

Love's a Beach

By

Katrina Devlin

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Jonah & the Wailer

Chapter One

The happy hour crowd at the *Sea Urchin* was finally thinning out. Friday night was always jammed at the popular beach eatery; locals and tourists gravitated to the attractive deck surrounding the waterfront establishment. It was still too early for the later, drinking crowd and dining patrons were heading inside to the famed indoor waterfalls and real seascapes that decorated the spacious dining rooms. But the five women sitting at the table on the huge deck closest to the rocky sea wall were still having a grand time, by the sound of it.

A guitarist sitting on a stool beside the tiki hut that housed the outdoor bar played beach tunes as the huge orange disc of the sun was sinking slowly into the horizon, casting slender fingers of amber over the rippling dark ocean.

"Look at that sunset," Chris sighed. "Is this the most gorgeous place in the world?" She pushed a lock of her almost black hair behind one ear. She was still wearing her work clothes – a gauzy cream skirt with a black tank top and black sandals. Her work life at the magazine was definitely casual, and she loved the fact that she could dress for comfort

every day, unless there was an important client coming in for a meeting.

Sandy Creek Sunrise was a wonderful place to work, and she was lucky to have landed such a great job in such a small place.

"It is pretty sweet," Pamela agreed. "We have the best of both worlds – city during the week and beach at night and on the weekends."

"Speak for yourself about the city," Allison said. "I'm happy with my little Sandy Creek Board of Ed."

"Dear Allison of Avonlea," said Linda, smiling. "You love your little village school, don't you?"

"Yeah," Allison said. "Damn straight I do. I get the best of one world. I don't care if it's old-fashioned."

"Oh honey, I am so not dissing it," Linda said, reaching over to pat Allison's arm. "If Paul would let me, I'd absolutely chuck my job. I hate commuting to the city when most of my life is down here. After 2010, I'm done. No more teaching Biology 101 to the unfocused freshman class at City College."

"This has been fun, ladies," Chris said, licking the last dregs of salt from the rim of her Margarita glass. "We haven't had a girls' night out for awhile."

"Too long," agreed Allison.

"That's because you two are totally besotted with your Neanderthal husbands," Jeanette quipped. "We can't drag you away from them with giant pliers."

Pam and Linda snorted but nodded in agreement.

Chris jumped inwardly at the mention of her husband. She hadn't thought of him for hours. She surreptitiously slid her cell phone out of the pocket in her purse and groaned when she saw the ten

missed calls. She still had it on vibrate from the afternoon meeting.

Crap.

Jonah was going to be royally pissed.

It really wasn't her fault, she reasoned, somewhat blurry from five jumbo frozen margaritas. Jonah had been working a side job this whole week, building a new show room for his friend Jimmy's Surf shop. He hadn't been getting home until well after seven each night. How was she to know that tonight he'd be looking for her?

"Jonah is not a Neanderthal," she told Jeanette, sticking out her tongue for emphasis. "He's a perfect gentleman and a sweetheart!"

"Oh yeah, a 6'4" sweetheart with that mane of long brown hair, huge biceps and pecs and a voice that sounds more like a lion than a lamb," Jeanette drawled. "Frankly, darling, I'm surprised he even lets you out. He's kinda like *Me Tarzan, You Jane*, isn't he?"

Christina Pendleton laughed, but it sounded hollow to her own ears.

"C'mon, Jeanette, you're crazy," she cried. "Yes, my husband is tall, and his hair is long, and his muscles are huge, but give me a break, do I look like the type to be hooked up with a caveman? Puleeeeeze!"

Jeanette laughed with the others, and she bowed her head.

"Mea culpa," she said. "My bad. You basically run that magazine by yourself, so you're actually a big bad editor mama! This round is on me. Jamie!" She called their waiter over. "One more for my buddies and me!"

Christina felt a twinge of uneasiness. She was pretty well hammered already.

"Make mine a club soda, Jamie," she called.

Her friends chanted "wimp, wimp, wimp," until she finally acquiesced and let the waiter bring her another Margarita.

"I am so fried," she whispered to Ally, her best friend.

"Me too," the blond said. "What the hell are they putting in these drinks?"

"Uh, maybe alcohol?" Chris guessed. "Jonah called me ten fucking times."

"You're dead," her friend stated bluntly. "Thank God David is away, or I would be as dead as you are."

"That sounds not as nice or helpful as you think it must sound," Chris told her friend.

"Well, you know what I mean," Ally said, lifting her eyebrows and scavenging through her tiny purse. "Oh God, you know what? I left my stupid cell phone in the car. Dave might have called me too. Crap!"

The waiter appeared with a tray heavy with their Margaritas. He placed a fully salted glass in front of Chris and winked.

She didn't know what the wink meant. She didn't think she had flirted with him in a way that would cause him to wink at her.

She smiled lamely at him and cradled her drink in her hand. Jonah would take exception to that wink. He didn't like winking waiters. Actually, Jonah would take exception to the fact that she was plastered at the *Urch*, before 8:00 at night. They often came to this bar and sat on this very deck and had a drink or two and dinner or just drinks and appetizers. But the fact was, he didn't ever get drunk, and he would not like the fact that she was.

"Where's Rob, Jeanette?" Allison was asking. "I know you said he was away on a long business trip but I missed where it was."

"My dear hubby is in Hong Kong," Jeanette said, taking a swig of her drink. "He's away until after Labor Day, so I've been wild and fancy free all month."

"Really?" drawled Pamela. "Because your wild and fancy free days seem an awful lot like exactly the same as your normal days."

"Shut up," said Jeanette. "I can be wild."

"She is wild, hear her roar," said Linda dryly.

"Just stop," said Jeanette. "I don't know why you're suddenly picking on me. So I get up early and work late every day, so what. That's who I am. I'm a partner, right?"

Jeanette was an attorney at a high-powered firm in Newark. She made partner last spring at the youthful age of thirty-three.

They all nodded, mock clapping.

"You beeyatches are hateful," Jeanette laughed, taking a big swallow of her drink.

"I have to pee," Chris said. "Anyone?"

"Me," Allison chimed in.

The two friends sauntered across the deck and giggled as they struggled with the heavy glass door leading into the dark, air conditioned lounge.

"Jonah will be pissed," Chris said nervously. "I didn't tell him I was coming here. I didn't talk to him all day."

"Shit, Christina, are you crazy, girl?" Allison made a face. "It's like, late, and he probably thinks you went off the road and cracked up your extremely adorable antique car or that you left him or that someone in your family is sick. You know

how these men think. It's never that you had to go food shopping or that you needed a girls' night out."

"I guess I should have called," Chris said.

"Damn straight," Allison agreed, opening the door labeled *Urchinettes* for her friend.

Jonah Pendleton glanced at his watch as he finished sanding the edge of the cherry desk in his workshop. The desk was gorgeous, if he had to say so himself -- it was a large, impressive piece of furniture that he was fashioning for Christina as a present for her thirty-fifth birthday next week. She had no clue it was for her; she commented on its beauty every time she stepped into his workshop and he would just tell her it was for his clients up north with the big guanda house and the big guanda money.

"They don't deserve something so beautiful, Jonah," she said the other day. "Buy them something at Pottery Barn and let's keep the desk. They'll never know."

"Christina Anne, you're an evil woman," he told her, swooping her up in his arms and lifting her to sit her on the edge of the desk. She had tugged on his long brown ponytail, pressing her breasts into his chest.

"Hey, hippie, you ever going to cut this thing?" she asked, pulling the glossy plank of hair around his back to shake in front of his eyes.

"Probably not, you got a problem with that?"

She just smiled, bringing the hair to her lips.

He knew she had no problem with his long hair. Christina always told him that she was in love with the whole deal. She loved his waist length hair, his joy in music and his carpentry business and the fact

that he lived his life the way he wanted to. She loved watching him surf on the weekends, and she loved to join him sometimes too. There were times when a night out meant that they would just lie on a blanket under the apple tree and watch the stars, watch the bats dance in the night currents and listen to the owls.

They lived in a very prestigious resort town on the New Jersey shore, but that was only because fifteen years earlier, Jonah had inherited a weather-beaten farmhouse from his grandfather, not three blocks in from the beach. To buy such a property today would require more than a few million dollars and yet they had nothing. The old white stucco farmhouse was charming to be sure, but it was oddly out of place with its high tech neighbors -- the sleek, grandiose, half-timber McMansions that lined the boulevards of their neighborhood. The farmhouse came with a huge parcel of land so their nearest neighbors were half an acre away on either side. Plus there was an orchard of peach trees in the backyard, shielding them from the golf course/condo development that bordered the back fence. The orchard yielded enough fruit to sell at the farm stand that had been in operation for well over fifty years. Jonah remembered his grandmother sitting on her lawn chair, gossiping with the people who stopped to buy brown bags of the succulent fruit. Now Christina ran the stand when the peaches were ripe. August was the best time, and she had been selling in the late afternoons after she got home from work and on the weekends.

The Pendletons had lived on this property in Sandy Creek for the last two hundred years. And Jonah Pendleton was not going to be the first one to

sell out. Christina knew his resolve when she married him ten years before. She did not hook up with him for the prospect of future fortunes. She loved *Pendleton Whitehouse Farm* as much as he did.

Glancing at his watch again, he wondered just where the hell she was. If she had a deadline and was working late, she always called him. He had worked late three out of four nights this week and had called her, letting her know that he would be at Jimmy's. He was worried, wondering if that damn foolish car of hers had broken down, stripped of oil or if maybe her sister Kate had called her to come over, feeling nauseous now in her first trimester of pregnancy at age forty.

The Clancy girls were in no hurry to reproduce; he knew that firsthand. One of their first arguments as a married couple had been about her refusal to become pregnant. She wanted to establish herself first. Jonah thought that there were better things than establishing yourself. But Christina had been adamant, and he gave in, knowing that winning that battle would not be winning at all.

He didn't usually give in. Their arguments often ended in one way, and that was with his wife sprawled across his lap, her naked bottom poised to receive his chastisement. But if there was a legitimate reason for her stubborn behavior, he always paid heed.

He pulled out his cell and hit the button for redial. She had not answered her cell since he started calling two hours ago.

He clenched his fingers, feeling helpless when the rings ended in her voice message yet again. Where the hell was she?

The shop was hot. Normally, he didn't work shirtless, out of consideration for Christina, but the night air was humid, and he was sweating. He stripped off his old polo shirt and tossed it on the lawn chair next to his worktable.

He had steak ready to grill and salad in a bowl in the refrigerator. He had turned off the grill half an hour ago, not wanting to waste any more propane.

Frowning, he snatched up the sleeve of sandpaper and looked at his wrist once again. It was nearly eight p.m.; she had better have a damn good excuse for being this late, he thought.

Chris slurped up the last of her drink. She had already licked off all of the salt.

"I have to go," she told her friends. "It's late, and Jonah will be worried."

"What? Jonah will be all buff and half-dressed and standing in the yard waiting for you?" asked Jeanette.

"Shut up," said Chris. "I did not say that, bitch. You read too many romance novels. And my husband does not walk around half-dressed unless he's at the beach."

"A girl can dream," said Jeanette.

Chris laughed, hugging her friend to her side.

"Kiss me, Jeanette, my dahlink," she said.

Jeanette complied.

"I have to go too," Allison said.

"Yeah, me too," Linda stood up. "Paul will be half asleep on the couch, never thinking that he could start dinner or maybe make himself a sandwich."

"Pam and I are going inside to have a bite," Jeanette said.

"No more *ritas* for you!" Chris said, shaking her finger.

"Oh definitely not," Jeanette agreed. "Six is my limit. Now I switch to red wine."

"Watch her," Chris told Pamela.

"We got dropped off here," Pamela said. "We're just going to take a cab back to Jeanette's."

The friends hugged and promised to meet at the same place next week at Christina's birthday party. They let Pamela, the accountant, figure out what they each owed on the check and left their money with her.

"Ciao, ladies!" Chris linked arms with Allison and Linda and headed across the white gravel towards their cars.

Linda's Volvo was parked closest.

Chris and Allison were near each other at the back of the lot.

"Oh, Ally cat, what the hell am I going to do?" Chris moaned. "You know Jonah, he is going to be mad as hell, and I'm a little tipsy."

"A little?"

"A lot. What about you? Can you drive?"

"Sure, but I'm a lot closer than you are. You've got deer on that back road to be worried about," she said.

"It ain't the deer I'm worried about," Chris told her. "It's the deer."

She started snickering, and Allison looked at her blankly.

"D-e-a-r," she spelled.

She cracked up at her joke and soon she and Allison dissolved into giggles, bent over and holding their stomachs.

"At least you can still spell," Allison said.

"I'm gonna pee my pants," Chris gasped.

"We could always call Jonah for a ride," Allison ventured.

"Hell no. That would *not* be fun," Chris said. "I'm fine. I'll be home in five minutes."

"Don't hit the deer," Allison cautioned.

"I'm more worried about the deer hitting me," Chris blurted out, starting to laugh again.

Allison bit her lip, trying not to laugh. It wasn't funny. She knew Christina was putting on a show of bravado. She had been in her shoes often enough. Dave and Jonah were so much alike that they could be brothers. Dave worked on a fishing boat, wore his sandy curls longish and was built like a lumberjack. Besides being big, outdoors type of men, they both also believed in the merits of an old-fashioned spanking when it came to dealing with bratty or irresponsible wives.

"Well, you can't say we didn't know what we were getting into when we married 'em, Chris," she said seriously. "And I love David, so I guess I'll be putting up with his quirks for a long time."

"Yeah, me too." Chris hugged her best friend and waited while she unlocked her car. "Call me tomorrow, Ally, maybe if it's nice we could hit the beach in the afternoon."

"Okay," Allison said. "Dave's getting back around dinner time."

She watched Christina bend over to unlock her cherry red 1976 Triumph Spitfire. That car was her pride and joy. It had belonged to her oldest brother, Patrick, who died in a boating accident when Christina was only ten.

Chris unrolled her window and called over to her friend.

"Got any messages, Ally cat?"

Allison reached for the cell phone that was tucked into the cup holder. The red message light was flashing. She hit the button and groaned when she saw there were five missed calls from David's cell.

"Some," she called back. "You're such a brat."

"Payback's a bitch," Chris laughed as she rolled out of the parking lot, heading toward home.

Allison sat for a moment, punched in her password and listened to her husband's deep voice.

"Hey babe, what's up? It's 5 now. Call me back."

"Ally? It's almost 6, where are you? Call me back."

"Hey Al, it's about 7, and I'm just pulling in and wondered if you wanted to meet me at Tico's for dinner. The boat needed some repair work done so we came in early. Call me."

"Allison, where the hell are you? Are you with Christina? Jonah's really worried. Call me."

"Are you all right, Ally? Please call me."

Oh boy. Her stomach flipped a little, but she was also glad that he was home. Now, she had to decide quickly. If she drove home and he even suspected that she was as looped as she was, there would be royal hell to pay. If she called him, explained that she had some drinks and needed him to come get her, there would still be a little hell to pay because of the lack of communication on her part, but he would be much more understanding. It made sense to call him. He'd been out for three days, and there was no way they weren't going to be making love, and he would certainly suspect the level of booze in her at that point.

Shit. She might as well go for it. She missed him. She didn't want to start the weekend with a big fight.

She hit the send button and waited for him to pick up.

Jonah heard the crunch of the Spitfire's tires on the gravel driveway and went to stand in the doorway to his workshop.

Chris had a little trouble with untangling her purse strap from the gear stick.

"Shit," she mumbled as she stepped carefully out of the car. Then she dropped her damn purse. "Son of a..."

"Ahem," the deep clearing of a voice made her glance up and there he was. A half-naked Neanderthal framed in the doorway. It wasn't completely dark yet, but the light behind him made him look like a towering archangel.

She started giggling, remembering her protests to Jeanette.

"Christina?"

The tone of his voice sobered her up immediately.

"Yes, honey?"

"Come here, please."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, I believe you do." He crooked his finger at her in that way she hated. Absolutely hated. It was as though he were tugging on an invisible string and her body acted on its own volition; she had no choice but to obey his finger.

She grabbed her purse from the driveway and walked over to the workshop. He blocked the

doorway, so she just stood in front of him, fidgeting.

"You didn't answer your phone." It wasn't a question, but she knew he wanted an answer.

"I had it on vibrate and didn't hear it."

"Where were you?"

"At the Surchin," she told him, studying her fingernails. "I get the mirls there for drinks."

"How much did you drink?" His eyes narrowed, and she made a face, wondering what she said to make him all pissy.

"Oh, a few," she said breezily. "Yummy margaritas."

"How many?"

God, was he writing a book?

"A few, Jonah," she snapped. "I didn't keep track."

