense of hide all the problems and make my own kids scared to talk to me."

"They're not scared exactly."

"But you have tried to keep them away from me." He was beginning to see it more clearly.

"Not away, no. But quieter, I guess. I told them you've been having a very rough time at work and

that you need your time at home to relax and unwind. I try to make sure that they don't bring you problems. Just like I try to keep things calm and easy for you."

"Easy-for-me at the cost of your happiness is not a bargain I'd have made if I'd been given the choice. Easy-for-me at the cost of our estrangement is not one I'd have even considered. You had no right to make that decision for me."

Silence seemed like a wise course so she clung to it—and him—until it became too much for her. "I'm sorry I messed up your chance to go diving this morning. Did you reschedule for tomorrow?"

"Actually, schedules and registrations were about the last thing on my mind when you flew out of there." That inflexible tone was back in his voice, and her bottom tightened of its own accord. She'd had two spankings in the past hour, neither hard enough to leave much more than the memory of pain. She was unlikely to fair as well in a third encounter. Then, he'd been grappling with a situation he didn't understand and couldn't control, and it had left him wavering uncharacteristically. Now, for the most part, the questions were answered. There would be no distractions.

Though it never hurt to try.

She rubbed his stomach as it made a protesting growl. "You missed lunch, too. Why don't we have an early dinner in town? Or would you rather eat at the hotel again?"

"We have something to settle first."

"Just like back when you still cared." She was teasing, but there was enough of an edge to it that she was unsurprised when a firm hand forced her to meet his steady gaze. "I'm sorry," she whispered hoarsely. "You always cared. I know that. And I know I have another spanking coming. Just give me a minute, okay? I'm not feeling quite as brave as I was a little while ago."

"Brave's not the word I would use," he muttered as he resettled her in his lap. Foolhardy,

thoughtless, whiney, moody maybe. Even cruel. Not brave. Knowing she wouldn't appreciate his characterizations, he kept them to himself. "Poking the bear a bit?"

"Just checking that the bear was still there."

"He's here. Always will be. He loves you very much."

She was very nearly in tears. "I know. I love you, too. Very much."

That was all for a while. He did nothing to hurry her, content to let her settle things in her own time. They had spent too many months tied to his calendar and project planning charts for him to begrudge her some time to think. And if she chose his lap for that meditation, well, that was hardly something to complain about. He satisfied himself with an occasional kiss to her forehead and the brush of his cheek against her curls, but it was a long time before she finally unfolded herself from his secure hold to say, "I'm ready."

He confirmed that as they stood. She seemed composed and unafraid. That was good. He dreaded seeing that caged, frantic look that made him feel untrusted. He thought they'd gotten well beyond that. It took him down a notch to realize he'd been so complacent about his relationship with Erin that he had not recognized the growing distance and its potential danger. For now, at least, her eyes were clear, her trust in his hands.

He led her the three steps to the bed and seated himself. Both of them reached for the button at her waist at the same time, and their laughter broke the tension in a natural, reassuring way. "I'll leave that to you," Erin declared, moving her hands away in surrender. It took Tanner only a few seconds to strip the shorts down, another few as they dealt with the problem of a swimsuit where panties should have been. She slipped the straps of the one-piece from her shoulders, and the shimmering nylon joined her shorts at mid-thigh. With the merest urging of a hand, he invited her to come

across his lap.

The fact that he didn't bring her between his knees, trapping her legs, said he didn't expect a fight—whether because he didn't intend a very hard spanking or because he expected her to control herself, she didn't know, but his hands were both sure and gentle as he settled her into place. This was, she realized as he adjusted the angle of her hips, her preferred position to be spanked in—if one could have a best way to be spanked. Stretched out like this—legs and torso supported, Tanner's forearm and left hand bracing her waist and hip—made her feel secure, if nothing else. She supposed it was more comfortable for him, as well, but the reason he had chosen it over the armless chair he had used earlier was based more on her comfort than on his. On a couch or a bed, he had once told her in the aftermath of another spanking, she could focus on the spanking without panicking that any shift in movement might mean a loss of balance. It had touched her, when he said that, to realize how sensitive he was to her fears, respecting her psyche even when her behavior disappointed him. Today, the opposite conclusion—that he would no longer respect her feelings—had been more devastating than the short spanking on the chair. Going back over his lap came with a surprising surge of contentment.

She reached forward to grab a pillow, something to hold onto when she would be tempted to reach back, something to smother the noise and tears if this turned out as she expected. Earlier, between anger, surprise, and bitterness, she had been unable to get to anything like contrition, but with most of their misunderstandings finally out in the open, she was already feeling pretty sorry—sorry for herself and sorry for Tanner. Just plain sorry.

She tensed for the onslaught and was surprised to feel, instead, his right hand gentle on her nether cheeks. "Why are you here?" he asked, as he sometimes did. This time it was more out of

curiosity about her state of mind and her take on the troubling day, less about getting her to admit a specific error. They would talk again after the spanking. She would undoubtedly have new insight, an effect of the endorphins and the emotional release.

"Because I'm an idiot."

His voice boded clear warning. "Excuse me?"

Perhaps recognizing what a rash statement that was for someone in such a vulnerable position, Erin curled against him, rubbing her cheek against his side as she looked up at his face. "Because, in a way, I knew all along that there was something wrong, and I was just hurt and angry that you didn't care." She corrected herself before he could fire off a reprimand. "That you seemed not to care. I expected you to read my moods and when you didn't I blamed you rather than discuss it." A weary sigh, then, "And that was both foolish and self-defeating."

"I'm glad you see that now, sweetheart. How long has this been going on?"

She stretched out again, face to the bedspread. "Months," was the guilty answer.

He winced at that. She had already been well into this funk when they'd had the massive argument during which she'd declared that she would plan no more outings for his benefit. If he had understood, then, what was going on, how much worry could he have saved her, how much trouble could he have saved them both? He should have pressed it then; that was easy to see in retrospect. He couldn't even remember what the trigger for that fight had been, but it seemed to cover every crime he'd ever committed from leaving towels on the bathroom floor to not calling when he'd be late for dinner. His being inconsiderate had been a highlight, but she had certainly not accused him of not caring. How close she must have held that barb...and how it must have hurt her.

He rubbed her bottom roughly.

"That's a long time to hold onto that much pain and anger." He watched her head nod against the pastel coverlet. "It's time to move on, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said past the lump in her throat. It was all so confusing. They both knew that the problems weren't all her fault, but she was the one about to get her bottom scorched. And she wouldn't fight it because in the end she knew she would feel better. It was one of the things she realized she missed from him lately—not the pain of a spanking, but the incredible emotional bond that came with it. And over the past six weeks she had resisted the urge to push him into it because she'd been afraid that, somehow, it wouldn't work. Either he would ignore the deliberate provocation, proving that she really had lost him, or he would spank her and she would resent it. Now, with all those reservations gone, she just wanted to skip ahead to the after part.

Unfortunately, there's no way to get to the after without going through the before and the during. They'd spent entirely too much time in the before. She braced for the during.

It came, as it always did, with a pistol shot of sound that cracked the air just before the sting of his hand on her bottom registered.