"Three? Four?" he shot off like bullets. "More?"

"Probably four," she lied.

"Christina, you are the only one of your friends who drinks a frozen margarita with salt, I can easily check with my buddy's brother, Jamie who works at the Urchin," he told her. "By the way, we call it either the Sea Urchin or the Urchin, generally not the Surchin."

"Shut up," she said sullenly. Damn, that was what the wink was about. The waiter knew her.

He looked at her expectantly.

"Six," she said. "So what, I had six drinks. Yeah, I have a buzz on. I repeat, so what?"

"You can lose the attitude, Christina," he said grimly. "If you got pulled over, you'd get a DWI. You could have hit someone or been hit by someone else. Why would you chance that? You know I'd come get you in a heartbeat."

"I know," she told him. "But you would lecture and go on and on. Blah blah blah."

"And you're going to hear it anyway, but now you'll hear it on a blistered butt." He took her shoulders and pointed her into his workshop. "Move!"

She realized she'd made a huge mistake. Jonah would have spanked her for the cell phone thing and not checking in, but that would have been like foreplay to what he planned to do now. She knew that look. Only once before had she ever got caught driving drunk and after an interminable episode with his belt and the wicked paddle he had made just for her, she had vowed it would never happen again.

Damn.

"Did Allison ever call Dave?" Jonah was asking. "He came in early and wondered where she was."

Poor Ally. She felt somewhat cheered knowing that she was not the only crazy, twenty-first century, professional woman about to get her butt spanked by an anachronistic husband. Dave was just like Jonah.

"She left her cell in the car," Chris said. "She didn't know he was home."

"The fact is, a simple phone call is all that's needed," Jonah said, lifting her chin to stare directly into her befuddled blue gaze. "Just tell me you're going out, I won't make dinner, I won't worry. I'll plan to pick you up. It could have been so easy, Christina."

She looked away, not able to shake his hand from her chin.

"I know," she said finally. "I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"You worked that side job all week," she complained. "How was I to know you weren't going again tonight?"

"Did I tell you every time I worked at Jimmy's?"

"Yes."

"What time did I tell you?"

She sighed. The fact was he'd been very considerate.

"By lunch time," she told him in a surly voice.

"You are not behaving well," he said sadly.

"Maybe this was a cry for attention. Hmm? Did you think to punish me because I spent so much time working this week?"

"Don't be stupid," she snapped.

"I think I told you to lose the attitude." Before she knew what he was doing, he had bent her over the goddamned desk he was making for his tasteless rich clients.

"Jonah, stop," she cried.

Her gauzy skirt was flung over her head, and she felt his rough fingers at the waistband of her bikini briefs, which he proceeded to tear down to her knees.

SLAP! SLAP! SLAP!

His hard, calloused hand felt like an oar of rough wood on her tender flesh.

"You know that I have to take all the side jobs that I can in the summer, Christina," he told her, stroking her bottom gently now. "When the season ends, a lot of the work goes too. You know that. We've been down this road before."

"I know," she sobbed, trying to reach back and knock his hand away. He wouldn't let her. He caught her hand with his other hand while he continued to gently stroke her bottom.

"You may claim that you just forgot, but I think I know better, Christina," he said. "You met your friends, and you started having fun, started feeling like it wasn't fair that you didn't get to have fun that much – because you know we get a little crazy in the summer." He paused. "You work hard at the magazine and at the stand, and I'm gone so much and you felt really unappreciated, even though you must know how much I do appreciate you. So you just decided, in one moment, to forget about me."

His words felt like a punch in the stomach. He was right. She felt horrible.

"I'm going to punish your ass right now, and you may hate me for that, but if anything ever happened to you, I'd hate life," he said gravely. "If I got a phone call about your stupid fucking Spitfire mangled around a telephone pole, I'd want to kill myself. You know that, don't you?"

Christina was crying. She nodded.

He lifted something from the desk, and she suddenly felt an explosion of pain on her butt.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

It was the damn paddle that she hated.

"Please, Jonah," she whimpered. "I'm sorry."

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"Love means never having to say you're sorry."

She smiled through her tears for just a brief moment.

"You're no Ryan O'Neal, and you're no preppie!"

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"If you ever, ever drive in this condition again," he warned. "I will make this session seem like a few simple love taps. You are to call me, I don't give a fuck what time it is, or where you are, I will come and get you. Do you understand?"

SMACK!

"Yes," she sobbed.

"Do you really understand?"

SMACK! SMACK!

"Yes, I promise, Jonah, I promise," she wailed.

She heard the clatter of the paddle as he tossed it and then she was in his arms. He held her while she cried, patting her back and stroking her hair.

"I love you, Christina," he told her softly. "I can't live without you."

"I love you," she whispered. The ache on her bottom faded to a dull roar as she relaxed in his arms, and she pressed her face into his neck. He smelled of perspiration and the musky aftershave he wore, and clean fresh air and wood chips. He was her redemption. He was the reason why she loved getting up every day.

"Peach stand in the morning?"

"Yes," she sighed, pulling his face close so she could kiss him.

"Peach picking at five a.m.?"

You are a devil," she told him.

"Tomorrow we'll deal with your horrendous lack of communication," he told her, lifting her into his arms and cradling her against his powerful chest as he flipped off light switches and grabbed her purse from the floor where she had dropped it.

"What? No fucking way," she yelled. "That was for everything. No fair, no fair! I protest."

"Maybe a switch from a peach tree would cure your nasty attitude."

"Jonah, you wouldn't," she cried, pummeling his chest with her puny fists.

"You make a lot of noise for such a little bitty thing," he told her, shifting her closer to his heart, nuzzling her neck and blowing strands of her silky

dark hair off her face before he fastened his lips on hers, kissing her until she couldn't feel her legs.

"Did you eat?" he asked suddenly.

"Uh," she stammered, looking anywhere but at him. Another one of his stupid rules she'd broken!

"My buddy's brother Jamie is very observant," he commented.

"No, damn you, I did not eat," she confessed.

"Maybe two switches from a peach tree," he said ominously as he kicked open the kitchen door and strode inside.

"Neanderthal," she muttered.

"Huh?" he grunted.

"Exactly."

Chapter Two

David Morris pulled into the full parking lot of *The Sea Urchin* and looked for his wife's navy blue Subaru. It was parked along the rope barrier that bordered the dunes leading down to the beach. Allison was leaning against the driver's side door.

She waved at him.

He stopped behind her and reached over to open the truck's door.

"Get in," he said shortly.

Allison was expecting more of a joyous reunion.

"God, Dave, don't be a jerk," Ally said, climbing up the Ford's massive side bumper into the front seat. His truck made her feel like a midget. Funny, he could just jump in with no problem.

"Excuse me?" he said, turning to look at her darkly.

"Well, I called you, Dave," she whined. "I could have just driven home. Is that what you wanted me to do? Jeez!"

"Allison, thank you for calling me. I appreciate the fact that you called. It was the right thing to do," he said. "But please explain to me how you planned to get home in this condition if you thought I was still out on the boat?"

Allison's heart thudded.

Shit. She forgot that little piece of the puzzle.

"Uh, I would have called Jonah," she tried. "Chris and I would have called Jonah. Yeah, that's

what we would have done. But I knew you were home."

"So, where's Christina?"

"She's uh, well, she went home."

"I thought you were going to call Jonah."

"Right," Ally said. "But I called you. So we didn't need to call Jonah. And she went home."

"Why didn't she wait for a ride?"

"I told you, we didn't know you were home," Allison was getting exasperated. "Didn't he understand the English language?"

"So if she went home," he said. "How were you going to call Jonah?"

"What?" She felt like Abbott or Costello, she wasn't quite sure which one.

"Allison, you told me that you were going to call Jonah when you didn't know I was home, is that right?"

"Yes," she sighed. "Thank God, he was finally getting it."

"When did you know I was home?"

"When I got to my car and listened to my messages."

"And where was Christina at that time?"

"She had left," snapped Allison, sick of the subject. "God, Dave, did the sun fry your brains in the last three days?"

"So, she didn't know I was home?"

"No. I told you that already."

"Wouldn't it be hard for you to call Jonah when Christina had already left?"

She opened her mouth to retort and snapped it shut. He had her.

"Did she drink as much as you did?"

"I guess she did," Ally said. "We had a lot of fun."

"And you're hammered," he noted.

"A little," she agreed.

"A lot," he corrected. "So she drove home hammered?"

"What are you, her husband?" Ally turned up her hands, making a face. "She has Jonah to worry about her. *Pulease.*"

"Allison," he said. "You're not being a very good friend. Please call Christina and make sure she made it home okay."

"Oh for God's sake," Allison snapped. "And what am I, her nanny?"

"Call her!" he ordered.

"Fucking stupid arrogant asshole," she muttered. She felt the shudder of the truck as it ground to a halt at the edge of the parking lot. Oops. "I didn't really mean that, Dave."

"Call her now."

Allison hit the #2 key for Christina's cell phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi Chris, it's me," she said. "You made it home okay?"

"Yeah, making it home wasn't the problem."

Allison heard a deep murmur, and her friend snorted into the phone.

"Ally cat, I gotta go," she said. "The boss is on my case like rite on whice."

"Bye babe," Ally told her best friend.

Rite on whice?

Allison hit the end button and shoved her phone into her purse.

"Her sentence structure is a little iffy, but she sounds fine," she told Dave. "Can we go home now?"

"Allison, I let a lot of things slide when I'm not here," Dave said. "But did you just call me a fucking arrogant stupid asshole?"

Sometimes Allison had a good memory. "No, hon, I think it was a fucking stupid arrogant asshole."

He clenched his hands on the steering wheel but she ignored that.

"Can we go home, Dave," she complained.

It was surprising just how quickly the big fellow could move. One minute, Allison was looking out the window, waiting for the truck to move, and in the very next second, her seat belt was unbuckled, and she was upended over the console that separated the bucket seats, her skirt yanked up and her husband's nasty hand smacking her butt.

"Ouch, Dave, cut it out," she cried. "We're in a public parking lot. People can see."

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"I know where we are," he told her.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"Stop, Dave," she cried. Her ass was on fire.

He tossed down her skirt and plopped her back in the seat.

"Put your seatbelt on," he ordered unnecessarily. She always put her seatbelt on.

Her butt tingled, and she could feel her face burning from the embarrassment of what he just did. While she was waiting for Dave, she had seen some kitchen workers smoking out back; and they had a fine view of the truck. Damn, she hoped they didn't see what happened but even as Dave pulled away, she thought she could hear whistles and applause from the dark area behind the restaurant.

"That was so fucking stupid," she spat, pissed that he would humiliate her so in public. "You're an asshole."

"Shut up, Allison," he barked.

He was really mad. He never told her to shut up. The ride was quick and quiet. Their house wasn't too far from the Urchin. They had a little cottage that they had bought for a song from an old fisherman that Dave had worked with years ago. It wasn't that close to the ocean but it was right on the bay. They didn't have much property but there was a nice garden out front and a deep patio and a small yard leading down to the wooden dock out back where Dave kept his catamaran, *The Ally Cat*, moored.

Allly loved her house; it wasn't huge like Christina and Jonah's farmhouse but it was sweet and perfectly situated.

All too soon, she found herself staring at it from the white pebbled driveway.

"Out," Dave said, holding the door open for her.

God, he really was in caveman mode, she thought. There was no graceful way to climb out of his stupid truck. She stood on the running board and had to hold onto the barbarian's shoulder to jump down.

He slammed the door and waited for her to precede him into the house.

She wondered if it would work better for her if she went on the offensive.

"You know, Dave," she told him as they entered the house. "I didn't appreciate that little display in the parking lot. It was crude and totally unnecessary."

The offensive did not work. She felt herself stopped in her tracks by the big lug, as he gripped

her by the upper arms and pulled her back into his immovable chest. She resisted the urge to lay her head back. He smelled so delicious, and she had missed him these last few days.

"I don't appreciate being called names," he countered. "That was rude and totally unnecessary."

"That's what you say."

"That's what I know," he said. "I want you to get your little fanny upstairs and into the corner, Allison. And I mean NOW!"

She hated the fact that she scurried for the stairs. But there she was scurrying, just like a bunny.

Dave insisted on certain rituals. She knew that he would expect her to be bare bottomed in the corner. It was part of the deal. Sighing, she unzipped her silky, flowered skirt and slipped it off. She hung it on a hanger in her closet and slipped her bikini briefs off, tossing them in the clothes hamper. She kept on her black tank top, only reaching under it to unclasp her strapless bra and throw that in her drawer.

The only corner in their bedroom was next to their dresser and close to the window, so she could look to the left and see the dark waters of the bay.

She wondered if anyone out on the bay in a boat could see her, poised in the corner, with her naked ass waiting for her husband's punishment. What a hoot, she thought. But as she told Chris earlier in the evening, they both knew what they were getting into when they married these guys. Allison welcomed the limits of a loving, guiding relationship, but sometimes she let herself give in to some healthy rebellion. She would never leave Dave or truly jeopardize their marriage; she loved

him too much, and she didn't think he would ever want to be rid of her either. But sometimes she got tired of the rules and went a little crazy.

Tonight was a case in point.

He was just being overbearing. He wouldn't be this mad about the cell phone thing. That was an honest mistake. Her mouth always seemed to get her in more trouble. Chris was constantly telling her to keep it under control but Allison had a hard time "shutting up."

She heard the heavy tread of his shoes on the stairs and steeled herself for his entrance.

The door opened and she heard the springs of the mattress creak as he sat down. He didn't say anything. The silence in the room pressed against her back until she felt that she couldn't bear it anymore.

She knew Dave had his particular ways. She tried to envision what he wanted from her. She thought back and replayed every moment from when he stopped behind her car and she got into the truck. She hadn't behaved very nice to him. She *had* cursed him. But he already spanked her for that. She wasn't sure what he wanted now.

"I'm sorry, Dave," she said into the corner.

"I'm sorry too, Allison," he said. "The thing is, I can't get past the fact that you would have driven home tonight as shit-faced as you were. I do appreciate that you called me but what sticks in my craw is, I wasn't supposed to be home and obviously you lied about planning to call Jonah."

"Your craw, Dave?" she quipped. "Where exactly is your craw?"

"Don't mock me, Allison," he told her. "Tonight's not the time."

Allison was sobered by his serious tone. She thought about what he had said.

"You're right," she told him. "I would have driven home. I was ready to drive home. I think I was fine to drive."

"You think?" Suddenly he was behind her, breathing into her neck. She shivered.

"Yeah," she said. "Maybe."

"Maybe not. Probably not." He took hold of her buttocks with one enormous hand and she bit her lip. She felt the calluses on his hand as he rested it on her fair skin. "You think you could handle getting charged with a DWI, Ally? Want to ride your bike everywhere or get a ride from your husband to work every day?"

Allison flinched. His words stung her, and she knew he was right. She had been so stupid.

"I know," she said. "It was dumb. I'm sorry."

"And then, when I come to drive you home, you decide to curse me out?" Dave tightened his grasp on her butt. "That's a nice way to greet your husband who was worried shitless when he couldn't reach you for three fucking hours?"

Allison felt the tears start to seep down her cheeks. She felt ashamed. Dave was mad because he had been so worried. What an idiot she had been.

"I'm sorry, Dave," she told him. "I know I deserve whatever you decide to give me. I was wrong."

He gently turned her around and she clung to him. He bent and fastened his lips to hers. Their kiss was deep and cleansing. She felt an air of redemption pass over her as she allowed him to lead her to the bed. He sat down and positioned

her over his lap, and she held onto his calves and started crying before anything even happened.

"C'mon, be a big girl," he whispered, stroking her softly, trying to soothe her before the fact.

His hand was like wood. Dave always spanked only with his hand. It was hard enough to usually bring her to tears.

SLAP! SLAP! SLAP! SLAP! SLAP! SLAP!

She gasped at the ferocity of his blows. Crap, he was killing her ass.

He spanked relentlessly for the next minute or so, and she was sobbing when he finally stopped. He turned her about and cradled her in his arms, holding her close to his chest. She clung to him.

"If you get drunk again and even think about driving, I will take the skin off your ass, Allison Marie, do you get it?"

"Yes, I do," she said. "I promise, I won't ever do that."

"I missed you, baby," he whispered into her hair. "How are you?"

"Fine," she told him. They both laughed.

He slid his hand under her tank top and fondled the rosy tip of one nipple while he slid his other hand between her thighs.

She groaned, twisting around so that she straddled him. That made it easier for him to take her plump nipple into his mouth. She thrust against him, letting him have easy access to all parts of her anatomy. He cupped her throbbing buttocks and pressed her closer to his raging erection.