If the earlier spanking for saying he didn't care was short and intense, this one looked to be just as intense but considerably longer. She had mentally braced herself to be good, proving that he didn't have to trap her legs, but she was twisting and wriggling in short order. How any human being could be expected to lie placidly while someone inflicted pain was a mystery, one Erin didn't have the focus to solve. She drummed her legs to vent some of the tension and resistance, and then tried to shift her bottom so that at least he wouldn't be striking the same spots over and over again—to no avail. Tanner followed her effortlessly, bringing spank after spank down on the crest of each globe with maddening accuracy. She clutched at the

pillow, willing herself to endure, then hitched her body forward on her elbows in a desperate, wordless plea to have him move down to her thighs.

Instead, he paused in his maddening rhythm and ran a gentle hand up and down her previously untouched thighs. Her bottom throbbed, a heartbeat pulse that seemed to have learned the steady pace of his hand. "Are you okay, sweetheart?" His gentle query was punctuated by the pulsing in her bottom, and she felt a lunatic urge to laugh.

It emerged as a sob. She was so surprised that she was unable to choke back another before she finally managed, "Yes," in a completely unconvincing timbre.

His hand brushed over her scarlet bottom again as he resettled her in her former spot, clearly rejecting her offer of unmarked territory. His open hand landed again—determined, solid, unmistakably firm—on the full crest of her bottom, but he did not resume the old pace. Fast and furious gave way to steady and measured. It still hurt terribly but gave her more time, more presence of mind, to remember how she'd gotten there: the wrongs, the angry words, the challenges that they had both taken part in.

And now, she hoped, they could move on, and she could get rid of the sick feeling in her stomach that all their best times were behind them.

She was oblivious to the tears when they started, but Tanner wasn't. He continued with a half-dozen more strokes just to make sure she wasn't still fighting the release then gathered her to him.

He held her through the storm of tears, which lasted easily as long as the spanking had. When she regained a smidgeon of composure, she was aware of the soft rain of words about her, as cleansing as her own tears. He denied the truth of his earlier accusations, assured her of his love and acceptance, and promised support. She was in his lap when he leaned against the headboard by some magic that

let him reposition them both without her awareness.

"Well, that was a long time coming, wasn't it?"

Tanner prodded gently.

There were a lot of ways to take that question. Erin deliberately took the most benign one and nodded against his chest. It had been a long time since she'd cried, a long time since she'd abandoned the strict control over the show of emotions and let him guide her through to the calm aftermath. The longing for that calm aftermath sent her into another brief spate of tears, but Tanner didn't press or demand, and in a minute she could breathe easily again.

"I'm sorry," she said. It was an almost-forgotten ritual that those be the first words she spoke, and Tanner's smile recognized the effort.

"I know, honey. We've both got a lot to be sorry about. It's gonna be okay. It is okay," he corrected. "We'll talk about everything, but it's already okay. You can feel that, can't you?" She felt a lot of things—sore, stuffy, and exhausted topped the list—but he was right that underneath it all was a feeling of contentment.

"Yes."

She tried to mop up with the inadequate tissues available bedside but eventually gave up and did a more thorough job in the bathroom. She was appalled at the splotchy ravaged look in the mirror but refused to dwell on the image; what she wanted most was to be back in Tanner's arms. She returned to the bedroom to find him opening the doors that led to the small ocean-view balcony and watched quietly as he shoved aside the wicker patio furniture and dragged the armchair from the room outside. Then, as though bent on another errand, he returned to the room, scooped up his wife, and made to return to the balcony.

She laughed for the first time in hours. "Put me down! I can't go out there like this. Let me put some clothes on, at least." Somehow a T-shirt—just a T-shirt—didn't seem decent outdoor attire.

"You look beautiful to me," he said after an assessing gaze, but he put her down all the same, his hand pausing to caress the still-bright bottom and prompting a wince and a blush on her other cheeks. He waited while she located and donned a pair of underwear but snatched her up again as she tried to decide which pair of snug-fitting shorts would be the least uncomfortable. "That's good enough. We're two floors above ground level and anybody who sees you will assume you're in a bathing suit anyway." He smothered any other objections with a sound kiss and by the time she could think again, they were on the balcony and it hardly seemed worth arguing about.

She settled back against his chest, keenly aware of the luxury of being in Tanner's arms. The sea breeze scooted sailboats and windsurfers along the water in the semi-protected cove below and ruffled the fringe on an umbrella in the sand, but she was warm enough in Tanner's arms, his legs propped against the railing where they provided a slight windbreak.

"I love you."

"I know. I love you, too. Can you tell me, now, what the problem was?"

She sighed, settling in for the inevitable discussion that would, finally, sweep away all remnants of these last difficult months. There would be no enmity here, but they might both get a little more clarity, she knew. And there were still things she had to tell him to really feel like they had a clean slate. She stalled for a minute, teasing the dark curling hairs of his chest through his shirt. "You weren't paying enough attention to me." Her voice was still a little pouty, and he covered his amusement by brushing auburn hair back to carefully kiss one temple.

"Try again."

She worked for the subtle shift of blame she knew he would be looking for, but it was still a guess. "I felt like you weren't paying enough

attention to me?"

"Tell you what," he offered. "Let me take responsibility for my actions, and you take responsibility for yours." It wasn't much of a bargain for Tanner, she knew. He would take responsibility for his actions anyway. He felt responsibility deeply, and the guilt of having fallen short of her expectations would eat at him. In the coming weeks they would revisit this issue in conversations large and small as he tried to convince himself that the damage had been repaired. It would be very subtle and non-demanding, enough so that she could write it off to solicitousness if she wanted to, but it would still be there: gentle, persistent checks that he had righted his own wrongs and been forgiven. The fact that such attentiveness would salve her own wounds was a bonus.

Her mind on that pleasant path, it took a minute to find the right words to answer his challenge. When she did she was embarrassed to admit the truth in there, the truth that had been there all along. "The problem was that I didn't ask for what I needed because I was afraid of what you might say, afraid it might be 'no.' Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to beg for love and attention?"

He tucked a stray curl behind her ear, a touch that turned into a caress. "I do—though I prefer to think of it as humbling not humiliating. Please, sweetheart, will you give me your love and attention again? I promise to treasure them, and to treasure you." The tears that she thought were gone sprang back unexpectedly. He soothed with words and touches. "I'm sorry, Erin. I've been taking you for granted. I've been neglecting you."

"I don't know. I've felt neglected. I guess I assumed that things would be easier after we got married, that they would stay easy."

"And they haven't," he agreed. There was a minute of silence as they both reflected on the last two-and-a-half years. "Stand up all the way?" he

said with a smile. At her puzzled look he prodded, "Remember that caving trip? I told you it was easy because I thought it would be. And you agreed to come, thinking it was 'stand up all the way.'"

"But it wasn't," she remembered with a watery laugh. "You still owe me for that one."

"No question. We both thought it would be easier than it was. But we made it through anyway. And I still look back on that day as the beginning of something wonderful."

"Yeah, well, I think it was a lot easier on you than it was on me," she teased.

"If you think for a minute that it was easy to watch you struggle with the panic over and over, you're wrong. And the entire time, knowing it was my fault—"

"Hey," she interrupted. "Ancient history. And a good day overall." She took a fortifying breath. "So this is just like one of those blind drops I have to wiggle through alone?"

"You were never alone, Erin. Not in the caves. Not now."

"You're right. I didn't mean it that way. I meant this isn't something you can do for me. The best you can do is hold my hands while I struggle through."

He thought about that a moment, his face softening as he remembered her squeezing down the smallest hole—her anger and fear mixed with resolve and trust. "I never let you fall. I didn't then. I won't now."

"No," she could finally say with confidence. "You won't."

They settled into silence again, and Erin gathered her nerve. "I'm thinking now's a pretty good time to come clean about everything."

Tanner worked to keep his expression neutral despite the renewed sense of dread her tone elicited. *Good Lord, what else could there be?* he wondered. What he said was, "Yep, now's the time. What is it, honey?"

"I talked to a lawyer—"

Chapter Five

"You talked to a lawyer?" He was appalled. How had things gone out of control without him seeing it? She was still in his lap, but he held her away so he could see her face. "You were planning to leave me?"

It was her turn to be appalled. "Of course not. I'd never leave you. I was just getting information, finding out where I stood."

"From a lawyer."

"I wanted to know, if you divorced me, whether I would have a legal right to see Claire." His daughter had become their daughter over the past year, and she would always be Lexi's sister.

"If I divorced you?" he said numbly. He closed his eyes, absorbing the accusation. He was both angry and guilty. How could she conceive of such a thing?

"I'm sorry." Her tearful words cut through the layers of hurt and anger. "I'm sorry for doing it, and I'm sorry for telling you. I just didn't want any secrets between us. I wanted to start fresh." Despite the apology, she was pulling away from him, and it took a firm hand to bring her back against his chest, where she stayed as roiling emotions settled.

"I'm sorry," she repeated.

"I feel like I just got the wind knocked out of me," he said ruefully. "Give me a minute."

She gave him several, and eventually he resettled her on his knee, so he could watch her reaction.

His voice was low and controlled. "Think about how you felt when I said I thought you were leaving me." It didn't take much. Her heart raced with outrage. "Now magnify it threefold and you might begin to understand how angry I am. You've been stewing over this for I don't know how many weeks, but rather than lay the situation out and settle things, you bottle it up, get angry at me, get the

kids tiptoeing around so I almost wonder if they still live there. And all this because you thought I was going to leave you?" He choked past a clogged throat. "Do you think it might have been a good idea to talk to me about that first?"

"Well, yeah, that seems pretty obvious now," came out on a watery chuckle before she plastered herself to his chest again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you." No, neither of them had meant to hurt the other; it was just a natural result of turning away.

He braced himself. "All right, anything else?"

"Well, this morning, at the traffic circle, I had a little problem."

Given the sudden turns their conversations had been taking all day, that statement shouldn't have surprised him, but it did. "The traffic circle?"

"You don't want to know," she predicted ominously, fully aware that wouldn't stop him.

It didn't. With fits and starts she explained how she had whipped up the road after their shopping expedition, stopping at the traffic light that led to the roundabout. It was the first time she'd been the lead vehicle into an empty circle, and she had been very self-conscious, mentally rehearsing the path that would take her out the other side. *On the left, on the left*, she had repeated over and over in her mind, and she had sighed with relief when she was back on straight road. A few blocks later, at the traffic light just short of the hotel, she had still been congratulating herself on handling the challenge so competently, when the driver of the car to her right leaned out to warn her to be more careful; she had just gone through the traffic circle backwards. "At first I thought he had to be wrong because I'm sure I was on the left, but then," she concluded weakly, "I realized that I was probably on the left-hand side of the road, but moving against the traffic. I went around the circle backwards."

"And that's why you were shaking like a leaf when I came in a few minutes later."

"I figured you were probably close enough behind me to have seen it. I knew you'd be furious."

"I'm glad you weren't hurt," he said, trying to blot out the image of her coming face-to-bumper with a car or bus rounding the circle in the other direction.

"Thank you."

"Is there anything else?" he asked mildly.

"Huh?"

"Anything else you want to tell me?"

"Isn't that enough?" she asked with a half-smile that showed as much exhaustion as relief.

A quick replay of the past several hours produced a *mélange* of images—accusations, tears, spankings, anger, divorce lawyers, potential accidents—and he had to admit, "Yeah, that's enough." He would take what relief he could that she was safe in his arms. And he would probably be unable to let her out of his sight again, certainly not on a moped.

"Okay," he said. "I've just got one more bone to pick with you." He waited until her eyes, cloudy with apprehension, met his. "And I want an honest answer." She nodded nervously. "Are you ready?"

For God's sake, just say it, she thought, desperate to put this all behind them. What else could she have done wrong?

"Five minutes?" he asked. "When have we ever made love in five minutes?"

It took a moment for his meaning to register, another for her to realize that, despite the humor in his voice, there was some underlying irritation there as well.

She wrinkled her nose regretfully. "That stung, did it? I didn't mean you in particular."

His eyebrows went up. "Oh? And who else have you been having five-minute sex with lately?" The idea was too funny for words, and he did eventually join in her laughter, but not until after he'd jostled her roughly and growled in her ear.

As the minutes ticked by, Erin, who had been

nuzzling into his chest, became less insistent at burrowing, and her breathing lost the nervous tremor of emotion, finally falling to the deep, even rhythm of sleep. He held her to him and silently reviewed the last 24 hours, then the last several months, determined that they would never find themselves at odds that way again. They had talked out most of it, he thought, but there was always the risk that something had been misunderstood by one or the other. Maybe, even, that she had left some things unsaid because she wasn't sure he—they—could take it.

He looked down at the beach, where waves rearranged the pastel sands in perpetual artistry, ever-changing and beautiful. But he could not afford to let nature take its course with his home life, or they might end up with problems that couldn't be solved with a spanking and a cuddle.

His own breathing caught at that, a staccato hitch that roused Erin from her light doze. He forced his breathing regular again despite the drowsy, admiring smile aimed upward to him. "Hey, there," she said as though seeing an old friend.

It pulled a smile from him. "Hey, there, yourself. How's my girl?" he asked as his hand caressed her panty-clad bottom.

"Hungry. Are you ever going to feed me?" she asked playfully.

"I'll feed you," he teased, mimicking her response to Declan's similar request, "I'll feed you to the fishes." Standing, he swung her seaward, safe in his arms, toward the balcony railing. The mock-throw was just unsettling enough to have her clutching his neck before she dissolved into giggles.

Wearing the sage dress was not a calculated move, but it warmed her to see that it still had its old effect on Tanner.

"I love this dress on you," he said as he mated the fasteners at the top of her zipper. "It does

wonderful things to your eyes."

"You can't even see my eyes from there," she protested with a laugh that faded into an appreciative moan as he began to nuzzle her half-exposed shoulder from behind, then moved up to kiss her neck. She was breathing hard by the time she gathered her wits enough to be able to say, "Don't you dare leave marks, Tanner," even as she leaned into his insistent mouth. "I don't have anything to cover them up with."

"Ha!" he countered with feigned indignation. "And did I get any credit for self-restraint earlier?" he asked, then answered his own question. "No, I did not. Ever the gentleman," he mocked himself as he donned a suit coat, "I try to minimize the lady's discomfort and embarrassment, but I do it so well that the effort gets overlooked. Well, I'll remember that next time." En route to the door, he landed a solid smack to her bottom, eliciting a yelp and a glare.

She was stung more by his words than the swat. It wasn't like him to tease her about a spanking, certainly not like him to minimize her discomfort afterwards. "Self restraint, was it? That hurts, buster, and it will tomorrow."