They came together in a frenzy, and Allison collapsed on his chest. She knew they would have another, gentler time this night, but whenever Dave came in from sea, they always coupled like

desperate lovers, as though it were their first time, their last time, their only time.

He kissed her and linked his hands behind her butt, pressing her down on him.

It was a sweet homecoming. She smiled as she kissed the damp skin of his chest.

"Welcome home," she whispered.

"I love you," he told her.

Jonah Pendleton was true to his word, and he dragged his wife's sorry ass out of bed at 5:00 AM.

Chris groaned and held her hand to her head. It was pounding.

"Stop," she cried, trying to anchor herself to the mattress. "My head is killing me."

"Oh, do you think maybe six Margaritas is like a few too many?" her husband's calm voice made her want to castrate him.

"Shut up, Jonah," Chris grunted. "Nobody wants peaches today. I can tell."

"Time for peach picking," he said implacably. "Don't make me get you out of bed!"

He went into the bathroom, and Chris sat up, moaning as the room swirled around her. He would be loathsome if she balked. She knew him. He was a beast.

She stood up and felt woozy from the axe-like blow to her head. She checked to see if her brains were on the floor. Nope.

Fucking shit, she had a bitch of a hangover.

Jonah came out of the bathroom, cheerfully swatting her butt as he passed by.

"I'll go make you a nice banana milkshake," he told her. "See you in five. Take a fast shower."

She knew better than to disobey. He said to take a shower, and if she didn't, he'd know.

She crept into the bathroom and turned on the shower. It took a minute for the water to get warm. Groaning, she stepped up and into the claw footed tub.

"I hate Margaritas!" she said to the billowing shower curtain.

She used a loofah to scrub away the cobwebs from her skin, and when she felt reasonably awake, she turned off the water.

She dressed in her favorite pair of khaki capris and a yellow tank top. She pulled on a pair of low socks and slipped into her sneakers, knowing she would need them in the orchard. There were brambles and bees and crappy peaches on the grass.

She walked into the kitchen, feeling much better but still unhappy. She snarled when her husband handed her a tall glass filled with a creamy concoction. It was banana and milk, honey and a little vanilla ice cream.

Whenever she had a queasy stomach, he made her drink a banana milkshake and surprisingly, she did often feel better.

"I'd rather have a Bloody Mary," she said tartly.

"That wouldn't help peach production," he said. He was sipping a mug of tea and munching on a slice of whole-wheat toast.

He was so cute, she thought in a sudden moment of clarity. Jonah's long hair was caught back in a thick braid that nearly reached his waist and he wore a loose white cotton button down shirt with a pair of khaki cargo shorts. The blond hairs on his muscular, tanned legs glinted in the kitchen

lamplight. The peach tattoo on his ankle was for her. His sweet Jersey Peach.

He wore an old pair of Nikes. He was forty years old, and he looked like a twenty year old hippie, she thought.

He took such good care of her. She absolutely knew he was going to be a great father.

She felt a pang when she suddenly realized that she was holding that back from him. She had used one excuse after another. She needed her career; she needed more time alone with him; she didn't think they could afford it. For such a dominant husband, he had always allowed her her own way on this particular subject. And now she felt guilty, realizing that she was hurting him, and hurting their future offspring. She suddenly realized that she was going to have to tell him. It was time.

"Let's go pick peaches, woman," he said.

She set her empty glass on the counter and silently followed her husband outside, into the filmy early morning dawn. It was cool for a late August morning at the beach. The sun was struggling in the Eastern sky, trying to nudge its stubborn orange head up into the day.

She worked silently with Jonah. They filled basket after basket with the perfect bulbs of pale pink fruit. When they finally finished, it was well after 7:00 AM. They had more than enough for the peach stand.

"So, now we have to address the matter of my Christina's appalling behavior of last night," Jonah announced to the peach trees. "She needs a gentle reminder that it is important to communicate with her husband."

"Jonah," Chris cried. "I already know. I said I was sorry."

"Honey, you said a lot of things last night, but being sorry for this wasn't one of them. No, not for this." He took her hand and pulled her close to him. Gently, he stroked the sides of her face, pushing back the long strands of dark hair that had escaped from her tortoise shell hair clip.

Her khakis sat low on her butt, and he slipped his hands under the waistband and cupped the flesh of her bottom.

"I'm sorry, Jonah; I know I was wrong," she protested, hoping she could escape a blistering of her still tender ass cheeks.

He was able to slip her pants down her thighs without unbuttoning them, yanking her briefs down with them.

Her naked ass was at his mercy, and she blushed, even though no one was around to see her humiliating position.

"This is fucking ridiculous," she hissed. "You're going to get your ass hauled into jail if anyone sees us out here."

"Shhhhhhh," he told her. "We're in my orchard, and I'm a king in my peach trees," he joked. He caught her hand and pulled her toward the little shed next to the orchard. She stumbled a little, her legs hobbled by her pants.

Jonah kicked the door shut behind them and pulled Christina close to him. He kissed her first, plundering her lips with his questing tongue and she moaned. He was a fabulous kisser.

"Just don't," she complained. "It's not fair."

"Of course, it's fair," he told her. "My sweet wife needs her ass spanked, so she knows how to communicate properly in the future. Do you agree?"

"Whatever," she snapped.

"Christina, this can last as long as you want it to," he told her seriously.

"Fine," she said, softening her tone. "I agree."

He held her away from him for a moment, and she could tell from his expression that he wasn't mad anymore. That made it even worse.

He set his foot on a low stool that was probably out there for just this purpose and suddenly tilted her over his thigh. Her butt was already bared, and he slapped her tender bottom with his hand.

"Oww, crap, Jonah, cut it out," Christina cried. "That hurts."

He ignored her cries and spanked her seriously; the tears were streaming down Christina's cheeks when he finally stopped.

"Next time, you'll tell me when you go out," he told her. "You'll keep your cell phone on you and not on vibrate."

She sniffed, trying to wipe the tears out of her eyes.

"Yes," she finally gasped, knowing he wouldn't stop until she acknowledged his words. "I promise. I will."

"Good girl," he whispered in her ear, rubbing her aching skin. "I'll bring the peaches to the stand. Go make sure you have enough bags, okay?"

"All right." She wished he would say something sweet or romantic. Sometimes it was such a drag to sell the fucking peaches, weekend after weekend, night after night. Sometimes her summer sucked.

He didn't say anything.

She watched him walk back to the orchard, his tall, loping grace oddly fitting into the morning light. His long braid swung back and forth, and she felt suddenly horny. She loved her husband so much. Even when he punished her, she was always wet for

him. She felt neglected when he didn't stop to smile at her, or when he was so caught up in the work of the farm or his carpentry business. She needed more. She wanted more.

She wanted him to know her inner mind, her deepest desires. She wanted him to know that she felt bad about the baby thing. That she realized she had stalled their future selfishly.

Jonah helped her get set up at the stand and then announced that he was going to work at Jimmy's.

"I'd like to get a little more of the framework done this morning," he told her. "It's early enough that I can get some work done before he starts to get busy."

"Fine," she said shortly, feeling sorry for herself.

Jonah noticed the abruptness of her tone. He paused at the edge of the wooden counter.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," she said. She was sitting on a lawn chair in the sunlight. She waved him away. "Go ahead."

The morning went by quickly. Christina was sold out of peaches by 11:00, and she kicked the "Peaches Picked Today" sign over and retreated into the house, clutching the box of money.

She dialed Ally's cell phone and was relieved to hear her friend's voice.

"I am not feeling happy, Ally cat," she said.

"Well, I'm feeling a bit hung-over and sore myself," Ally answered. "How was it last night?"

"Bad," Christina said shortly. "And it continued this morning. Jeanette was right, he is a damn Neanderthal."

"Poor baby," Ally commiserated. "I ended up calling Dave to come pick me up because as you now know, he was home."

"Brownie points for you," Chris said.

"Not as much as I thought," Ally said ruefully. "He was more fixated on the fact that I was planning to drive home if he wasn't there."

"Oh, Ally, that's my bad," Christina said. "You wanted to call Jonah and I wouldn't. I'm sorry, girl."

"S'okay. You want to go to the beach?"

"Might as well. At least we could cool off in the ocean."

"Probably have to wear one of my short sarongs over my suit," Ally said, knowing that sometimes Dave got a little carried away on the top of her thighs.

"Shit, I forgot about that," Christina snorted. "I guess I will too. What a screwed up world we live in."

"I don't want to live anywhere else," Ally said. "Do you?"

Christina thought about her friend's words.

"Maybe sometimes," she finally said.

"Chris?"

"It's all right, Ally," Chris said. "I'll meet you at our spot left of the lifeguard stand. 'Bout an hour?"

"Sounds good."

Christina made two turkey sandwiches and packed them and a couple of diet sodas and some water bottles in a small igloo and shoved a bag of pretzels in her beach bag, along with four plump, ripe peaches. She knew Ally would forget lunch, she always did.

She scrawled "Went to beach with Ally" on a piece of paper and left it on the table.

She felt oddly obstinate and detached from Jonah. She was in a resentful mood, and a bad feeling filled her mouth. She felt pissed and didn't know why. It wasn't the discipline; she was used to that. She just felt lonely. And guilty.

Her Spitfire purred as she slid down the driveway. She had put the roof down, and the sun rifled through her silky, dark brown hair as she spun out and sped toward the beach.

For a moment, she felt happy. The sun was on her hair, the sea breeze in her face and the freedom of the road under her. She tried not to think about her husband. She didn't want to think about him now.

She just wanted to be herself for a while longer.

Chapter Three

Chris pulled her TR6 into a parking space only three away from Ally's Subaru. She was lucky; there were only a few of the diagonal spots alongside the boardwalk left open. In another hour, people would be lugging their stuff from the side streets. She slung her tote bag over her shoulder, her chair and umbrella over her other shoulder and carried the igloo.

Allison was stretched out on her reclining beach chair, her feet on her towel and a diet coke in her hand.

"Hey Mrs. Morris," Chris greeted her friend, dropping bag, umbrella and chair into the sand and setting the cooler down.

"Mrs. P," Allison fluttered her fingers in a small wave. "It's like a lake today. Too bad, I think Dave and Jonah were planning to go surfing later."

"Pity," Chris said dryly. "My heart bleeds for them."

"Why, Christina Pendleton, I do believe you're having unkind thoughts today," said Ally, shielding her eyes with one hand to study her friend's face.

"Probably," Chris said. She pulled the umbrella out of the canvas bag and snapped the two pieces together. Digging the pointed stick into the sand, she swung it back and forth several times to get it wedged in nicely. "Jonah didn't say anything to me about surfing today. But I guess that doesn't

surprise me. I'm the only one who has to write out my itinerary if I'm just going to the supermarket."

Ally snorted.

"I hear you, girlfriend," she said. "But, Chris, you know the two of them always plan to surf when the weather's good. It's a given."

"Yeah, I know." Christina unfolded her beach lounge and laid one towel over it and another out on the sand, so her feet wouldn't sizzle on the hot sand. She pulled the newest Patricia Cornwell novel out of her bag and set the bag along with the cooler in the shadow of the umbrella. She untied her wraparound skirt and yanked off her tank top. She stood in front of Ally's chair. "Can you see anything?"

Allison inspected the back of her friend's thighs and lower back above her bikini bottom.

"Nope, you're good. Jonah is very meticulous about staying within the lines," she said. "But I ain't taking off my sarong. I know Dave thinks everything above the knees is fair game."

"Bullies," said Chris. "Why do we put up with this crap?"

"We love them?" Ally ventured. "Do you have *PMS*? You're in a wicked bad mood."

"Mad bad," Chris agreed. "No, I'm done like a week ago. I am just feeling out of sorts."

"Out of sorts like you want to talk or out of sorts like leave me the hell alone I wanna read my book?"

"Book, for now," Chris said. "Thanks, Ally."

"Sure," Ally said. "No problemo." She tucked her can into the sand beside her chair and propped her sunglasses on top of her head as she shut her eyes.

The two women shared a companionable silence for almost an hour.

"I'm hungry," Ally said. Her stomach growled as if to prove her point.

"I brought you a sandwich," Chris told her, reaching over to lug the cooler closer.

"You're my hero," Ally sighed, reaching out for the wax paper wrapped turkey sandwich. "How did you know I would forget?"

"Hello? Am I not your best friend? When have you ever brought a sandwich of your own making?"

Ally nodded.

"You're right. Thanks, bf," she said.

They ate their sandwiches and munched a couple of pretzels. Ally sighed happily when Christina handed her a peach. She bit into the ripe fruit and licked her lips to catch the sweet juices that dribbled out.

"God, this is one delicious peach," she said.

"*Pendleton Whitehouse Farm* thanks you for your patronage and please come again," Chris intoned woodenly.

"You're really in a mood today, aren't you," Ally asked in concern. "What's wrong?"

"Ally, I'm feeling like the biggest shit in the universe," she said in a low voice. "I've been selfish beyond belief. You know how bad Jonah wants kids, and I've been saying no for ten years, and I realized today that I don't even know why I'm saying no anymore."

"Your career," Ally began, reaching out to pat her friend's arm.

"My career is flexible," Chris exclaimed. "I could've told them five years ago that I was bringing a baby to work, and they would have been, sure, fine, go ahead. I can do that job with my eyes shut, and even my writing is easier now. I fit it in whenever."

"So you're feeling guilty?"

"Yeah," Chris said. "Really guilty and it pisses me off to feel this way. My husband breaks my butt if I forget to call him to tell him I'll be late, but I screw up our future like this, and he does nothing? He ignores it and just lets me do what I want? I'm confused, Ally."

"Maybe he's just giving you space," Ally said. "I mean we all know that you'd tear his face off if he ever dared to order you to get pregnant. Be realistic, Chris, Jonah would never be that way. He respects you. He loves you."

Christina looked down at the sand. A tear slid out of her eye, down the side of her nose to dangle precariously above her mouth. Then it dropped, and she tasted salt.

"And I respect him, and I love him, but I feel awful," she whispered. "Don't say anything, Ally. I mean to Dave. I have to figure this out."

"What's to figure out," Ally said. "Just get off the pill. Problem solved."

"Yeah, I guess," Chris sighed. "I have a doctor's appointment next week. I'll ask her if everything's okay, and then I'll tell Jonah."

"You're going to mope around for a week?" Ally whistled through her teeth. "Jonah will *not* go for that."

"He won't notice," Chris told her. "He's so busy working on Jimmy's surf shack, he barely even looks at me. That's kind of why I thought he wouldn't get so upset last night. It's ironic; now that I'm ready to get pregnant, I can't even get my husband in the sack."

Ally gave Christina a quick hug and stretched out her towel to lie on her stomach.

"Don't worry so much, Chris," she said. "And stop blaming yourself. I'm sure that Jonah doesn't blame you at all."

Christina nodded silently, but she didn't believe that. How could he not blame her? It made sense to blame her. She was the one to blame, after all.

She picked up her book and tried to get back into the adventures of Kay Scarpetta -- Doctor, Lawyer and Woman extraordinaire.

The day passed quietly and pleasantly.

At four, Ally gathered up her things.

"Dave gave me a conditional curfew," she laughed. "He made me promise to be home by five if the ocean was too calm for surfing. He really wants to go to Senor Miguel's, and you know how long you wait if you get there too late. Why don't you and Jonah meet us there?"

"I'll ask him," Chris said listlessly. "What time?"

"Dave intends to be sitting in the courtyard, listening to Mariachi music, looking at the bay and drinking a Corona by six."

"Okay, thanks, Ally."

The friends walked up the beach together and loaded their things into their respective cars.

"Ciao," Chris called as she backed out and darted across the beach road toward a cross street that intersected her own back road.

Jonah was home when she got there. He was working on the beautiful desk he was making for his clients in Ridgewood. She waved to him and went inside to get a drink.

She used the bathroom and then grabbed two cold Coors Lites and headed back out to his workshop.

She handed him a cold bottle and sat down on the high stool that was beside his worktable.

"Thanks," he said, twisting off the top and taking a long swallow.

"Ally and Dave are going to Miguel's, want to meet them there for dinner?" she asked.

"Maybe," he said noncommittally.

He ran a hand over his forehead, and she noticed that he was perspiring quite a bit. She saw that he was working on the bowed bottom that contained the drawers. It was hard work to sand the rough edges to flawlessness but that was what he was doing.

"Jonah, my God, stop being such a perfectionist," she told him. "These clients of yours are never going to know if you skimmed on the sanding of this desk."

He shook his head wryly.

"I'll know, Christina, and that makes a difference to me."

"You're killing yourself for no reason," she scoffed.

"It's my craft," he said seriously. "Would you skimp on a story? Tell a lesser tale for the sake of expediency?"

She shrugged.

"I might if no one would notice."