Recognizing the budding resentment in her voice, he stopped in the act of locking the door and wrapped her in a quick, gentle hug. His lips close to her ear he said softly, "The restraint I was talking about was making sure there wouldn't be any marks where they'd show in a bathing suit, sweetheart. I wanted to make an impression on you, not the rest of the island." He met her eyes, saw the realization dawn in them, then the flush of embarrassment as she played out the possibility of bruises or—God help her—vivid handprints on her thighs.

"Thank you, kind sir. How very noble of you. Ever the gentleman," she agreed. No resentment anymore. The words were said with a mixture of relief and indulgence, and she leaned into the comfort of his shoulder as they moved down the

hallway. He would always take care of her, she reminded herself, unaware she'd voiced the thought until he answered.

"Always." It was confirmation of a vow he'd made a long time before.

He did eventually feed her, an early dinner that tantalized as much as it satisfied, at a lovely little restaurant in a converted 18th century house. It was named, improbably enough, "Once Upon a Table," and she made an effort to notice her surroundings—including creaking floors and antique lighting fixtures that bespoke authenticity—so she could be dutifully impressed, but she really had eyes only for Tanner. She delighted in his attention, remarkably at ease with the caress of his hands and eyes, entranced by the same gestures she had vigorously rejected over the previous couple of days.

He kidded her about ordering a bottle of wine, or even a split, knowing she rarely drank, and was surprised at her response.

"Aren't they supposed to have rum drinks with little paper umbrellas and everything?"

"No, you're thinking of the Caribbean," he chuckled. "That's a lot further south. I'll get you drunk if you want to, though."

She disarmed him with a smile and the words, "Order what you like. I'll drink it, but I'm warning you: if I were any more relaxed, I'd be comatose." He could see the truth in her eyes, slumberous and unguarded. Her brief doze had done nothing to dispel the aura created by a sound spanking, a relaxed buzz that for Erin was matched by a glass or two of alcohol.

It might make an interesting experiment to see what the combination would do, but he didn't want her nodding off over dessert, not with the plans he had for later. "Just water, then," he told the waiter, who had been standing at patient attention.

The room was dim, the light coming mainly from wall sconces, augmented by small candles at the table. Erin leaned forward to catch the splash of light on her menu. Tanner was indifferent toward the menu but was fascinated by the play of flickering candlelight in her eyes. It was a quiet meal, the silences easy and intimate, the touches across and under the table reassuring. By unspoken agreement, they resisted the urge to tackle any of the serious subjects that had erupted earlier, reveling instead in the comfort of each other's company, remembering and rediscovering the ease that had once been there.

It was not until they were headed back to the hotel after sharing a piece of Black Forest cake that either of them approached the problem head-on. "Let me try something here," Tanner began, his arm around her as they walked. "There're lots of things we need to work through, for sure. But let's pick a starting place. If there were one thing you could change, what would it be?" The question opened a world of possibilities. What would he do if she wanted him to step back from the project? Even leaving Bermuda early would not come without financial hardship. At the moment, he'd have promised her anything. "It's your anniversary. What can I do to make you happy? Do you want to go home? It's done. Anything."

"Anything?" There was a brief, teasing glint to her eye that he had almost despaired of seeing.

"Anything," he confirmed.

"Smile for me."

The tenderness in his eyes was far from a smile, but she waited, patient, sure it would be worthwhile. He began to smile, but it was hard, looking into her now-serious eyes, remembering the wariness he had seen there so recently. Then, with a thought, all his self-consciousness was gone, and he grinned with the ease of a man who had not spent the last 36 hours in mortal struggle with his other half. More relieved than she'd have thought

possible, Erin let her own delight show. The smile led to a chuckle, the humor easy, natural, and warm.

"You went somewhere else," she said perceptively. "Where was it?"

He laughed again, snuggling her tight before tipping her back to kiss the tip of her nose. "I was thinking about the bathroom war."

She snickered in memory. "You have no idea how many times I had to refold and reposition so that there was no lump under the rug. And that darn cardboard roll." She had struggled to keep it from reclaiming its shape under the lightweight rug and had considered spiriting it out of the bathroom in her pocket, but that violated her sense of fair play. Instead, she had secured it to the floor with a half-dozen strips of adhesive tape from the first aid kit. Perseverance and attention to detail.

"As I said at the time: you are the champion."

The walk back to the hotel was a sensory experience: the rough woolen nap of Tanner's suit coat on her hands and cheek, the pervasive fishy smell of saltwater coaxed up by the breeze, the very proper dress of the locals. She was disappointed not to see any of the famed Bermuda shorts on the police or businessmen, but it was too early in the year. Despite the clamminess of the afternoon, it was still a mite early for shorts season, according to the guidebook. In fact, the few people she had seen wearing the nearly-knee-length shorts were clearly tourists. No Bermudian worth the name would be seen in the garish plaids she had witnessed; nor would they accent them with T-shirts from the Hard Rock Café. Americans all, she was sure.

They strolled past a number of boutiques, lazily window shopping and planning a return stop before leaving the island. English tweed, Irish linen, and Waterford crystal all beckoned, and they imagined

what they might buy, and for whom. Rum cake for his office, they decided; a set of coins for Claire, their budding numismatist; maybe a sextant for Declan, if the price was right.

They were standing in front of a closed Trimmingham's when Erin realized that neither of them was looking at the crystal on display. They were each looking at the other in the reflection of the plate glass. "Well, you gave me what I wanted most: a smile. Turnabout's fair play. What would you like for your anniversary?"

There was that smile again, and this time he had not gone far to call it up. "I'm guessing it's not a crystal goblet," she said with a slightly nervous laugh. He shook his head in agreement, still watching her reflection in the window.

"You. Naked. On a bed." The words bounced off the plate glass.

"Oh, I think that can be arranged."

He turned to her finally, gently taking both hands. "Yes?" He searched her eyes for any sign of uncertainty, cautious of pushing too fast. There was none.

She glanced to the concrete sidewalk. "I don't see a bed here."

"Fortunately, I know where one is."

The remainder of the walk back was short, rich with anticipation.

She met his eyes across the room, held them until she felt the tinder flash. She reached back to unhook her necklace and set it gently on the bureau, her heated gaze barely interrupted by a blink. She stepped out of her heels and shed her stockings in the same slow, methodical fashion, and still he stood, frozen in the act of removing his tie, arrested by the quiet drama taking place six feet away. "Me..." she said as the sage dress puddled around her ankles. "Naked..." she continued as her bra and panties joined the small pile of cast-offs on

the floor. "On a bed," she finished as she turned down the covers and slid in.

That last move might have been more seductive if she hadn't winced at the abrasion and flipped onto her tummy with a whimper, but Tanner's low, throaty chuckle said he was still in the moment. "I don't think I've ever seen a checklist reviewed with such style," he observed. "I believe you've got all the relevant preparations." The tie finally slid out of his collar to be negligently draped over a chair.

In two steps he had kicked off his shoes and joined Erin on the bed, unable to keep his hands off her for another instant. "Yeah, this is definitely what I was looking for," he said hoarsely, one hand gliding along the familiar curves of her torso.

She propped her head up with one hand, the other tugging gently at his belt. "You've got on way too many clothes for this to work out, you know." His mouth, drawn to the curve of her neck, roamed there until she groaned, giving up her pose of suave sophistication. "Clothes...off...now," she insisted. Her fingers, clumsy with the effort of releasing his belt, moved to his shirt. The buttons were perhaps a more intricate challenge, but they yielded more easily to brute force. Tanner finally interceded, saving himself several buttons, and the rest of his clothes hit the floor in an untidy heap.