"No, I don't think you would," he argued. "How's your butt?"

She blushed, hating his reminder that she'd messed up.

"Fine, thanks so much for bringing that up," she said snottily.

He looked surprised at her nasty tone, and then he grinned.

"I wasn't *bringing it up*," he told her. "I was just asking how you felt. Maybe I feel bad because I'm thinking I was too hard on you this morning."

Christina took a swallow of her beer.

He rarely apologized for a spanking.

"You're sorry you spanked me?" she asked incredulously.

"Not sorry I spanked you, just thinking I should have waited until tonight to finish your punishment. I was pretty hard on you last night, not that you didn't deserve it, but still the second part could've waited for when you weren't so sore."

"Can we talk about something else," Chris whined. "Like how about the fucking weather? And enough about my ass and how hard you were on it."

"Christina," Jonah said in a warning tone.

"What, Jonah?" she shouted, getting angry. "Do you want a goddamn medal for feeling bad about abusing me?"

She knew she said the wrong thing when she noticed his face shutting down. He set the beer down and went back to sanding the desk.

"Great, now you're going to sulk," she muttered.

He tossed the sandpaper onto the cement floor. He looked at her with those deep green eyes that passed through her like a river. She shivered.

"I'm not sulking," he told her.

"Could've fooled me," she said.

"You think I abuse you?" he asked seriously.

She was surprised by his quiet voice. She thought he would've been yelling his head off at her. She almost felt like she deserved him yelling at her.

"Hello?" she said. "You smack my ass with various objects and make me cry and then ask if it hurts?"

"That's not what I asked," he said. "I asked if you think what I do to you is abuse."

She knew he was giving her an out. If she told him right now that she felt like he was abusing her, he would definitely stop. Yes, he believed in spanking, but he also loved her. Jonah was so moral, so true and good. She felt the easy button sliding out of her fingers as she looked at him and told him the truth because he deserved that much from her, even if it got her in trouble.

"No," she whispered. "I don't."

"Yet you started this," he said. "By saying words to that effect."

"I was pissed, Jonah," she told him. "I say hurtful things when I'm pissed. You know that. You know me."

He looked at her as if he wanted to toss her over his knee right then and smack her ass with some of those various objects.

"I don't appreciate your attitude, Christina, it would be really wise of you to adjust it before you cross one of those lines you're so fond of crossing," he said seriously. "Do you want to meet Allison and Dave for dinner?"

"Yes," she said shortly. "I'll go get ready. You might want to take a shower. You're a bit sweaty. And you smell," she added rudely.

She was almost out the door when he grabbed her and pulled her back into the studio.

"You have an evil bug up your butt today, wife," he hissed in her ear, slapping her bottom with one big, hard hand.

She couldn't stop the shiver that ran through her body at his actions.

"Ouch," she cried. "Stop."

"I can't stop," he told her seriously. "Your ass is mine, and I love it."

"Even when there's an evil bug up it?"

"Even then," he said. "Because I know how to get it out. Like so."

He spanked her again, watching her mouth open. She looked at him from under her eyelids, her blue eyes almost black with desire. He knew she was turned on. He untied her short skirt and let it fall to the floor. He slid her bikini bottom down her thighs until it hobbled her at the knees.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

He slapped her naked ass hard and darted his tongue into her ear. She clutched him, heaving her breasts against him.

"Want to take a shower together?" he asked, pulling her bikini back up to cover her pink bottom.

She didn't say anything, and he took her silence as acquiescence. He grabbed her hand and pulled her into the house, through the hall, up the stairs and into their bedroom. She stood mutely as he dragged her tank top off and quickly unclasped the top of her bikini. He peeled off her bikini bottom, tossing it over his shoulder.

He cupped her breast reverently and leaned down to kiss the tip of one hard nipple. She groaned. He nibbled a bit, and she squirmed. Then he knelt, hooking his hands around her hips and planting his face in her pussy, laving her labia with his tongue, and licking the juices that dribbled from her arousal. She dug her fingers into his thick hair, loosening the braid as she frantically clutched at his scalp.

He slid his finger into her well lubricated sheath and fondled her innermost points of sensation while continuing to stroke the sensitive hood of her clitoris. She came in a shuddering gasp and dug her fingers into his hair.

"Love me," she whispered to him. "Just do it right now. I need you in me."

He was happy to oblige, and she held him close to her as he thrust into her, inhaling as though in pain when he finally came.

The shower was soothing on them as they gently soaped each other and washed each other's hair, wiping the shampoo away from their eyes with a washcloth.

"I love you," Christina told her husband.

"I love you too," he said. "I hope you know, Christina, that I always love you, and I'm always thinking of you, even if I seem distracted or busy or filled with stupid projects. It's all for you. Always."

Christina felt a hard pang in her chest at his words. He was so good. He was so purely her love and so ignorant of her duplicity. She turned and gave him her back, sighing when he scrubbed her skin with a loofah.

"I know," she murmured, feeling her guilty heart splinter into a thousand pieces.

"Everything looks absolutely fine, Chris," Joy Landrum told her as she snapped off the latex gloves and tossed them in the hazardous waste can. "So I take it I won't be renewing your script for birth control?"

Christina took a deep breath and smiled at her doctor.

"Nope, I'm done," she said. "I'm ready. Tomorrow I'll be thirty-five, I'm more than ready."

"Do you have birthday plans?" Joy smiled. "Mike surprised me and rented a stretch limo and invited 20 friends to Atlantic City for my 35th birthday. God, what a blast."

"Thanks, Joy, for sharing yet another story about your fabulous, devoted husband," Chris laughed. "Jonah is not planning anything remotely like that. We're just meeting friends and family for dinner at the Sea Urchin."

"I love that place; maybe I'll see you there. Have a wonderful birthday," the doctor said. "And regarding operation baby, proceed with fun and give Jonah my best," Joy told her. "He must be ecstatic."

"I haven't told him yet."

"Christina, you do love to torture that man!"

"I'll tell him tonight," Christina promised.

The two women hugged briefly.

"If you don't hear from me, everything is fine with your pap, and hopefully I'll be seeing you really soon for another, happy test." Joy patted her arm as she retrieved the file with Christina's medical history.

"Thanks, Joy." Christina waved as the doctor left the room.

She dressed quickly. She had a board meeting at the magazine in half an hour and wanted to eat her yogurt and apple before it started.

Jonah brought home the *Friday Night Special* sushi from the Japanese restaurant next to Jimmy's. They ate outside on their big wrap around porch. As Chris munched on a California roll, she studied her husband. He seemed preoccupied. She wanted to have a discussion about her doctor's visit, but he barely looked at her.

"Jonah, are you okay?" she finally asked.

"Fine," he said shortly.

"What's the matter?"

He sighed.

"It's just work, Christina," he said. "I've had a day from hell. Sam tells us today that the architect decided to add a seven foot area of deck to the first floor, and we already have the whole thing framed out. Just stupid stuff. Then I ran into trouble at Jimmy's and had to spend two hours fixing something that he should've taken care of last summer."

He rubbed his forehead. He looked really tired. She slipped out of her chair and went around the table to knead his neck and massage his shoulders. He was hard as a rock beneath her fingers.

"You're so tense," she murmured.

He relaxed a little as she continued to rub his back, digging her thumbs into his tight muscles.

"That feels great, babe," he told her. He leaned back and pulled her head down, so he could kiss her. Christina toppled into his lap easily enough, and they cuddled together in the deepening evening as the stars came out, pricking the velvet sky like tiny silver pins.

Later, when they went upstairs, Christina wanted to tell him that she had officially been off her birth control pills for a week. She wanted to tell him that today Joy had given her a clean bill of health, and they were finally on their way to starting their family. It was what he wanted after all. But she didn't say anything. She just tumbled silently into his arms, holding him close in the dark.

Jonah surprised her with breakfast in bed the next morning.

"Happy birthday to you," he sang in his smooth, mellow voice. He had been in a garage band all through high school, and for the last twenty years, *The Surf Bums* had been playing one to two gigs a

month. Dave played bass. Jonah sang lead vocals and played acoustic guitar. Jimmy played drums, and their old buddy Tom Gerard played keyboard. They were an icon in Sandy Creek and were very popular at beach events and private parties.

"Thank you, yum," she said, breaking off a piece of crumb cake and munching a big kernel of sugar and powdered sugar. "You went to Bedeckers, and bought me my favorite breakfast in the world."

Bedeckers was a tiny breakfast café that was open from 6 until 12 every day of the year. There was a fat croissant stuffed with crispy bacon and scrambled eggs, a big mug of creamy tea and the huge wedge of crumb cake.

"In honor of your birthday, no peach stand today," he told her. "It's a gorgeous day. First we'll start with a little surfing and then join Allison and Dave for a nice excursion out on the Ally Cat. Then party at the Urch. This is for you."

He dropped a heavy little package in her lap.

She picked it up and shook it.

"That is one heavy diamond, honey," she joked.

He watched her face light up when she unwrapped the mahogany paperweight he had carved for her. It was in the shape of two people entwined in an embrace.

"It's so beautiful," she exclaimed. "When did you ever find time to do this?"

"There's always time for you, sweetie." He kissed her on the nose. He'd give her the desk tonight after the party. He'd fabricate some story why she had to go on to the Sea Urchin with Allison and then Dave was going to help him move it into her office. He even had a big bow to wrap around it.

The day passed by too quickly. The waves were awesome, and they surfed for three hours, finally breaking for lunch at the Crab Shack. They spent the afternoon lazily skimming the bay on the Ally Cat, drinking a couple of cold beers and snacking on chips and dip. All too soon, it was time to head home, to get ready for dinner.

"This has been the best birthday so far," Chris told Jonah happily as they drove back to the farmhouse.

"I hope it gets even better," he told her.

Christina dressed in a sleek black halter dress that clung to her curves and fell just above her ankles. She slipped into a pair of strappy black sandals and brushed her dark brown hair until it crackled. She braided Jonah's hair for him while he ironed a white shirt that made him look like a beach god/poet when he wore it loose over his favorite pair of well worn jeans.

His cell phone suddenly rang. He listened, said okay and then snapped it shut.

"Dave needs me to help him get the Cat anchored, a piling cracked, and he lost the mooring. He'll drop Allison here, and you girls can take the TR6. I'll ride with Dave and meet you at the Urchin in fifteen minutes or so, okay babe?"

"Don't get your pretty white shirt dirty," she told him.

"I'll be careful."

Jonah kissed her as she got into the Triumph with Ally.

"See you in a few," he said.

The rest of *The Surf Bums* and their wives were at the restaurant, as well as Christina's parents, her sisters Kate and Maura and Kate's husband Sean. Maura's boyfriend Peter was conspicuous by his

absence. Chris knew there had to be a story there. Her brother Tim was there and Jeanette, Pamela, Linda and her husband Paul. Her paternal grandmother, Nanna Clancy, sat in an armchair smiling at everyone and waving regally like a queen.

"Merry Christmas," she told the waitress as she helped herself to a glass of champagne. "I'm enjoying the boat ride immensely."

"Okay, Merry Christmas to you too," the girl said blankly. "Anchors aweigh."

"Nanna has a little time and space problem," Maura explained to the baffled waitress.

They had an alcove off the main dining room all for themselves, and their waitress passed hot hors d'oeuvres and served drinks.

"This is fun," said Chris to Ally as she took a sip of champagne. "I like birthdays."

"So what did Jonah say when you told him you were finally off the pill?"

"I didn't tell him yet," Chris said.

"Christina Pendleton, you better tell him," Allison said, wagging her finger in her best friend's face.

"Maybe I'll tell him when I get pregnant," Chris laughed.

"Maybe you'll tell him before that," a deep voice said coldly.

Christina spun around and bumped into Jonah's chest.

Allison stammered something about getting another drink and hurried off to find Dave.

Christina's heart plummeted when she saw the look on her husband's face.

Chapter Four

"I just ran into Joy Landrum in the parking lot," Jonah said. "I was confused when she started congratulating me on our happy venture."

"Jonah," Chris began. "I was going to tell you, I just..."

"Save it, Christina," he said shortly. "I'm too angry to listen right now. And you're having a birthday, so let's party." He steered her toward the long table that was decorated with flowers and balloons, urging her along with his hand pressing into the small of her back, dangerously close to her bottom.

"I can walk, Jonah," she snapped.

"I'd watch my tone if I were you," he told her. "Birthday spanking is going to take on a whole new meaning for you, my darling wife," he murmured in her ear as he helped himself to a Corona from a bucket of cold beers on a sideboard.

Chris felt a lump in her throat at his hard words. But her mother was calling her over, so she shrugged out of Jonah's grip and escaped to Faith Clancy.

Her mother handed her a small box, and Christina inhaled with delight. She knew what it was.

"The last of my mother's diamonds," Faith told her. She had given one to each of her daughters on their thirty-fifth birthday, which was how old she'd

been when her mother had died, leaving her the enormous triple diamond pendant.

Christina unwrapped the small jeweler's box and tears came to her eyes when she looked at the beautiful platinum necklace; her mother knew she didn't wear much yellow gold and had chosen the setting with special care.

"Thank you, Mom," she whispered, embracing her mother. "I love you."

The evening passed in a blur for her. There were gifts and well-wishes and so much food and never-ending drinks. But mostly she was with her sisters or Ally. Jonah smiled and joked around, toasted her and acted so affectionate even Ally was fooled.

"I'm so glad he wasn't mad after all," she said to Chris as they waited in line in the ladies' room. "He seemed so pissed, I thought for sure you were in big trouble."

"Hmm," Christina turned her face so Ally wouldn't see her eyes well up. She didn't want to go into it right then. Jonah was furious and hurt. She could read him so well; she didn't need the words to identify his moods. She knew she was in for a real blistering when they got home.

It didn't seem fair. He was angry at her for finally doing what he wanted. What was so wrong about taking the initiative?

Men!

After the cake, when most of the guests had left and Jonah was in the other room paying the bill, she was sitting with Maura and her older sister noticed her conflicted mood.

"What's the matter with you, Christy?" Maura asked, reverting to her childhood nickname.

"Jonah's pissed at me," Christina said. "And it's not fair; I should be pissed at him."

"So, get pissed at him," Maura told her. "Men suck anyway. Can't live with 'em and can't live with 'em."

Christina smiled at her sister. Although she'd been with Peter for over a year, Maura loved her single life. Peter lived in his own home a block from the beach, and she lived in her condo on the beach and partied on the weekends and traveled when and where she wanted. She owned her own realty business and was hugely successful in the beach community.

"You're right, Maury," she said. "Who needs them?"

An idea germinated in her brain. Maybe Jonah would lose some of that anger if he didn't have her to push around.

"Maura, help me cart these gifts out to my car, okay?" she told her sister. "I need a favor from you."

Sure, anything for my little sis," Maura said.

Christina leaned down to whisper something in Ally's ear as she passed by her friend who was sitting on Dave's lap and looking decidedly content.

Allison jerked her head up, smacking into Dave, when the words sank in. But Christina was already gone.

"Hey, that's my nose, woman," Dave complained, rubbing his injured body part.

"Sorry," Ally said. "Oh crap, this is not going to be good."

"She what?"

Allison jumped when Jonah stormed past her.

"That girl's in serious trouble," Dave said.

"She's long gone by now," Ally said. "He's not going to find her outside."

As if to prove her point, Jonah strode back into the restaurant.

"Why would she do this?" he asked "Is she really such a spoiled brat?"

"No," Ally said. Dave squeezed her hand warningly and pulled her to his side.

"Rhetorical question," he whispered to his wife. "I guess we're going to head out, man," he told his friend. "Good luck and thanks for the party. Manana the waves?"

"You got that right," Jonah said. "I'll meet you early."

"I'll pick up the joe."

Jonah clasped his friend's hand and bent to kiss Allison on the cheek. He watched them leave and after they were gone, it dawned on him that he was without a means to get home. He went to talk to his brother-in-law who was sitting at the bar flirting with a pretty blond.

Tim was surprised when Jonah plopped onto the bar stool next to him.

"Your sister is driving me to drink," he said, ordering a Miller Lite.

"Sounds about right," said Tim. "I have three sisters, no wonder I'm a fun seeking alcoholic."

"Hey, I've had this one for the last ten years, you have no excuse."

"I worry about her, being her big brother and all," Tim said.

"Well I don't understand her," Jonah told him. "I've been begging her to have a baby for the last ten years and she decides in a moment to stop taking birth control and then doesn't tell me."

"Really?" Tim's eyebrows disappeared into his curly brown hair. "So she's trying to get pregnant and hasn't even clued you in?"

"Exactly. And I respected her decision to not have children for the last ten years, and I'd expect the same respect. Discussion and a mutual decision to go forward, not just hey I'm not gonna take the pill anymore, and fuck you by the way.'

"You're right," Tim said. "Although I do feel definitely creepy speaking about my sister like this. Can we change the subject?"

"Sure, how's your love life?"

"The blonde's name is Bridget, and I do believe she likes me," whispered Tim. "I think you should go spank your wife or something because I'm absolutely on a winning streak here."

Jonah laughed at Tim's innocent words. Little did the younger man know.

"Not tonight," Jonah said. "I actually need a favor. Your sister left me stranded. Can I bum a ride?"

Tim nodded.

"I'd better take you now. Bridget's looking more interested in you than me," he said. "Self preservation first and foremost is my goal."

Jonah finished his beer and dropped a ten on the bar.

"Thanks, Tim."

"Anytime," said Tim, flashing his Casanova smile at the voluptuous Bridget. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Keep my seat warm?"

"I'd love to," the girl said, giggling.

Jonah waved as his brother-in-law backed out of the driveway, heading back to the Urchin. Tim tooted the horn and rumbled away in his truck.

The bright red bow and the festooned balloons that decorated the cherry desk caught his eye as he passed Christina's office. She hadn't even seen her present yet.

Anger boiled in his veins as he remembered Allison's message from his wife.

"Tell Jonah I'm not coming home tonight. I don't appreciate his threats and general attitude. I'm his wife, not his child. I'll talk to him later."

She sure acted like a child. Jonah grabbed a bottle of water and stretched out on the couch. His palm was actually tingling as he thought about the way he was going to educate Christina when he finally got his hands on her.

But images of his dark haired wife brought a smile to his lips as well. She was such a beautiful woman; her heart was kind and her mind lively, and if she did have an excess of the smart ass gene, at least she kept him on his toes. The fact that they were finally going to try to start a family overwhelmed him with joy. He would love to see Christina's beautiful features on their own little girl or her deep blue eyes shining out from a little boy's mop of dark curls. He knew that once she got past her original trepidations, she was going to be a great mother. He hoped he'd be a good father.

But that was the future.

The present was still a burr under his skin. He intended to correct that problem in the morning. Christina Anne Clancy Pendleton had a reckoning due her, and he was itching to do it.

"Maury, do you want eggs?" Chris called to her sister. She was frying herself a couple over easy, and the pan was still hot.

"God, no," Maura said. "Black coffee and a handful of pretzels. That's breakfast in this Clancy household."

"That's gross," Chris said. "Sunday is big breakfast day in the Pendleton house. I loves my eggs and my bacon too."

"Tick tick tick," Maura sniped. "Oh, is that a heart attack waiting to happen?"

"Eggs are good for you. Protein."

"Pretzels are good for you. Salt," Maura countered.

They sat at the little table on Maura's balcony, overlooking the glimmering Atlantic. It was a gorgeous morning. It was early, not yet seven-thirty. Maura opened the paper to the real estate section.

"Thank God, I don't have an Open House," she said. "I just want to take it easy today."

"Want to hang at the beach with me?"

"Maybe. So, are you going to call your husband or just see if he shows up here and drags you out by the hair?"

"Why does everyone think that Jonah is part caveman?"

"Possibly because you constantly remind us that he is," Maura said.

"I only say things like that to generate sympathy. You're not supposed to really believe it," Chris argued. "God, Mom and Dad are going to be sending Father Billy to my house if they think I'm married to a tyrant."

"Ahem, Christy Anne, last night you told me that you were afraid to go home because, and I quote,

my husband is the world's biggest bully, and he's going to make my life a living hell." Maura sighed. "I am afraid you're just a big bamboozler, pulling the wool over my eyes."

"Jonah's different," Chris began tentatively. "He reacts in a different way when he's mad at me or when I screw up. He's not like regular people."

"I thought he spanked you."

Christina choked on a mouthful of eggs

"Shit, Maura, what a thing to say."

"Well, isn't it true? Katie told me that he's done it since day one," Maura said. "Obviously you felt you could confide in the oldest sister and not me, no biggie, she tells me everything anyway. But who told Mom - because last night she asked me what you'd done to make Jonah want to, and I quote again, put you over his knee."

"Oh no," Chris groaned, laying her head down on the table. "Everyone knows. Oh God."

"Not everyone, I don't think Nanna Clancy knows," Maura said reassuringly. "But I don't think Nanna Clancy knows her own name. By the way, she had a really great time last night. I think she thought it was her thirty-fifth birthday. She tried to pick up the bartender on the way out."

"And my family's okay with me having a husband who, well, who does that to me?"

"Obviously, we think you need spanking," Maura pointed out. Then she burst into laughter. "Christina, hello, you love the big galoot, and we love him too. If you let him, and I quote, do that to you, well, who are we to say anything about it? You're clearly over twenty one, and he's the love of your life. Plus, you can be a brat."

"Okay, stop with the quoting."

"Really, Chris, it's not the strangest thing in the world," her sister told her. "A little spanking never hurt anyone, well that's not exactly true, but never seriously damaged anyone. I quite enjoyed it when Peter would get his strict thing going."

"You too?"

"Yup. So, tell me, Christy, what really happened to make Jonah look like, as Tim says, notice I'm not quoting, I'm just paraphrasing now, he wanted to throttle you and toss you into the ocean as fish bait."

"Tim said that?"

"No," Maura sighed. "I told you I was paraphrasing. Tim said that Jonah looked like he wanted to spank the bejesus out of you. He also said something about you going off birth control and not telling Jonah. But I knew that was a big lie. You'd never do that. Not after holding that man at bay for the last ten years."

Christina held her head in her hands. She felt horrible. This all started because she felt horrible. If she'd just gone to Jonah last week and come clean, told him her feelings, none of this would've happened.

"It's true," she mumbled. "I felt so bad when I realized that I was trying not to get pregnant for no reason. I just stopped the pill. Then I had an appointment with Joy and told her I wasn't on the pill anymore, and I told her I was telling Jonah that night. But I didn't, and she mentioned it when she saw him last night. End of story. Me bad, Jonah good."

Chris looked out at the ocean and saw a few surfers in the white froth of waves. Jonah wouldn't be at this beach. But she knew he'd want to be in

the water, on his board. It was a morning meant for surfing.

"Chris, honey, you better go home," Maura said gently. "Don't let this thing fester any more, go fess up and take your medimen."

The sisters chuckled at her reminder of Christina's childhood pronunciation of medicine.

"Medimen sucks," Chris said.

"Yes, it does. But so does lying to and deceiving your husband."

"I could say I didn't lie," Chris said. "But that's just nit picking. Anyway, point taken."

She finished her breakfast and drank her tea, staring out at the deep green ripple of water. She didn't relish the idea of going home. Jonah was going to be even more furious today than he'd been last night. She was going to be one sorry puppy for running out on him.

She carried her plate into the kitchen and loaded it into the dishwasher.

Maura was still reading the paper on her balcony. Chris hugged her and gave her a big fat smooch on the lips.

"I'm going to borrow these clothes and sandals until later, okay?" she said, patting the loose fitting khaki shorts she'd borrowed from her sister's dresser.

"Definitely. We don't want you walking out of here in your fancy dress. People will think we're an item."

"Shut up," Chris laughed. "You are so not my type. And thank you, my seester, I love you, and I appreciate the bed and the breakfast of heart attack waiting to happen."

"My pleasure," Maura said. "Keep me posted about the reunion. Like how many swats and all."

She ducked when her little sister went to slap her arm.

"Not funny, Maura," Chris hissed. "Don't you dare tell anyone about this."

"Who would I tell? Everyone knows."

Chris groaned as she left her sister, grabbing her bag and her clothes from the plump white sofa and letting herself out into the thickly carpeted hall.

She didn't want to go home.

She drove toward Echo Point, a quiet stretch of beach at the edge of Sandy Creek that served as a wildlife sanctuary and a retreat for solitude lovers. There were a couple of acres of narrow boardwalks that meandered through the dunes grasses, offering peaceful vistas of ocean, sky and sandy beach. She parked her car near a tiny kiosk that sold trail maps and snacks.

There were only a handful of walkers out on the weathered wooden planks. She walked at a leisurely pace, enjoying the bath of sunlight that fell across her face as she inhaled the salty air. She loved the smell of brine and fish and ocean life in general. She saw an osprey perched on the top of a tall post, its rich brown plumage glittering in the sunlight. It was huge. She didn't like to see the sea eagles scavenging the carrion on the beaches but it was an impressive bird.

She jumped when the buzz of her cell phone vibrated from the pocket of Maura's shorts.

It was Jonah. She held the phone, staring at the words *Jonah Cell* that flashed across the screen of her phone.

She couldn't talk to him yet.

She waited until the red light flashed, letting her know she had a message and quickly retrieved it.

"Christina, where the hell are you? Maura says you left about half an hour ago. I'm going surfing with Dave. I want an explanation about last night and the last week. Call my cell or find me. Soon. This isn't going to go away, you know."

He hung up without saying anything else. His voice was still the mad voice. The *I am not going to budge because you are wrong* voice.

Chris seethed at his implied threat. Why couldn't he just say that he loved her, and that nothing she did was beyond forgiveness? That he missed her.

She continued her walk, bristling inwardly from a sense of outrage that she couldn't shake. Yes, she was wrong, but he was implacable. Would it kill him to bend a little? She wanted to hear a husky bit of desire in his voice. She imagined his face, faintly scruffy with morning shadow before shaving. His long hair would be in a ponytail, blond highlights where the sun hit it in the morning light, swaying against his muscular, totally golden tan torso as he raced toward the surf. Khaki board shorts that hung to just above his knees. He was an Adonis at the beach. Girls drooled over him.

His eyes were spectacular, mossy green with a fringe of deep brown lashes that echoed the deep brows above. He wore a tiny silver hoop in one ear. He called it his "C."

Great, Chris thought, now she was getting horny for the big galoot.

She walked back to her car, her reflective morning mood spoiled now. She called Ally as she bought a coffee at the kiosk.

"Chris?"

"Hi Ally," she said. "Milk and sweet and low," she told the man behind the counter.

"What's going on?" her friend asked.

"I'm in trouble. Haven't been home yet or seen the man."

"The man is definitely looking for you," Ally pointed out. "He drove around looking for your car before he met Dave this morning. He went to your parents, Kate's, Jeanette's, even Tim's before he checked out Maura's condo. He must have been out since six AM."

Chris felt a twinge of remorse but quickly shoved it back.

"He was his usual charming self on the message he left me," she said. "Not much love, just where the hell are you, get home. Blah, blah, blah."

"Come pick me up," Ally said. "We'll go watch them surf. It'll be fun. Just like old times."

"Allison," Chris sighed.

"No, really, c'mon, Chris," Ally said. "We'll be together. It won't be so bad because you won't be alone, and at least, you'll get it over with."

Chris thought about it and decided Ally was probably right. It was kind of cowardly but who said she was brave.

"Okay," she told her friend. "I'll be there in five minutes. Want a coffee?"

"No, I'm on my second already."

Allison was waiting out front when the TR6 swung in front of the cute cottage on the bay. Chris drove to South Creek Beach where Jimmy's Surf Shop was, which was where Dave and Jonah surfed. There were a lot of cars in the sandy lot across from the beach.

"Mucho surfers today," Chris commented.

Ally made a disgusted sound as she pointed toward a red Jetta.

"Lilah is here," she said. "I hate the way she always tries to pick up Dave. She knows he's married."

"She's made the moves on Jonah too," Chris said. "He can't stand her."

"Girl can surf though."

"True."

They walked to the cement promenade that lined the beach. There was a low stone wall at one end that overlooked the surfing beach; it was in front of the rustic, sprawling "Crab Shack," where most of the surfers hung out. Chris and Ally sat down on the wall and stared out at the waves.

"It's gorgeous today. Look at the waves," Allison said.

"What's that?" Chris pointed to the daily specials blackboard in front of the Shack.

Surf Bums Today 4 PM was scrawled across in bright pink chalk.

"Didn't you hear Jimmy tell them last night that he booked them for today?" Ally asked. "He basically made an announcement to the whole bar, trying to drum up some business for the Shack."

"The beer *is* cheaper than at the Urchin," Chris commented. "But I didn't hear Jimmy say that. I was too preoccupied with my strong, silent, disapproving award winning actor of a husband to pay much attention to anything else."

"It's a benefit for Ryan Pearson, that fireman who has leukemia," Ally said. "It's to raise money for his treatment and his family."

"Are we going?"

"Chris, of course, we are," Ally told her friend. "I do *not* allow David to perform at the beach without proper supervision. Too many gorgeous girl

wannabe surfer chicks. Your whole family said they would be there."

"Uh oh," Chris whistled through her teeth. "We've been spotted."

Their husbands were walking out of the frothy surf, carrying their boards. They stopped to unattach their ankle leashes and prop their boards upright in the sand.

A blond woman suddenly jumped up from her towel, planting herself in front of the two men.

"Lilah," Ally hissed.

"Why does she have her hand on Jonah's chest?" Chris asked. "That bitch needs to go home."

Jonah slipped past the blond and headed up the beach toward them. Dave followed, laughing over his shoulder at something Lilah was saying.

Chris felt her stomach turn somersaults as she watched her husband approach. He was walking grimly, with purpose. She was certain he wouldn't do anything here. She *hoped* he wouldn't do anything here. Christina fought the urge to hightail it out of there.

Dave and Jonah vaulted the low wall to walk the rest of the way on the promenade.

"Be brave," whispered Ally.

All too soon, he was standing in front of her. She stared at the dusting of sand on his bare feet.

"Christina," he said.

"Jonah," she answered, finally looking in his face.

"Let's take a walk," he said, reaching out and grabbing her hand before she could make another escape.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not at all."

He pulled her along beside him up the promenade toward the end of the beach.

When they were in an isolated spot with only a few sunbathers on the beach, he stopped.

"Sit down and start talking," Jonah said, pointing toward a wooden bench.

"How 'bout I stand up and stop talking?"

She was completely unprepared for the sudden swat that landed across her butt. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she immediately sat on the bench, at least to shield her bottom from any further humiliating attacks.

"God, Jonah," she complained.

"Do you want me to turn you over my knee and give you now what I planned to give you at home?"

"You wouldn't," she said in a sulky voice.

"Yes I would," he told her. "Do you want me to?"

"No."

"Then I suggest you lose the attitude and start talking to me," he told her. He took her chin in his hand and tilted her face up so that she was forced to look into his eyes. "What happened, Christina? Why all this drama?"

Chris tried to hold onto her feelings of righteous anger, but when she looked at his face, she felt all of her inner resolve crumble. She wanted to be held; she craved forgiveness.

She knew she wasn't really angry at him. She was angry at herself.

"Please, Jonah," she whispered. "Just hold me."

"No," he said. "First you talk."

She sighed. It was going to be a long day.

Chapter Five

The bewildered anger in Jonah's eyes made her cry. After her resistance had melted away and she tried to hug him and was rebuffed, she felt more forlorn than ever before in her life. She looked at him piteously and leaned toward him. He held her away.

"First you talk," he said again, resolutely.

"I'm sorry I left you last night," she whispered. "That was horrible of me to do, and I should've at least thanked you for a wonderful birthday and party."

"Yes, you should have," he agreed.

"The thing is," she continued. "I realized last week that I was so totally wrong about this baby thing. I was wrong, and you never called me on it; you just let me be. And I'm not blaming you, well, yeah, maybe I was blaming you because I felt a bit abandoned and really, really guilty."

She paused, looked into his steady gaze.

"Jonah, you bust my butt if I forget to call you, and yet you've let me slide for ten years on my own desires?"

"Christina, it's your body," he said gently. "I would've loved for us to start a family a while ago, but that doesn't mean I'm not just as happy to start one now. There's no blame here. The only thing I'm mad about is you acting without any respect for me. You don't suddenly decide to have a baby and

move forward on your own; that's just selfish. You talk to me, and we discuss the matter, and then we move forward. That's why I'm angry. It's not about the last ten years. Those years were perfect because we were perfect."

Chris was sobbing. He reached for her and gathered her in his strong arms and patted her back. She finally felt better.

"And then to have you ditch me last night was totally wrong," he continued. "I don't treat you like a child, but sometimes you do act like one. I worry when I don't know where you are."

She didn't argue that he could've figured out where she was. She couldn't stop the tears from sliding down her nose, onto his breastbone.

"Shhh," he soothed. "Don't cry. You make me feel like that big old caveman you're always calling me for making you cry."

"You are a caveman," she said in between snuffles. "But I was wrong. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he told her. "We'll address it at home, and we'll make it right."

"Do we have to do it now?" Even though she wanted it over with, she was still not looking forward to a punishment spanking.

"Yes, now," he said. "The Surf Bums are due back here by three, so we have a lot to take care of. Let's get going."