Her hands were in constant motion, appraising his body with an almost desperate urgency, a ferocious need for...something. "Erin, Erin, relax. Slow down. I'm not going anywhere. We've got all night, honey. Shoot, we have three days if we want. No need to rush." Her snide comment about five-minute lovemaking had found its mark. His own hands moved slowly, gently capturing her face, caressing her jaw line, the strong, stubborn structure of her countenance. He could feel her resist his urging. He was half-tempted to go along with her, fast and hard and rough. It had a certain satisfaction of its own, and he had undoubtedly jump-started that mood with his bold suggestion on

the street, then frustrated it with the slow walk back.

But rapprochement was a delicate process. And as much as he had tried to substitute duty and responsibility for attention, he did not want to substitute lust for lovemaking. "Slow down," he repeated. "We'll get there." Her muscles trembled with the effort, but she made her hands stop moving. They rested on his hips, familiar and comfortable, but no longer directing his movement.

"Let me get this straight," she said dryly. "What you wanted for your anniversary was to have me naked on the bed, where you intended to—what?—do nothing?"

He smiled. "I wouldn't call this nothing."

No, she would have admitted if she could have spoken; it was not nothing. It was a slow, thorough kiss. His lips slanted against hers, his tongue a gentle tease against her lips. When she acquiesced too quickly, trying to take his tongue into her mouth, he retreated slightly, taking patient possession of her lower lip as though it represented all the known world. She became dimly aware that he had control of her hands. They had shifted from his hips, where they had resumed their insistent prodding, and were instead trapped against the bed on either side of her head.

She was immobile under him and, perforce, gave up any effort to hurry him along, relaxing into the kiss with a sigh. He tasted sweetly of chocolate and cherries, with the tang of coffee, very different from the minty-toothpaste taste of him fresh from his normal bedtime routine. The sex was always good, if not frequent enough for either of them, but there was a certain amount of pressure from outside influences that tended to constrict. The occasional days of seclusion they had managed during the first year of marriage were mere memories since Lexi was born. And Saturday mornings lolling around in pajamas were scarce indeed, given the complicated lives of two pre-

adolescents, let alone Tanner's work schedule. Sex had, by necessity, suffered some in the scheduling, she thought wryly. It was rare indeed to have the time, energy, and privacy for extended foreplay. It would be a shame to squander it. "Slowing down," she said dreamily, when she finally had free use of her mouth again. "Slowing down."

He levered himself up on his elbows, studying her face with smug satisfaction. Most of his body weight still pinned her to the bed, a heavy, comforting solidness she enjoyed, but he had let go of her hands. They lay limply on the pillow. When she began to touch him again, it was not with the urgent demand he had quieted. She stroked and touched his face in rediscovered fascination, drew him down for another languid kiss.

His hands began their own explorations, tracing the line of her ribs, ending in a gentle capture of her breast. The desire was thick between them, a palpable reality that built moment by moment. They would get back to urgency, but it would be a circuitous, interesting trip. He laved one breast, then blew gently against the still-wet skin for the pleasure of seeing her squirm. She made a noise well back in her throat—half-whimper, half-squeak—and twisted slightly to bring his mouth back to her flesh. He blew across the damp skin again before settling in on the other breast, nipple quite erect in anticipation, to give it the same devoted attention.

"I love that noise," he said with a chuckle of purely male appreciation as he moved up to her mouth again.

She was instantly self-conscious. "What noise?"

"You make this really sweet sound when your body wants to give in to me, but your mind is still trying to run the show." She wouldn't like the thought of that, he knew, but that didn't make it any less true. "And when you make that sound, I know you're about to give it up and let me have my way with you."

"I was willing to let you have your way with me when we came in the room," she said with a laugh.

His hand moved across her belly, soothing, exciting, reassuring all at once. "No, when we came in the room, you were willing to have your way with me. This is a little bit different."

"But nice."

"Oh, yeah, very nice. You love it when I take control in bed. You find it terribly sexy."

She flushed pink. "I—I—I never said that." She tucked her head against his chest.

"But you do. I can tell. Sometimes you start something just so I'll finish it. You've always been that way. It's one of the things I love about you."

She struggled with the thought, but Tanner's hands—gentle and persistent and oh-so-talented—kept pulling her back to the elemental pleasure of being touched. Was he right? Did she really want him to be in control? To, in some sense, subdue her? No, she corrected herself automatically. That's not it at all. It's just that I'm not sexually aggressive. I'm fine with being in control of things in my life. I just like to give myself up to him in bed. But there's nothing wrong with that, she told herself.

"Nope, there's nothing wrong at all," he murmured, and she wondered whether he was answering her thoughts or if she had spoken some of it out loud. His hands continued to move, teasing and massaging, prompting her to arch toward him in a craving for more contact. He answered her by moving further down her body, trapping her in place. He lay his face against her stomach, felt her squirm against the rasp of beard stubble, then turned his head to lay a series of kisses across her abdomen, eliciting a breathy sigh.

He used to do that all the time, he remembered. It had begun in the early days of her pregnancy with Lexi as a sort of a tribute to the life protected inside. Later, as her belly swelled, he would sometimes follow the gesture with long

conversations with its unseen inhabitant, sharing observations about her mother that would have been quite inappropriate if the child had been able to understand any of it. It had been a way to acknowledge Erin's hopes and fears, reassure her of his understanding, and insert himself firmly as one point in the three-way relationship.

"Oh, God!" he said jerking away suddenly. "I forgot to call my mother."

Erin snorted indelicately and took a feeble swing at him. "Nice line, Mr. Romantic. Does that work with all the girls?" Torn between amusement and indignation, she wasn't sure which would win.

"No, no, that's not—oh, Erin, I'm sorry." He climbed her body quickly and took her in his arms again, hugging her tightly, releasing her just enough to drop kisses on her forehead. "I told you yesterday that I would call the house so you'd know the kids were all right, and I forgot about it completely. Do you want me to call now? I will."

Amusement won out. "Well," she said, running her foot up and down his leg in playful caress, "I was thinking about the children, but—" She tugged him back as he reached for the phone. "But," she repeated, "I was thinking that this is probably the first time we've made love since our honeymoon that I haven't had to keep one ear cocked for a crying baby or a nightmare or a telephone call saying, 'Mom, can you come and get me?' It's nice."

He relaxed into her shoulder, largely reassured. "I just—I just didn't want you to worry. That's all. I'm sure everything's fine, and Mom has the number here so she can contact us if she needs to, but I said I'd call yesterday, and I didn't."

"That's why I called last night."

He chuckled after a beat. "Good for you. How're they doing? Driving Mom up the wall yet?" He settled down on one elbow, still shaking his head ruefully.

"Well, I could tell you all about chocolate pudding finger painting and who won the Stratego

game...but we were in the middle of something far more interesting. Or at least I thought so." Her foot eased up his leg again, a tantalizing pressure that drew him closer, nudging thoughts of home quickly away.

"More interesting, yes. Definitely." The words were soft, almost negligent, around kisses and nips to her neck. It didn't take them long to pick up where they left off. The desire had not been quenched at the interruption, only banked. With a quick, fortifying breath, it was burning at full strength.

It was a long time later, her mind numbed by the emotional impact of the day and her body drained from its enthusiastic conclusion, that Erin, under the warm blanket of Tanner's body, murmured, "That was a much better choice than a smile. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Well, you can share my wish. How 'bout that?" he asked with what little energy remained.

Yeah, she thought with mingled delight and satisfaction, *how 'bout that?*

Chapter Six

Their third day on the island dawned without any of the complications of the previous two, easy and breezy and comfortable. In bed and on the beach, they capered like children on an unexpected holiday. Over lunch, they agreed that they really ought to do a couple of touristy things, so that they had something to talk about with family and friends. It was one thing to spend their entire honeymoon in bed; an anniversary trip should probably have more to show for it than a fully satisfied libido, Tanner agreed reluctantly. Erin volunteered that she knew just the thing. Off they went on their sputtering motorbikes.

The first time they missed it, they got all the way to the Maritime Museum before Erin admitted they'd gone too far. "Oh, good," Tanner teased, as they considered their options in the parking lot. Westward lay about 700 miles of ocean, but he had been studying it as though trying to figure out how to surmount that problem. "Maybe this would be easier if you told me what we were looking for."

Scowling, Erin consulted her guidebook, keeping the page tilted away from inquiring eyes. "It should be right as we leave Somerset Island just before we get back to the mainland." Then, less certainly, "Could you tell when we left the mainland?" Bermuda comprises more than a hundred coral islands scattered about, but the largest half-dozen curve into a fishhook, with the main island forming most of the shank. The road followed the curve of the hook, but she had been unaware that they'd crossed any bridges, so how could they be three islands away from the main island? With a look at the lowering sky, she asked "Or would you rather just go to the museum?"

"Rather than what?" he laughed. "I have no idea what we're looking for that we missed."

Reluctant to ruin the surprise, she finally admitted, "A drawbridge."

"A drawbridge? Like at a castle?" he asked skeptically. He knew the island had a couple of beautiful 18th and 19th century forts, built against some imagined Spanish invasion, but nothing that would have had a drawbridge.

"No, a drawbridge that lets boats through." She demonstrated with her hands, putting them side-by-side, then pivoting at the wrist to make a gap.

"Oh!" he said in pleased surprise then leaned over for a quick kiss. Bridges and dams were always an attraction for him, stirring some boyhood fascination with the human drive to conquer nature. He'd been known to detour a hundred miles to "show the children" a bridge or other engineering feat. It was sweet that she would make it a point to indulge him that way.

They made a second pass. The "Entering Southampton Parish" sign might just as well have said "Missed It Again, Idiot." She tooted what passed for a horn on the motorbike and they pulled off the road to confer. "I don't know how we missed it. It's got to be on this road. Should we give it up and go back to the hotel? At least it's dry there." Rain, which had been threatening for twenty minutes, had begun to fall.

"Nah. This is nothing. You're not going to melt, are you?" He reached across to knock off a raindrop that dangled, tear-like, from her nose. "Besides, we've come halfway across the Atlantic. We wouldn't want to return home without seeing all the significant sites."

They turned back again, determined not to miss it. That determination lasted until the squall hit, drenching them to the skin in a matter of seconds. What they had first thought was rain was no more than sprinkles. This was rain. Setting aside the difficulty of navigating a two-wheeled vehicle on slick pavement and the needling discomfort of wind-blown rain, there was the very real problem that visibility wasn't much beyond arm's length. They ditched the bikes roadside and headed for the

dubious shelter of a small copse. By the time they reached it, both were gasping for breath, laughing, and struggling not to slip.

"Well," Erin said when she could finally talk again. "I'm thinking the Maritime Museum might have been a better choice."

"Yeah, whose idea was this?" Tanner asked on a laugh, then reached over to run his hand, squeegee-like over her face. They couldn't possibly get any wetter, so he took her in his arms and they settled in to watch the deluge. There were worse ways to spend time.

Elsewhere on the island, the rain would be caught up in rooftop cisterns, prized as the only source of fresh water. Here it, quite literally, went to ground, sheeting off the road to be absorbed by the lush flora or draining into the surrounding sea. Nothing was very far from the sea in Bermuda, Tanner mused, wondering what it would be like to be so open and vulnerable to the whims of weather. Not twenty feet from where they stood under a dripping tree, a small tongue of turquoise water stretched beneath the two-lane road and lapped at a seawall. There was no crash of waves, a combination of the breaking effect of coral reefs that ringed the island and the irregular shoreline nearby. It made for a raw and wonderful world, however treacherous it might have been for generations of sailors. For now, for them, it was a healing place, one that let them find each other, touch each other, hold each other again.

Tanner leaned heavily against the tree, smiling into Erin's wet and scraggly hair.

"Tell me something," Erin said several minutes later.

"Hmm?"

"You wouldn't really have laid into me there in the parking lot of the marina yesterday, would you?"

"No?" he asked doubtfully.

"No," she said, trying to convince them both.

"I think I'd have done almost anything to break that stalemate. Tell me this: if I hadn't gone after you yesterday, pinned you to the wall and made you tell me what was going on, what are the chances we'd be here right now?"

"What? In the rain?"

He growled and nipped her ear. "No, looking for the famed drawbridge of Bermuda, you smart aleck. You know what I mean. If you'd gone back to the hotel alone, and I'd gone diving, we'd both be miserable now."

"Yes," she admitted. "I'm glad that's not what happened."

"So'm I. Then there's really no point in playing out all the other possible conclusions, right?"

"It embarrassed me."

"I was embarrassed by your behavior." It was said without rancor, without heat, yet she flushed with guilt.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you. I just wanted to get away."

"And I didn't mean to embarrass you. I just didn't intend for you to get away. I hoped a brief reminder would be enough. I'm glad to see it was."

"How can you always be so darn sure of yourself?" she asked, half-sulking.

"It's called arrogance, my love, and I think they hand it out with the Y-chromosome."

A bubble of laughter told him he'd read the situation just right, but as she settled back into her accustomed place, she corrected him, "No, not arrogance. It's confidence."

The rain continued to pour from fast-moving clouds. "But you wouldn't really do it," she persisted.

"Is that a question or an answer?" he parried.

"Both." After a long pause she finally prodded, "You're truly not going to answer me? Come on, you wouldn't really do that in public, would you?" A note of genuine worry had snuck into her voice.

"There should never be the need."

"Argh! You can be so aggravating!" Her shoulders twitched in a half-hearted effort to pull away, but she resettled against his chest when Tanner did not immediately acquiesce.

"So can you, sweetheart. The difference is I have an automatic remedy for you. Look, I know what you want me to say, and I'm not going to say it. What I will tell you is that I always want to keep our private affairs private. As long as you let it stay private, it will. Now, are we really arguing about a single swat yesterday, honey? Not about what happened in the room—we're arguing about one swat in the parking lot?"

"No," she said, confused and vulnerable. "We're not arguing. I'm just—"

The rain began to let up.

"You're just what?"

"It's been a long time since you did that," she said obliquely. "It leaves me with a lot of funny feelings." Her hand went to her stomach as though calming butterflies, a clear indication of where some of those feelings lay.

"What kind of feelings?" The words were gentle, as were the hands that soothed her.

She turned herself in his arms, settling her back against his chest and linking his hands together across her stomach. It was still raining hard, but it was not the deluge they had fled five minutes earlier. Visibility was much better. She could see the road clearly and the little bridge where it arced across seawater. "Rain's letting up some," she observed.

"What kind of feelings?" he repeated, snuggling her closer to his chest and settling his chin on her head.