Her mouth dropped open when he scooped her up in his arms and lifted her, walking back down the promenade with her cradled against his chest.

"Jonah," she whispered. "Put me down."

"No way, you might run," he said.

"I won't," she told him. "I promise."

Her face was burning in embarrassment.

"This has to look weird," she said. "Like you're trying to be Richard Gere in *An Officer and a Gentleman* only no white dress uniform, no clothes actually at all."

"Honey, we *are* weird, haven't you figured that out yet?"

She sighed. He was right. And the perfume of his sea scented chest made her sigh happily as she rested her cheek against the springy, curly hair around his nipple.

"I love you, you big nasty brute," she whispered.

"I love you too, you spoiled prima donna princess."

"Hey," she slugged him in the arm.

Ally and Dave waved as they passed them on the way to the sandy parking lot.

"Way to go, Paula," Ally called.

"What'd she say?" asked Jonah.

"Debra Winger's character in *Officer and a Gentleman*," she explained. "It's only like one of our favorite movies."

"You're both the weird ones," he told her, tossing his truck keys to Dave. "Can you drive it over with my board before the gig?" he called.

Dave nodded. Jonah deposited Chris in the front seat of her car. He held his hand out, waiting for her to give him her keys.

She pulled them out of her bag and dropped them in his palm.

"You're driving me crazy," she quipped.

"You too," he replied, sliding his hand under her seat and squeezing her butt cheek.

Chris groaned.

At home, he steered her straight to the bedroom, without letting her stop for a second in the kitchen. Then he guided her into the corner.

"I think that corner time today would be an added benefit," he said.

"Jonah," she protested. She hated it when he made her do this. It seemed so stupid to stare into the walls.

"Christina, don't argue; just listen to me for once," he said sternly. "Maybe you'll feel better after all this. You need time to reflect, think about things."

She bit back the snotty remark that was poised on the edge of her tongue. He deserved her obedience in this instance.

She felt foolish, standing there with her nose almost touching the jointure of walls, silent and waiting in much trepidation for his first move. It felt like an eternity. For once, she allowed his words to lead her to a place of repentance. She thought about how she'd treated him and was truly sorry.

"Come here, Christina," he finally said.

She turned from the corner and saw him sitting on the edge of the bed. His face was solemn and so handsome; she felt a twinge of warm desire in her groin. Slowly, she walked to him, dreading the moment when he would topple her over, make her lose whatever equilibrium she had acquired in the silent moments before.

He captured her within his legs and neatly turned her over his lap. His board shorts were still faintly damp, but she didn't say a word to him about sitting on the bed in a damp suit. He pulled down Maura's shorts and her own bikini briefs to her knees.

"Why are you here?" he began in his customary pre-spanking lecture.

"Because I wronged you," she said honestly. "Because I disrespected you and behaved badly, and made you worry last night."

"You did not wrong me," he said gently. "You did behave badly and make me worry. You disrespected me and us, but that's it and this clears it all up, Christina. No more guilt. We need to go forward."

"SMACK!"

Her bottom quivered under the first hard spank and shuddered at his ferocity. It was quickly followed by a volley of rapid spanks.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

She was gasping, her skin on fire from his hand. How did he have such a hard hand, she wondered.

"I'm going to use my belt," he told her. "I think you deserve my belt."

She squeaked in protest but couldn't move against him.

He retrieved the wide leather strip from the bed where it was waiting and doubled it over.

THWACK!

She yelped as the fiery band of pain wrapped across her already stinging, bare bottom.

"Jonah," she screamed. "Please don't."

THWACK! THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!

He repeated the striping across her ass cheeks until she collapsed in a heap of tears across his lap, her face buried in the quilt. Then he stroked her throbbing skin with his hand, rubbing her until she moaned.

"Christina, you're now done with all of this. No more guilt, you're forgiven," Jonah told her as he

lifted her into his arms. "I love you so much, and I'm so proud of you. Let's talk about your prescription now."

"Uh, Jonah, I don't think I should take birth control any longer," Chris said. "I'd like to try to have a baby. What do you think?"

"I think it's a great idea," he told her. "Want to make our first attempt?"

"Technically not our first," Chris pointed out.

"It is *our* first," he corrected.

She smiled slowly at him, pushing him down on the bed until she straddled him. She wiggled out of her shorts and panties, rubbing the length of her legs against his warm, muscular thighs. He yanked off her tank top and tossed it. She spread her fingers against his pounding chest, twining her fingers in the coarse curls that grew there. Her large breasts swung above his face, and he caught one nipple in his mouth, latching onto it and rolling her over on the bed. She hissed when her ass made contact with the quilt.

"Oops," he said, biting her nipple gently.

The sting on her bottom hurt, but the exquisite pain of her nipples and her desire overcame her, and she dug her fingernails into his shoulders.

When he inhaled sharply, she grinned at him through half-lidded eyes.

"Oops," she said.

"Touché," he said, smiling down at her.

They moved frantically together, desperate for the penetration that would make him part of her and vice versa.

"Wow," Christina whispered when it was over and they were lying, spent on the bed, her head nestled under his arm, her bottom perched on his thigh.

"Yeah, wow," he agreed, stroking the side of her stomach.

Chris sniffed.

"My head is in your armpit," she complained.

"Ah, don't you love the smell of B.O. after a rigorous morning of surf, sun and sex," he exclaimed.

She twisted around and pummeled his chest.

"I do not," she told him. "Although I do love the smell of you."

"Why don't you go downstairs and see what we have for lunch."

She fastened her lips to his and dove her tongue into his mouth. She caressed his shoulders gently, flattening herself against him.

But he wanted her to see her birthday present. He knew she wouldn't make it into the kitchen without stopping first in her office, to check her email.

"Go downstairs now, woman," he said again, swatting her on her sore butt.

She made a face at him and straightened up, climbing off of him. She slipped into one of his tee shirts and left the room.

He laughed when he heard her scream. He appeared in the doorway to her office to find her sprawled across the new desk, hugging the sides of cherry wood.

"Ohmigod, Jonah, I was so sad today when I realized it was gone from your studio, and I never even got to say goodbye to it. I love it. I love it. I love it. And I love you!"

She threw herself at him, wrapping her legs around him. He held her close, patting her hair, her back. He loved her excitement. He loved her.

"I'll make us some grilled cheese sandwiches," he told her. "Why don't you check out your birthday present."

And so she did. She pulled out every drawer. In a little secret compartment in the large center drawer, she found a turquoise and silver ring holding a scrolled piece of paper.

She slid the ring off and tried it on. It fit perfectly. It was the ring she'd admired at the antique store in town for the last few months. She'd whined about it so much, she thought he'd refuse to buy it for her out of principle. Jonah hated to be pressured. And he hated whining.

She unfurled the parchment paper and could not stop the tears from falling as she read the words her husband had written for her.

*My Christina
She breathes
And the moon glows
She smiles
And the sun shines
She speaks
And my heart listens
She is my moon
She is my sun
She is my heart
My Christina
My love
My redemption*

*Happy 35th Birthday
Love, J*

Jonah was standing at the stove, two ovals of rye bread stuffed with American cheese and

tomatoes sizzling in the frying pan as he monitored them with a large spatula.

Christina wrapped her arms around his waist, letting one hand cup him tenderly as she kissed his neck, his ear lobes, and his stubbly chin.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "I love you so much; you are the most perfect man in the world."

"Talk about something to live up to," he murmured, turning around to press his hard erection into her soft belly.

Christina didn't stop there.

"You cook," she told him, dropping to her knees beside him.

He tasted so good. She whipped her tongue up and around his stiff cock, cradling his balls in her palm and then tenderly took him in her mouth, sucking and tonguing until he was groaning. When he came, Christina dug her fingers into his ass cheeks, holding him in her mouth, milking him for every drop of cum.

"Baby," he whispered. "Oh baby. That was fantastic."

"*You* are fantastic," she said. "But are you burning the sandwiches?"

"Shit."

The Benefit for Ryan Pearson was going great. The Surf Bums played their first set and encored three times before leaving the makeshift stage in front of the Crab Shack.

Lilah, the blond surfer girl, was lounging against the side of the building, her eyes following the band as they made their way to the bar set up outside the front door.

"Want a beer?" she called to Dave, holding up a Corona with a wedge of lime jutting out of the neck of the bottle.

"Sounds great," he said, taking the drink from her.

"You guys were fabulous," she drawled. "You should be signed."

"We don't want to be signed," Dave laughed. "We really are surf bums, and we play music because it's fun. If it became a job, it probably wouldn't be fun any more."

"Oh, well, you're really good anyway," she said, swinging her long blond hair off of her shoulders. "Where's Jonah going?"

Dave glanced over to see Jonah heading inside.

"Lilah, I don't usually keep tabs on my buddies," he said. "He's probably skipping to the loo. But what do I know?"

Lilah laughed as though Dave had just said the funniest thing.

Allison looked over from where she was sitting with Chris.

"That stupid child is beginning to irritate me," Ally said. "Excuse me while I go ask Dave if he took his Viagra today. Because I feel good and horny."

"Be careful, Ally Cat," Chris called. "Don't cause a scene."

Allison rubbed her knuckles on her chest.

"Piece of cake," she said. "I eat little girls like that for breakfast."

"I thought you ate Cap'n Crunch."

"That too," Ally said in her tough voice. "Call that girl a Crunch Berry."

Chris smiled as Allison sauntered over to where Dave was standing with Lilah.

A few minutes later, Lilah strolled away and went inside the Shack.

Score One for Ally! Chris smiled.

Maura came over to where Chris was sitting and plopped into the green resin chair that Ally had vacated. She leaned in close to her sister, an excited and scared expression on her face.

"Peter is here," she said. "I haven't seen him in three weeks, and he's here tonight after our little conversation this morning. Isn't that weird?"

"Totally bizarre," Chris agreed. "By the way, I never asked, but why haven't you spoken in three weeks?"

"Remember that strict side I told you about?"

Chris nodded.

"Well he was pissed at something I did or said; I don't even remember what, but he basically said he expected a phone call from me apologizing for it. And I didn't feel like calling."

"You don't remember what you did?"

Maura made a face at her little sister, running her fingers through her shoulder length curls in exasperation.

"Oh all right," Maura snapped. "I walked out on him in a restaurant. After I said a few choice words to him and tossed like a half an inch of wine in his lap. No big deal."

"Maury!" Chris whistled between her teeth. "Red or white?"

"Lucky for him, chardonnay."

"So what brought on the name calling and wine tossing?"

"He was talking about getting married and me having babies and not working so much," Maura snorted. "Hello, do I need some straight-laced

lawyer telling me that my biological clock is ticking away? Fuck him."

"So where is he?" Chris asked, patting her sister's hand, trying to calm her down.

"He was inside talking to Jonah," Maura said. "Until that blond chick came in and started hanging on Jonah's every word. Who is she?"

"Lilah," Chris said shortly. "Surf bitch."

"I thought you were a surf bitch."

"I'm a surf widow," Chris told her sister. "And a sometime surfer. Lilah surfs and wants to surf the guys. Know what I mean?"

"Are you going to let her fawn over your man like that?" Maura asked indignantly.

"Uh, Maura, what part of spanking husband don't you understand?" Chris said. "The one and only time I caused a scene and nearly pulled that bitch's hair out, I got upended the second I got home, and my husband wailed on my butt. Jonah does not play. Haven't you figured out that he gets plenty of offers every day and never even realizes it? He was so pissed when he got that I was jealous. That does not fly with him."

"You are pretty calm, sis."

"Years of practice," Chris said. "That doesn't mean I won't try a little vindictive payback later. If I think I can get away with it."

Maura laughed. That was more like the Christina she grew up with.

Peter Mueller suddenly appeared at the side of Maura's chair. Chris smiled up at her sister's longest lasting boyfriend. She'd really thought he'd be the one to finally retire Maura from her single life.

"Hi Peter," she said.

"Hi, Christina, how's everything?"

"Everything is great. Still enjoying your subscription to SCS?" she asked pointedly.

"I read it cover to cover every month. I really liked your story on surfing," he told her. He looked down at Maura, ruffling her curly auburn hair. "And how are you, Maura?"

Maura glanced up nonchalantly.

"Hey," she said. "I'm fine. How 'bout you?"

"Still waiting for that call," he said. "That was on Friday. Well, it's Sunday, three weeks later and still no call."

"What's the matter, your dialing finger broken?"

"Maura, did you not call me to make a point? Was I supposed to understand something from your appalling behavior and then your silence?"

"Understand what you want," she said sullenly.

Chris couldn't keep her eyes off the drama that was unfolding before her eyes. Peter the normally sweet and affable was becoming Peter the strict and domineering. Without any warning, he lifted Maura out of her chair and tossed her over his shoulder.

"Hey," Maura squeaked.

"We're going for a walk on the beach to have a discussion," Peter said.

"Fuck you, put me down," Maura screeched.

He answered that with a swift and powerful smack to her helpless bottom.

Christina gasped, quickly covering her mouth with her hand. She watched mutely as Peter strode across the promenade to the beach. He didn't put Maura down the whole time Chris watched them.

"Ohmigod," she whispered. "Ohmigod!"

"Did Peter Mueller just carry your sister down the beach," Faith Clancy asked, appearing at Christina's elbow. "And did he... well, did he..."

"Yes, he did," Chris said. "He really did. I can't even believe it, but he did. He fucking did."

"Christina Anne," her mother said sharply. "Such language..."

"Is totally inappropriate," added Jonah who came up behind them. "Even given the circumstances."

"Did you see?" Chris asked, holding onto her husband's hand and pulling him down for a kiss.

"Unbelievable," Jonah said. "Mueller's a braver man than I."

He leaned into her hair and whispered quietly in her ear.

"You should apologize to your mom, she's shocked."

"God," Chris sighed loudly. "She doesn't care. Mom, do you really care that I said the 'f' word? Jonah seems to think you do."

Faith rolled her eyes.

"Do you think I'm stupid enough to get in the middle of this? Keep me out of your battles," she said, laughing as she went to find her husband.

Jonah scooped Christina up in his arms and sat down in her chair, hugging his wife on his lap.

"I thought she'd be shocked," he said. "I'm used to your foul mouth, but she's a genteel lady."

"How long have you been her son-in-law? Do you not know where I learned to curse like a sailor?"

"That's true enough," he agreed.

"Wonder what's happening on the beach," Christina said.

"Don't get any ideas about going spying," Jonah told her. "I'm very comfortable."

"That was ridiculous," Maura spat as Peter continued walking with her in his arms.

"You're ridiculous," Peter countered.

"Yeah, so why are you kidnapping me?"

"I love you," Peter said simply. "A few weeks ago I was going to give you something before you gave my lap a wine bath. Now I want to give you something else."

"Well I don't want anything from you," Maura said stubbornly. "Put me down."

Peter complied, dropping her on her butt in the sand.

He then surprised her by kneeling in front of her, presenting her with a small blue velvet box. Maura's mouth dropped open.

Peter snapped open the box, revealing a beautiful square cut diamond.

"Maura, will you marry me?"

Maura startled both of them by bursting into tears. She never cried.

"Why?" she asked, hiccupping. "I'm thirty-eight years old. I'm so set in my ways I'm almost crotchety. I bitch a lot, and I'm demanding. I don't cook at all."

"I know," Peter said, rubbing her back. "Will you marry me?"

"You're an idiot."

"I know. Will you marry me?"

She looked into his warm hazel eyes and couldn't help her hand from brushing his gray tinged hair off his temple.

"I do love you," she finally told him. "So you really think you can handle me? I mean being married to me?" She blushed.

"Definitely," Peter said. He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "We Muellers have ways of dealing with brats."

Maura didn't like the gleam in his eyes. She began inching back from him, her progress impeded by the sand. He caught her in his arms, and they toppled over on the beach.

"But we'll address that tonight, before bed," he told her. "Right now, it's time to celebrate. Let's go tell your family."

He slipped the huge diamond onto her finger and slanted his mouth over hers, kissing her until her legs turned to jello. He lifted her to her feet and brushed the sand off the back of her pants.

"They're gonna shit," Maura laughed, jumping when her fiancé smacked her butt again. "Hey!"

"I'm getting the sand off," Peter told her innocently. "Don't be so crotchety."

Christina sat nestled in her husband's arms on an Adirondack chair outside the Shack, watching the sun begin its descent over the ocean.

Her family was scattered around on the assortment of chairs beside them or propped against the low stone wall. They all held flutes of champagne, courtesy of Peter who'd brought his own supply of glasses and bottles of chilled Taittinger. The Crab Shack didn't offer much beyond cold beer and boxed wine.

"Christy, how's your butt?" Maura asked innocently from the crook of Peter's arm.