"Very confusing ones," she admitted with a half laugh. "Part of me wanted to kill you. To have touched me like that where others could see...I was embarrassed and angry, and I wanted to kill you. And, at the same time, another part of my brain was saying, 'Oh, there you are. I remember you,

the guy that spanks. Where've you been?' And that part of me wasn't thinking about the fact that we were in a parking lot or that people were coming and going. I was just—well, I was just so glad to have you back."

"I was never gone." He felt the silence as a gentle reproach. "But I'm sorry that you felt like I was."

At the time, she had felt a bewildering mix of fury, resentment, and security, and she hadn't known what to do. So she had done what he told her to. That was usually a safe course, and it had paid off again. She released a soft sigh of contentment.

"But you wouldn't really have spanked me in a parking lot, would you?"

He chuckled and plucked at the wet cotton over her belly. "I love you, Erin," he said by way of answer. "Look, it's stopped raining." Maybe stopped was an exaggeration, but the torrential downpour had eased to mere rain, and a sudden shaft of brightness gave the promise of sunshine. "We've got to be within a half mile of that bridge. Shall we hoof it or take the bikes?" He tugged her out from under the tree they had been leaning against.

"Did I mention that it's a really small drawbridge?"

"You don't want to see it after all?"

"No, it's not that," she said with a helpless laugh. "I think I might have oversold it. It's just a little bridge. Its claim to fame is that it's the smallest drawbridge in the world. And I think that's it." She pointed to the road thirty feet beyond where they'd left the motorbikes—exactly where Tanner had noted the tongue of water beneath the road. A brick bridge spanned the small stretch of water. As they had waited out the storm, Erin's eyes had repeatedly settled on the peculiar break in the middle of the bridge, where a swoop of chain linked the two brick walls. It was oddly incongruous, the short length of insubstantial metal with the solid

masonry on both sides. She had considered and dismissed a number of ideas: perhaps it was meant to provide a place for children to sit while fishing; perhaps the weight of additional bricks was somehow unsafe; perhaps such a break made the bridge less susceptible to flood damage. Then she realized with a flash of surprise that she had been looking at Somerset Bridge, reputed to be the smallest drawbridge in the world. She had imagined that meant a single-lane bridge, perhaps wood, with rope and pulley controls. Not this.

No wonder they had missed it the first two times. Maybe it was something to see when open, but closed it was wholly unremarkable, a break in the roadway that could pass for an expansion joint on an interstate highway back home. Tanner hung over the side of the bridge to study it then climbed down the small slope to examine it from below while Erin frowned, trying to form an apology. They could have gone snorkeling or museum touring or souvenir shopping, but this was her foolish choice based on a single line in a guidebook. It was singularly unspectacular, she thought.

Tanner's expression, though, was alive with interest. "I've never seen anything like it. It looks as though it opens maybe a foot and a half, which is probably just enough for a sailboat mast. I'm guessing it saves them from going around the point, but I don't think I've ever seen a drawbridge built just to accommodate small sailboats." He held his hands at the imagined width, barely wider than when Erin had mimed the drawbridge operation for him. "I don't suppose they do it under sail. That's not much margin for error. Still," he mused, "that'd take a lot of control even with an auxiliary motor or paddles. That's a pretty small gap."

"The famed Smallest Drawbridge in the World," she observed with a serious regard that would have been more appropriate for a study of the Mona Lisa or the Constitution.

"Maybe 'famed' is a little too strong."

Erin began to giggle first, but soon both were shaking with laughter, holding each other up and, eventually, pushing each other out of the road as a lorry teetered toward the outlying island.

"I can't believe you followed me all the way out here to look at a gap in the road," she finally gasped.

"Hey, you followed me into a cave in West Virginia, if you'll recall."

"Oh, I recall, all right."

He ruffled her hair, spraying water on them both. "And I know there are not too many who would. Fewer still who would follow me back out." His hands smoothed out the collar of her blouse in an unconsciously proprietary gesture. "An afternoon getting drenched to look at a mythical drawbridge seems like a fair trade."

"Not mythical," she protested. "Just ...elusive."

The rumble of an approaching pastel bus interrupted their kiss.

The drawbridge did merit a couple of photographs—if only for the chuckle factor—but they both agreed that the next day would be for more conventional tourist activities. A breakfast horseback ride and a brief foray into souvenir shops were capped off by a tour of a commercial cave. ("You'll love it. I promise. They've got handrails, paved walkways, and everything. I bet your feet never touch dirt.") Over lunch, Tanner suggested they take one of the glass-bottom boat tours. Erin's counter-suggestion was windsurfing.

Which is why she spent much of the afternoon being battered by salt, water, and wind.

Windsurfing looked so smooth and effortless from their balcony. The brightly-colored triangles of sail, their bowed booms pivoting to catch the wind—what could be more fun? Well, she told herself grimly as she clung to the board, watching was definitely more fun. She'd inhaled almost as much

seawater as air on that last fall, but her burning eyes bothered her more than the coughing did. She hung feebly onto the board, rubbing her eyes, until she knew she had the energy to haul her body back onto the board and her bearings enough that she wouldn't immediately fall off again. Her eyes stung. No matter how tightly she closed her eyes, they burned the instant she touched the water, burned like they were open wounds. Swimming in the ocean back home was not as painful as this.

Of course, the ocean back home didn't have the same haunting range of colors either—celadon to deep aqua, with a thousand discrete shades in between. What was called Bermuda blue wasn't so much a color as an array of colors. At home, on the mid-Atlantic coast she was familiar with, the sea was limited to two looks: green-and-murky or dark-and-impenetrable. At home, you couldn't see twenty feet down where small schools of fish darted around, oblivious to the rent-by-the-hour torture she was enduring at the surface. She had admired the seascape on the flight in and again from the lighthouse, but it was even more striking up close to realize that she could see straight down to the sandy bottom of the sea. It was crystal clear. How much of that crystal clarity comes from salt crystals? She groused silently, and then finally laughed at herself.

She could hardly blame her own awkwardness on sea salt. In truth, she had just not realized how much of windsurfing was balance. She would never have considered surfing on a surfboard, but the presence of a mast and a sail fooled her into thinking it was sailing, not surfing. Sailing, she had done before. Sailing was capturing the wind and controlling its effects.

This was not sailing.

This was a completely different experience, and her fragile sense of balance wreaked havoc. If she didn't keep her knees flexed, if she didn't lean at the right precarious angle, or if she overcorrected

for what seemed to be leaning too far—plop!—she was back on the water, sometimes with the sail and mast on top of her. The board was utterly unforgiving. She rubbed at her eyes some more, determined to at least be able to open them if not actually remove the salt.

"How're you doing, babe?" came Tanner's voice from behind, and she pasted on a smile before turning.

"Fine," she lied. "You had a good run there." He had, what she'd seen of it. He'd been scooting along the surface, had even managed an apparently deliberate turn as Erin had struggled to get on her board and then fallen off without even getting the mast clear of the water.

He'd missed her latest fall but assumed it had been like all the others, unsettling. "You about done in there?" he asked sympathetically. "How about snorkeling? I bet that would be more fun."

"Probably," she grumbled. "But, by God, I'm going to get this."

"Is that determination or thick-headedness?" She bared her teeth in a growl that left him laughing.

It was five tries later when she finally managed to pull it all together and discover the magical combination of wind, advice, luck, and practice. "You're doing it! You're doing it! You're sailing!" she heard from behind. And it wasn't just Tanner's voice. The young instructor who had taught them the basics was back on the beach cheering her on enthusiastically. When she was finally dumped again into the water, she had moved nearly thirty yards across the aquamarine surface. Not much compared to some of the others, perhaps, but ten times more than she'd managed on any previous attempt. She was rubbing her eyes and grinning when Tanner approached, his strong freestyle eating up the distance between them. "You did it!" he repeated as he grabbed on the other side of the board. "That was super!"

"It was!" she agreed on a laugh. And now this was something she'd never have to do again because she'd proven to herself she could, if she wanted to. She leaned across the board and kissed him. "And, now, I think I shall go out in a blaze of glory. If you want to save me the ignominy of falling off another dozen times as I try to get this damn thing back to the beach, you'll take it in yourself. Tell you what: I'll race you."

She was several strokes away before she heard the sharp bark of laughter and "Oh, so now you want to play, do you?" When she looked back, she was pleased to see him gamely pulling the sail from the water. Breaststroke kept her face out of the brine but slowed her enough that Tanner slipped by her on a breeze and was waiting for her in knee-deep water. She got a consolation kiss for her loss, the sailboard to wrangle with, and an affectionate swat to move her on her way. The smile never left her face. Tanner started back out to retrieve his own board, left bobbing in the light chop. "Hurry up," she called after him. "I'm not finished playing with you."

She was gratified to see that threw him off stride. But he did hurry.

They spent most of the rest of the afternoon in the hotel room, playing and lounging...and playing some more. When they finally came up for air (and food), it was to realize they were on the last evening before returning to the States. Tanner headed off for a long-delayed shower as Erin sorted through the trinkets and presents they had picked up throughout their stay, pulling out receipts for Customs and setting aside the souvenirs they would want to pack in their carryon luggage. By the time the shower went off, she was nearly finished the preliminary packing, but she still needed a container for Claire's coins. None of the lightweight paper or plastic bags would stand up to the double-handful of

coins they'd collected and traded for.

She surveyed the loose coins spread across the bureau. It had taken some convincing before Tanner had accepted her opinion that Claire would prefer a large sampling of circulated coins rather than the silver proof dollar he had admired. So they had culled through their pocket change, separating their U.S. and Bermudian coins, and paid careful attention to their transactions at cash registers, mentioning repeatedly that they were interested in a variety of coins for their daughter who had never been to Bermuda. Time and again, clerks had tolerantly traded dollars, quarters, dimes, and pennies until Erin had a pretty good range of years and designs.

Tanner had picked up their most unusual piece from the little canteen at their hotel. Just as in the U.S., odd denominations were relegated to some nether world in cash drawers that didn't include enough compartments, and the clerk had dug under his bill drawer to produce a fifty-cent piece. She picked it up to examine it again.

Tanner came up behind her, still moist from his shower, and joined her study. The front of the coin showed a very young Queen Elizabeth, but the reverse was the sort of busy design Claire would love. The seal Erin recognized from the Bermuda flag. It was a shield, held by an animal she could only guess was a lion, and on the shield was a ship being tossed about in waves. In a banner across the bottom, where it might have said "E Pluribus Unum" or "In God We Trust" on a U.S. coin, were the words "Quo Fata Ferunt." She reached back for half-forgotten high school Latin. "The motto—quo fata ferunt—what does it mean? In which fate goes? Where destiny has led?" she guessed.

"Close. It's usually translated as 'Whither the Fates lead us.' Same idea, though." He caught her from behind in a gentle hug, resting his chin on her shoulder as they both studied the coin. The money had been reassuringly familiar, the same

denominations, even coins comparable in size to what was familiar. There were no tricky conversions that often leave tourists feeling like they're using play money. Yet even in the familiar handling of currency, the place left its mark: *quo fata ferunt*.

Something had led them there, and Erin was willing to give fate, or the Fates, or the Easter Bunny the credit. It was easy to be generous when she felt so full and satisfied and loved. "Thank you for this trip, Tanner. It's just been so perfect. I think I'm even glad we didn't come here on our honeymoon after all, because now it seems magical. Maybe it wouldn't if we'd been here before, done this all before."

"Well, now," he chuckled, "we still haven't done it all. Never did make it to scuba diving. Think we'll have to come back next year for that. Don't you?"

The last morning, as they finished packing and prepared to return to the real world of children and traffic and schedules and deadlines, he watched her put on a front, chatty and bright, though she chewed on her lip whenever she turned away.

"Something's troubling you," he finally said.

"Um, no, not really."

"Something's troubling you," he persisted.

"It's just that...Well, I'm feeling a little like Cinderella—all my dreams come true in a heartbeat—and I'm thinking that the coach is going to turn into a pumpkin when we land. I'm not going to find a bunch of mice scurrying around, am I?" He acknowledged the weak attempt at humor with a chuckle and the underlying fear with a touch.

"Be the squeaky wheel," he urged. "Tell me what you need."

"What if what I need is for you to be able to understand without my having to tell you?"

It was a teasing and provocative question, so he answered it in the same spirit. "Then we'll have to settle into a routine that includes either more

alcohol or more spanking. Sort of a prophylactic." It was a tantalizing prospect. She blushed and hid her face against his chest for a moment, gathering her thoughts.

She toyed with the buttons in his shirt, struggling to put a positive spin on her anxiety. "This has been great these past several days. It feels like back at the beginning when we both listened better to each other. I guess we were both more attentive, more attuned to each other."

"Less complacent?"

"Maybe that's it."

"Well, if there's one thing that you've convinced me of, it's that I'd better be less complacent," he said ruefully.

She fell silent, trying to see how their new lessons would translate once they crossed the Atlantic for home. He eased the moment, drawing her hands and eyes to his. "Okay, here it is. This is a new beginning, not an interlude. I'm not going to forget what we learned and I will pay better attention. From you I want a commitment that you'll be a little more upfront, too. You'll tell me when there's a problem. And, if you think I'm not listening, you'll tell me again."

"I'm not on your project team, you know. I'm not doing weekly progress reports," she said cautiously.

"No, you're my wife and you're doing a daily one," he teased gently. "And don't let me catch you slacking. You won't like the results of your 'performance review.'" It was hard to take the threat seriously with that smile on his face. And his hands where they were. But she strove for a serious response despite her own drifting attention.

"And what if my performance does not meet your expectations?"

"Close, continuous supervision until we've corrected all deficiencies." It didn't seem like a terrible fate.

"Squeaky wheel," she agreed uncertainly.

"That's not a cop-out saying that you should have to badger me into paying attention. That's not what I mean, and I hope it's not the way it sounds. I just mean that I've never intentionally dismissed you, the house, the kids—any of it. If you think I am, please red-flag it for me. Okay?"

"Okay." He studied her eyes, trying to read the truth in them. What he saw must have reassured him, because the next thing he did was smile—that killer smile that she still thought ought to come with a warning—and enveloped Erin in a tight hug.

Several weeks later, he knew the message had penetrated well when he returned home late to find Erin already abed. He felt a twinge of envy, as this was his third late night in a row struggling with what everyone hoped was the final debug of the control program.

Leaving Erin in the darkened bedroom, he crossed to the bathroom for his habitual pre-bed shower. As he brushed his teeth, bleary-eyed, he caught something unusual in the mirror's reflection. Scribbled in what was clearly the children's crayon soap was a message, bright red against the stark white porcelain bathtub:

Squeak!

(Wake me, please.)

He smiled around the toothbrush.

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