"Shut up," Chris said. "It's fine. How's yours?"

"I hardly think this is a proper conversation," said Faith Clancy. "We all do not have to discuss

Christina and Jonah's private practices or Peter and Maura's for that matter."

"Thank you, Mom," said Christina.

"Sounds a little like us, hon," Pat Clancy chuckled, hugging his wife closer.

"Patrick," Faith chided softly.

Their children groaned. Kate covered her ears and then her belly.

"I do not want to hear this," she cried. "And I do not want your first grandchild to hear all about your kinky sex life."

Christina knew her face was bright red. But so was Maura's.

"Christy was really awful," said Tim. "Are you sure she learned her lesson, Jonah?"

"Everything is fine," Jonah told his brother-in-law, tightening his grasp on his wife. "My darling wife is perfection."

"My hippie husband is perfection," Christina whispered into his neck. "Caveman tendencies and all."

"Really?" he asked. "No more second guessing my motives? No more wanting what you don't have?"

"Really," she told him with a big smile. "In you, I have everything I'll ever want, really, truly, honestly, forever and for always."

He kissed her fervently.

"Me, too," he said.

Love's Labor

"That man, that man just makes me crazy," sputtered Christina as she wheeled Clancy's stroller onto Maura's balcony.

"By 'that man', I take it you mean Jonah?" her sister asked. She poked her head under the hood of the carriage and cooed at her little niece. "Hey, Clancy Rose, how's my favorite baby today?"

Clancy gurgled sweetly in her sleep.

"Yes, I mean Jonah," Christina snapped. "He's getting on my last fucking nerve. I swear, Maura, I think I'm going to strangle him."

"That would be hard to explain to the kid," Maura said. "Might leave lasting scars and all."

"I'm serious," Christina said and promptly burst into tears.

"Hold on, Christy," Maura said, soothingly, as she pulled her little sister into her arms. "Tell me what's wrong. What's going on?"

"He treats me like I'm made of glass," Christina wailed. "He works all the time, and when he's home, he makes me sit back and put my feet up. He brings me so many fucking glasses of milk and juice, I feel like a lactation machine. I want a glass of wine. I want to go out to dinner. I want to go surfing. He's making me insane; I swear to God I'm going to knock him flat one of these days."

"And what else?" asked Maura.

"We didn't even do anything for my birthday. Jonah fell asleep during *Deadliest Catch* so I got to sit there and drool over the crab fishermen on my own. Big whoop, some birthday."

"That sucks, but I drool over them too," Maura nodded. "And what else?"

"And he never lets Clancy cry," she continued. "At the first peep, he's right there and carting her to bed where she invariably ends up on my breast, in the middle of my sleep."

"And?"

"And, she's three months old. It's time for her to learn some kind of sleep pattern. I know she's not hungry, she's eating cereal and nursing, and I even started feeding her pears the other day, and she loves them."

"And?"

"And, he lets me get away with so much crap. I don't know where my husband went to, Maury. I miss him. I could jump off a bridge and set fire to his studio, and he'd find some way to say it's okay because I had his baby."

"So," Maura leaned back in her chair. "You want him to spank you. You miss the old Jonah."

Christina made a face at her sister, but then she smiled ruefully.

"Yes, damnit, I want my old Jonah back. Enough with this borderline obsessive father thing and give me my caveman back."

"He loves Clancy so much," Maura pointed out.

"I know, and I love that he's such a wonderful father," Christina said. "I love this little girl, too, but I want to have a life again. I took her to the beach once this summer because his precautions were so elaborate. I couldn't even relax enough to sit down. The one time I took her down to watch him surf, he came running up the beach to tell me to keep her bonnet on in the direct sunlight."

"Oops," said Maura.

"Yeah, oops. The idiot thinks I would fry my own child. I want to slaughter him, Maura, and I

want it to be in the direct sunlight, without a fucking bonnet."

"You're over-reacting just a tad, I'd say."

"You think?"

"You need to get away," Maura said. "What are you doing this weekend? Going to Mom and Dad's?"

It was Labor Day Weekend. Usually, everyone went to the Clancy house and hung out, playing croquet and swimming, partaking of the informal feast Faith Clancy would put out on the long table on the patio. Patrick would make a big deal about taking his boat out on the lagoon, and most of his children would join him for the customary cruise onto the bay and maybe into the ocean, if time permitted.

Christina couldn't bear the idea of sitting in the shade, watching the festivities while her husband hovered like an annoying bee around her ear.

"I'm going with Allison and Dave to Cedar Inlet," she told her sister. "Dave's parents have a cottage there, and it's beautiful. We went there, once, years ago. It's so peaceful. There's this isolated beach with a sandbar that you can swim out to, and there are pine trees and sand dunes, and it's just gorgeous. Jonah doesn't want to go, but that's tough shit because Clancy and I are going, and I'm bringing my breast pump. So this woman is drinking some margaritas this weekend and lying in the sun and swimming."

"Pulling out all the stops, huh?"

"You got it. I'm sick of his mollicoddling, and if he doesn't want to come, then that's just fine. He can go hang out with you guys and worry to his heart's content."

"Why do I have this feeling in my bones that trouble's heading your way, sister?"

"Maybe because it is," Christina replied jauntily. "I eat trouble for breakfast. Trouble is my middle name."

"Well, which is it? Do you eat it for breakfast, or is it your middle name?" Maura sighed. "Never mind, I know what you eat for breakfast, and trouble is definitely your middle name."

"Isn't there such a thing as good cholesterol?" asked Christina, knowing her sister's abhorrence of bacon and eggs and all things good.

"If there is, I know you'll find it."

"Anyway, that's where I'll be. I'll tell the folks that I won't be joining you all this weekend, but let's plan to have some sister time next week with Kate, too. By the way, where's Peter?"

"Out buying himself a newspaper and some cholesterol. He doesn't think my pretzel breakfast cuts it."

"Poor man, did he know what he was marrying into?"

"I certainly warned him, so don't blame me." Maura took a sip of her coffee and munched another pretzel. "So get going. I thought I was babysitting because you had so many things to do."

Christina took a deep breath, willing herself to relax. Jonah's latest enactment of his descent into paternal psychosis was to call her cell phone just as she was pulling into Maura's complex. He wanted to remind her that Clancy had had two poops that morning, and didn't she only usually have one, and maybe Christina should call the doctor. Maybe he should have taken a sample for her to take to the doctor's.

"I am *not* taking the baby's poop to the goddamn doctor, Jonah," Christina had shouted into her phone. "She's pooping more because she's

starting to eat something besides breast milk. I'd think you'd be glad to get rid of the breast milk poop."

Ohmigod, she was shouting about baby poop.

Help me, she groaned as she slammed her phone shut and tugged the key from the ignition. She turned to the sleeping baby in the backseat.

"Your father is insane," she told her daughter. "But don't worry, I don't think it's hereditary."

"I do have lots to do," she said now to her sister. "Thank you for watching her. She'll probably sleep, but if she wakes up, there's cereal and bananas, another new favorite, and a bottle of breast milk in the little igloo. I shouldn't be too long."

"Go." Maura shooed her away with a wave. "Have fun. Buy yourself some sexy lingerie or something. Operation Reclamation begins. Take no prisoners."

Christina laughed as she took one last peep at her sleeping baby and pressed a kiss on her petal soft cheek.

If Maura only knew, Christina thought, as she headed toward Sandy Creek's shopping center.

She wondered how things could have gotten so out of control with Jonah. When she became pregnant last fall, she'd been so happy and Jonah was ecstatic. By Christmas, he had the nursery nearly finished, complete with a beautifully carved rocking horse that the baby wouldn't be able to use for at least two years. He spent so much time on the coming baby, Christina felt neglected. The last time he'd shown any signs of the old Jonah was on Valentine's Day when she'd made some rude, smart ass comment to him, and he'd given her a couple of warning swats. But then he looked horrified at what

he'd done – as though he were going to damage their well-insulated baby by smacking her, by then huge, ass.

Christina should've been relieved; she'd been complaining for years about her husband's strictness and nasty habit of spanking her whenever he thought she deserved it. Contrarily, she became incensed that she could no longer get a rise out of the normally dominant Jonah Pendleton.

His solicitousness grated on her nerves, and by the time June rolled around, and she was ready to deliver, her bitchiness had become the subject of family discussion and her friends' concern.

"Chris, what's going on?" Allison had asked her only days before Clancy's birth. "I've never seen you like this. Aren't you afraid that Jonah's going to retaliate with some kind of payback after you have the baby? Dave couldn't believe you slapped him last night."

"Well, he was trying to cut my fucking steak, Ally, what would you have done?"

Allison grinned.

"Yeah, true. I probably would've whacked his hand, too, but it did make quite a scene when his knife went flying across the dining room. Good thing the Urchin was so empty, or you might have speared a waitress."

The truth was, she'd behaved like a brat, and the Jonah she knew and loved would never have let her get away with it.

Then Clancy was born. With Jonah's beautiful green eyes and the wispiest dark brown curls. They named her after Christina's family and Jonah's mother. Clancy Rose Pendleton was a bundle of seven pound, eight ounce perfection.

And things got worse. Jonah became obsessed with working more and more side jobs. He insisted that Christina take advantage of her boss' offer to have the summer off, but then he smothered her with his overzealous care and nurturing. She couldn't do anything to anger him, and she tried, God knows, she tried.

She thought she'd go mad.

This weekend away was what she needed. As Maura said, she intended to reclaim her husband. It would be hard work, but it would be a labor of love, which was only fitting given that it was Labor Day weekend.

She drove past her house, so she could switch the sensible Subaru Jonah had purchased, for her darling TR6. It had been so long since she'd driven her baby car.

"First stop, Victoria's Secret," Christina murmured as she darted into a free parking spot near the fountained courtyard of the Sandy Creek Galleria. Thank God, she finally had her pre-baby body back because she was going to work it, baby, work it.

With her purchases neatly stowed in the front seat, Christina decided to stop by the construction site of the new house where Jonah was currently working. She'd deliver a large, cold can of his favorite Arizona Iced Tea and see what he had to say about her weekend plans. She parked behind his truck and sauntered toward the back of the nearly completed structure where most of the banging was going on.

When she saw him, she was nearly spellbound. His long brown hair was caught back in the standard

ponytail; the sun streaked chestnut color gleamed like polished wood in the sunlight. He was standing on a ladder, hammering something into the molding above the back door frame. His naked torso glistened with perspiration, and she was mesmerized by the taut muscles of his calves above his high work boots. She stared at his forearms and wanted to jump him.

He was one fine looking man, she thought, her body throbbing with lust. It had been too long since she'd been pinned beneath those powerful thighs, her legs wrapped around those calves. She stood there for a moment until one of Jonah's co-workers noticed her.

"Hey, Christina, how are you?"

"Hi, Angel," she smiled and waved.

Jonah looked over, and she saw how his eyes didn't even stop on her, but immediately searched behind her for the stroller.

He didn't even see her, she thought bitterly.

"Where's Clancy?" he called, sliding his hammer back into the loop on his thick, leather work belt and stepping backwards down the ladder, hopping to the ground from the third rung.

"Oh my God!" Christina made a gesture of mock dismay. "I forgot the baby. Whatever did I do with the baby?"

"Christina," he warned, striding over to her.

"Here's a cold drink," she said. "Fucking nice to see you too."

When she would have spun on her heels and left, he gripped her by the arm, pulling her back.

She felt that old familiar weakness in her knees when she saw the flash of anger in his eyes. Then he seemed to collect himself, and he released her

arm, kissing her lightly as he took the iced tea from her hand.

"Thanks, hon," he said, popping the top and taking a deep swallow. "I'm sorry that came out the way it did. Your mom watching her?"

"No, Maura," she said shortly.

"What brings you out here?" he asked.

"I thought I'd see what you look like in daylight," she snapped. "You haven't graced us with your presence any time before eight PM in the last month."

"Christina," he sighed. "I told you it's only temporary. I want to make as much as I can during the season. It's for you and the baby."

"Such a grand gesture," she said nastily.

"What the hell..." he stopped abruptly. Pulling his bandana from his back pocket, he wiped it across his wet forehead.

He looked so tired, Christina thought.

But then she hardened her resolve. He chose to be this tired.

"Actually, I just wanted to tell you that I decided to accept Allison and Dave's invitation to join them at Cedar Inlet this weekend."

"I already told you that I don't think it's a good idea for us to take the baby that far from home."

"Jonah, it's a fucking hour and a half drive. Clancy and I are going. You do what the hell you want."

For a moment, he looked like the old Jonah, and she backed up apprehensively. Then his expression became shuttered.

"This isn't working," he said flatly.

"Damn straight it isn't," she retorted, her heart frozen by his ominous words.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're smart, figure it out."

"I gotta get back to work." He turned and walked away without another word.

"Yeah, well, I have to get back to lying on the couch and eating bon bons," she shouted, not caring that a half dozen carpenters had stopped their work and were watching the scene with interest. "And drinking my water and milk, don't forget that," she added.

He stopped and stared at her.

"Why don't you just put me out to pasture with the other fucking cows?" she taunted with tears in her throat. "I'm sure it'll make for better, healthier baby poop."

He walked back to her, and she flinched when she saw the coldness in his eyes.

"Go home, Christina," he said finally. "I think you're about done embarrassing the both of us."

Her face flamed at his quiet words. It wasn't fair that he made her scream like a deranged person, and he stayed so cool and calm.

She wanted to throw herself in his arms and beg his forgiveness, beg him to love her again. She wanted sex. She wanted to apologize for all of the horrible things she'd said and done over the last months. Most of all, she wanted absolution. In the only way he'd ever given it to her. She needed the intimacy of being over his knee, feeling her sins drift away as he banished them one by one with his hard hand. She never thought she'd crave a punishment spanking, but God help her, she did.

But the Jonah who would have delivered one, was not the Jonah standing before her.

"I want my husband back," she said, and then she left, not seeing the speculative expression on his face as he stared after her.

She drove the TR6 home and hopped into the Subaru to pick up Clancy. She wondered if Jonah would even mention her little display when he came home. Probably not. He was too busy playing caretaker of the world to talk much anymore.

She was right. He came home, showered and relieved her of Clancy without saying a word to her.

"I liked your old method of punishment better," she muttered as she walked past him into the kitchen, where she banged more pots around than were necessary to heat up the spaghetti and meatballs she'd made for dinner.

"What did you say?" he asked quietly, standing in the doorway and cradling the baby in his huge, tanned arms.

"Nothing," she said. "It's not important."

"I think it was something," he said gravely. "I think it is important."

"Yeah, well I give a rat's ass what you think," she said rudely, dumping the mess of sauce and noodles into a bowl and slamming it on the table. "Here's your dinner."

She stalked off, inwardly appalled at her own behavior. Let him figure out how to eat while holding a baby. She had to.

She was already in bed when Jonah brought Clancy up for one more nursing before bed.

"I meant what I said, Christina," he told her. "We're not going to Cedar Inlet, tomorrow. So get it out of your head."

She glared at him, reaching for the baby.

We'll see about that, she thought mutinously.

Christina packed up the Subaru after Jonah left for work the next morning. He'd remained distantly polite and had told her he'd be home at dinnertime. He wasn't working any side jobs over the weekend.

"Maybe we could take Clancy for her inaugural appearance at the Sea Urchin," he said with a hint of a smile.

She nodded, turning her head so his kiss grazed her cheek instead of her lips.

She felt a little guilty as she wrote the note telling her husband where she was going. She rummaged through her purse for the piece of paper with the cottage telephone number. Ally and Dave were already there, and Ally had warned her that cell reception was iffy at best. She wrote the number at the bottom of the note and stuck the sugar bowl over it so it wouldn't blow away.

The cottage in Cedar Inlet was as charming as she remembered. Dave and Ally were lying on a blanket, hands entwined, on the stretch of beach behind the house.

"Well, this is a fine how do you do," Christina called. "Clancy, see that's what people in love look like. Take a good look, you don't get a chance to see it at home."

Dave jumped up to greet her. He enfolded her in a burly bear hug and patted her back while Allison claimed the car seat carrier that held the rapt Clancy. The baby looked around at the world with her alert green eyes, a smile curving over her rosebud lips.

"Gas?" Allison ventured.

"Nope, that's a bonafide happy to see you, Aunt Ally smile."

"Where's Jonah?" Dave asked.

"My husband thinks this little town is too far from civilization to take a three month old baby. But lookee here, you gots 'lectricity and paved roads."

"Christina," Ally said softly, rolling her eyes toward Dave. As close as brothers, Dave didn't take kindly to Jonah being mocked.

"What, Al, is Dave going to make me leave because I didn't bring Daddy dearest to make the party complete?"

"Christina, why don't you go call Jonah and let him know you got here safely," Dave suggested.

"He's working, Dave," she said. "He won't be home for hours. So, let's have some fun. I have pumped milk. I have tequila and many cans of the frozen nectar. Bring on the 'ritas with mucho salt, por favor."

Allison laughed and pulled her friend toward the house.

"I hear you, sistah," she said.

Dave set up Clancy's porta-crib under the beach umbrella, and after a bowl of rice cereal and some pears, the baby settled on her tummy, playing with her stuffed, musical lamb until she fell asleep.

"So, what gives?" Allison asked as they settled in beach chairs near the crib. "By the way, you look damn good, girl. Back in a bikini in three months. You are amazing."

"I can't seem to get him back, Ally," Christina said desperately. "He just won't click back into himself. I push and push, and he just gets nicer." She sipped her huge frozen Margarita. "Yummy, this is the best I've ever had."

"That's what they all say," Allison said demurely, batting her eyelashes. But then she turned serious. "He still has the kid gloves on?"

"Kid gloves, armor, indifference – whatever you want to call it."

Dave plopped down next to them just as Christina began her detailed description of her

horrendous behavior over the past months; she cringed at the look of stern disapproval in Dave's eyes.

"Don't you be getting any ideas, woman," he warned his wife.

"Me? Have an idea? Why that is just the silliest thing, you big wonderful man who knows all, you," she said sweetly, sticking her tongue out at him.

"Are you, well, are you depressed about having the baby, Christina?" Dave asked in an odd voice.

"What? Don't be ridiculous," Christina said. "If I'm depressed, it's because I can't get my husband to notice me. You know how long it's been since we made love?"

"Whoa, let's take a detour off this information highway," Dave said, putting his hands out as though to ward off her words. "I don't need to know that."

"Well, it's true," Christina said stubbornly. "He's just not into me any more."

"I don't get what he's doing," Dave grumbled. "Not that I want to see you in trouble, Christina, but you've paved your own path to some kind of comeuppance. You know he loves you like hell, so don't get any stupid ideas about that."

"Don't you love my farm boy, Chris," Ally cooed. "Who says comeuppance, but my own dear Alfalfa?"

"Grrrr," said Dave.

"Ooops, I'm empty," Christina said. She held out her empty glass to Dave. "Please, Alfalfa?" she said with a seductive smile.

"Maybe I'll just help my old buddy out and spank you myself," Dave growled, rubbing his palms together threateningly.

Christina laughed as she handed her friend the glass. Ally hurriedly swallowed the last of her drink and gave him her glass as well.

"Me too, please," she said, shaking her breasts in an attempt to entice him into doing her bidding.

"Don't get drunk, you two," he said when he returned with their drinks. "I'm going out to get some steaks for dinner."

"We won't," they chorused.

After three Margaritas, they ate a late lunch of Italian subs that Christina had picked up in Sandy Creek. Clancy woke up, and Christina fed her one of the bottles of breast milk she'd packed in the cooler.

Christina was feeling more mellow than she had since before the baby was born. She lay on the blanket, face to face with her tiny love and traced the little features with her finger.

"She looks like Jonah, don't you think?"

"Exactly," agreed Ally. "But you too. She's a perfect combination of the two of you."

"He'll probably be pissed, you know," she said. "He might even yell at me."

"Think he'll come?"

"Absolutely. Like a bat out of hell. Hope he doesn't get a speeding ticket."

"You know Dave called him?" Ally asked. "I heard him on the phone earlier."

"I figured he would when I wouldn't. But didn't I tell you I bought ammunition; the hottest, sexiest little cami and panties. I'm hoping to be wearing them when he comes."

"You want him to come here like a berserker," Allison accused.

"Not before I have a swim," Christina laughed. "Will you play with Clancy while I take a quick dip?"

"Take your time. I'm going to start her on her ABC's. Never too young to learn."

"Teacher," Christina groaned, hopping up and running down to the water's edge. The cove where the cottage was situated was pretty isolated; only one other house shared the private beach, and the owners were never home, Ally had told her.

The water was warm. The Atlantic in September was perfect for swimming. She dove under the gentle waves and struck out for the sand bar. Once there, she stretched out on the high ridge of sand in the middle of the inlet. Jonah would definitely be home by now. He'd know where she was because of Dave's call. He'd read her note and then her imagination shut down. She had no idea what he would feel, what he would do. Oh, he'd come, to be sure Clancy was okay, but beyond that, she had no clue. She shut her eyes, suddenly so tired.

Water was lapping against her ears. Christina scrambled to her knees and realized that the tide was coming in.

Holy shit, how long had she been asleep?

"You deserve the worst whipping of your life," said a voice behind her.

Christina jumped and spun around to find her husband standing up to his ankles in water on the sand bar.

She was so relieved to see him; she disregarded the furious glare he was sending her way.

"Jonah," she cried, jumping up to hug him.

He held her for the briefest moment, and then he pushed her away.

"You smell like booze. Can you swim?" he asked grimly.

"I swam out here," she said defiantly, her happiness deflated by his coldness.

"And you fell asleep in the middle of the fucking ocean," he added. "Honestly, Christina, you need a keeper."

"Applying for the job?" she quipped, trying to soften him up.

"Ready to swim?" he asked, ignoring her playful tone.

"Wait, I want to ..." she choked on her words, wondering if she'd imagined what he'd said before.

"You want," he barked. "You want, Christina? What the hell do you want?"

"I want you," she said dejectedly.

"Well, you got me," he said. "You got all of me and my undivided attention. You've got me for the rest of your life. And no more of this pussy-footing around. Post-partum depression or not."

"Post partum what?" she asked, confused.

"Post-partum depression," he said. "Angel told me his wife had it, and you had all the same signs. I thought I was helping you. Every time you cursed at me or stomped away or tossed food at me, I let it go. I made allowances."

Christina stood speechless, staring at him. Then she hauled back her fist and punched him as hard as she could in the arm, knocking him into the water.

"You fucking asshole," she screamed. "You thought I was depressed all this time? I'll give you depressed. Ohmigod."

"Maybe it's maniac-depression?" he offered, looking up at her from the shallow water. He easily hooked one of her ankles and pulled her down on top of him.

"It's manic, you idiot," she corrected.

"Nope, you're definitely maniacal."

SWAT!

His hand landed on her ass with a resounding echo in the quiet cove.

"Ouch," she complained. "Stop, I have to hurt *you*, remember?"

SWAT! SWAT! SWAT! SWAT! SWAT!

She blinked back tears when her ass began to sting.

"Oh, I think not," he said in that silky voice she used to dread. "But definitely we'll continue this with my belt. You disobeyed me today. You've disrespected me for about six months. You're rude, bratty and a downright bitch at times. I'm ashamed of you, Christina Pendleton."

She couldn't stop the tears; she sobbed into his chest, scared at the mention of his belt but so happy to be in his arms again. He reached up and smoothed her wet hair.

"So, I'm sorry, Jonah Pendleton," she said finally. "But don't you think I'd tell you if I were depressed about having the baby? I love Clancy more than life."

"You didn't tell me you were pissed at me for the way I was treating you," he countered.

"I thought you'd figure it out," she said. "You never had a problem deciphering my moods before."

"Hey, guess what, Christina, we never had a baby before."

"Okay, fair enough," she conceded. "So now what?"

"Like I said, now we address the problem, and you, my darling wife, may have to take out a bank loan to pay this piper." He pulled her face down, so he could kiss any spark of resistance out of her. She melted into him.

"Mmm," she agreed.

"Ready to swim now?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Good, do it." He rolled her off him and gave her ass another smack to send her into the water.

Christina swam as though the hounds of hell were on her tail, and Jonah swam beside her – his hand propelling her butt whenever she slowed down.

On the beach, he didn't let up, and she had to run up to the cottage to evade his punishing hand.

"Where's Clancy?" she gasped as she passed the empty porta-crib.

"Dave and Ally took her for a walk."

SMACK!

She yelped and sprinted ahead into the house. She seriously thought about locking the door behind her, but then realized that this was what she wanted. Her Jonah was back.

In the guest bedroom, he cornered her between the bed and the dresser.

"Strip," he said.

"Jonah, maybe I should explain," she began.

"Explain what?" he asked coolly. "Explain why you felt the need to shit on my tolerance and good nature for the last three months?"

"But..."

"But nothing," he said. "I still owe you for slapping my hand at The Urchin."

"You were cutting my meat."

"You could have asked me to stop."

"I'm hot-headed," she admitted.

"Listen to me, Christina Pendleton, this is going to be a real Labor Day weekend for you. Because you're going to be working hard every day on trying to make amends." He shook his head. "All the crap

I let you get away with. Goddamn Angel. Now are you going to strip, or do I have to do it for you?"

She shook her head mutely and began to peel off her wet bathing suit.

There was a wooden chair next to an old fashioned student's desk; Jonah pulled it into the center of the room and dragged her over to it. He sat, and the world went topsy turvy when he tipped her over his lap. She reached out to touch the floor, even knowing that no matter how mad he was, he wouldn't let her fall.

She felt the familiar wetness in her groin and the whirring of butterflies in her stomach. She didn't have long to wait.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

His hand rose and fell relentlessly, and soon she was trying to scramble forward, willing to take a head knocking on the hard floor to save her ass from his blistering blows. But he pulled her back and kept her firmly positioned with his iron left hand.

"You've been a rude, exceptionally bad girl, haven't you, Christina?"

"Yes, yes," she gasped. "I'm sorry. I just wanted you back again."

"Well, I'm back," he said. "Happy?"

"Yes," she sniffed through her tears.

"Okay, ten with the belt and that's enough for today,"

Dread filled her stomach. She hated his belt.

Then the hated implement was snapping down on her hot, throbbing ass.

"Ow, Oh God, Jonah, please," she wept.

He took his time. Each stroke was heavy and stung like hell. And he let each one sink in fully before he gave her the next. Finally, he was done.

He tossed the belt onto the bed, but he didn't let her up. He rubbed his big, hot hand over her aching rear end as she cried in shame and pain.

"I'm sorry too, Christina," he told her. "I should've realized sooner. I really thought I was helping you adjust. I should've gone with my instincts long ago."

"Which were?"

"Oh God," he said wearily. "Three weeks after Clancy was born, you called me a fucking moron and threw a frozen bagel at my head, which hurt by the way. My instinct was to cut a peach switch and answer that kind of disrespect the way it should be answered. But Angel had me convinced that all women went through a form of post-partum depression."

He continued rubbing her, and she began squirming on his thighs. She had another need now that she wanted him to fill.

"You were stupid," she said bluntly.

SMACK!

She reared up at the fire that laced across her tender buttocks.

"Sorry," she said. "I keep forgetting you're back."

"Don't."

"Can you try to relax a little with the baby, Jonah?" she asked seriously. "I'm not an idiot, and I'm trying to be the best mom I can be."

"You're a terrific mom," he told her, sliding her long brown hair aside so he could drop a kiss on the nape of her neck. She shivered.

He slid his hand between her butt cheeks, keeping them separated while he found the hot wetness he knew would be there. Slowly,

torturously, he stroked her clitoris until she was writhing across him.

Finally, he twisted her around and cradled her to his chest before carrying her to the bed and laying her gently across it.

"I love you, Christina," he said. "I know you're sorry. But I was serious about the weekend. Three more days of spankings and all of them hard. No rest for the weary hand."

"No more belt?" she asked, hoping.

"Not unless you add something new to your transgressions."

"I won't," she told him. "I promise. Now give me that *post* part of you to get rid of my bad mood. And tell Angel he'd better start looking over his shoulder."

"Don't threaten my co-workers, Christina. I'm still the brunt of their jokes from your antics yesterday."

"Oh, that?" she said airily.

"Yeah, that," he said. "But as Scarlet O. said, tomorrow is another day."

He stripped off his wet board shorts, and she sighed happily as he descended over her. He was back.

She held him to her, breathing deeply of his sun-soaked, salty and slightly sweaty body. She tugged on his long hair and lost herself in his loving green eyes. She loved this man with all of her heart, all of her soul – her very being. She'd savor every delicious moment of this weekend, even when it hurt. Love's labor was sweet indeed.

Painting the Town Green

"We definitely *are* going," Christina yelled at Jonah's back as he walked past her into the bathroom.

"I hate St. Patrick's parties, Christina," he yelled back. "It's just an excuse for a big drunkfest."

"It's my heritage, Jonah," she said. "And Maura always has a big party to commemorate the occasion."

"Yeah, and remember what happened last time we went to one of her parties?"

Christina racked her brain, trying to remember her sister's last St. Paddy's Day party. Last year Maura was away on business and Christina was pregnant, so she hadn't even celebrated the day beyond having a bite of corned beef and cabbage. But the year before was a fun time. She was sure it was a fun time; Maura's parties were always fun.

"Let me remind you," Jonah said, walking back into the bedroom and stretching out on the love seat in the corner of the room. "Does the word police ring a bell? How 'bout dancing on tables, strip tease act and some nameless woman getting her butt spanked for defying her husband's reasonable request to lay off the Guinness?"

"Oh, that."

"Yes, that. You and St. Patrick don't go together well. You always end up getting hammered and being an insufferable brat."

Christina threw up her hands in frustration and stormed out of the room. Five seconds later she stormed back in.

"How come it always has to be your fucking way?" she asked, anger lacing her voice.

"You're going to wake Clancy if you keep yelling," he said calmly. "And it doesn't always have to be my way. I just think it would be nicer if we went to dinner at the Urchin and then went to a movie, since your Aunt Margaret offered to baby-sit. Aren't we a little too old for these raucous parties?"

"Raucous?" Christina sneered unpleasantly. "Who appointed you Father O'Malley?"

"Keep it up, Christina," Jonah said, staring at her.

She gulped. Somehow their discussion about Saturday night had evolved into this nasty tit for tat. Time for a different tactic.

"Please, Jonah," she pleaded. "I'm sorry I was mean, but this is Maura's first party since she and Peter bought their house. She'd be upset if we didn't go. She *is* my sister, after all."

Jonah looked at her and she struggled to maintain an even, innocent expression on her face.

"It means that much to you?" he asked skeptically.

"It really does," she said. "Maura is making tons of corned beef and cabbage and even my parents are going. How raucous can it be?"

He smiled. And she felt her first glimmer of hope since the whole discussion started.

"Okay," he said. "But you have to promise to stop drinking when I tell you you've had enough."

"I will," she promised. "Now, I've got to go find your green outfit. Where's that hat I bought you for the parade that year?"

"Christina, I am *not* wearing a derby."

"I think it's in the basement," she said, ignoring him. "Yes, definitely in the basement, along with

your green suspenders and Kelly green button down."

"Oh lord," Jonah sighed.

"You look great Irish," Christina told him. "Not at all like a leprechaun, although you *are* my pot of gold, baby."

"Now you're going over the top; now I'm getting suspicious."

"None of that, mister," Christina assured him. "We're just going to have loads of fun."

The next day, she called Maura during her lunch hour.

"What do you say, you and I carry on the Clancy tradition?" she asked her older sister.

"What tradition?"

"Didn't the boys, and Dad before them, have a habit of painting the town green?"

"You mean the line in the middle of Main Street?"

"The very line," Christina laughed. "You know that Tim isn't interested. All he cares about is Bridget, and Michael won't do it now since he married Mary; she's too straight, and Liam's in Seattle, so who better to carry on the tradition but us?"

"Christy, you're a genius," Maura said. "No one will ever suspect us and we still get to bask in the family glory. Let's make plans. It should be before the party, so we get to hear the hubbub about it."

"Definitely," Christina agreed. "I say that we do it late Friday night. I'll sneak out and you can pick me up at the corner of Three Bridges Road. I have paint, from when Jonah and I painted the new peach stand sign last year. We'll just do a wee bit of artistry on Main Street for old time's sake."

"You know that your husband and mine will likely skewer us if they find out, right?" Maura pointed out.

"Sure and begorrah, and that's a sad fact," Christina laughed. "I say we don't let them find out."

"Deal!"

Friday night was take-out night in the Pendleton home and Jonah came home with a large feta cheese and sun dried tomato pizza with a little container of plain grilled chicken strips for Clancy, which Christina pulled into tiny shreds for the baby to gnaw on with her carrots and brown rice. She'd let her daughter sleep past her normal time that afternoon and she knew Clancy would stay awake later with them.

They watched a romantic comedy on HBO and just cuddled on the couch with Clancy nestled between them until eleven, when Jonah yawned and picked up the baby.

"I'll put her down, you coming up?" he said.

"As soon as I tidy the kitchen," Christina told him.

There wasn't much to clean; she loaded their few plates in the dishwasher and wiped down the counters before joining Jonah in their bedroom.

"She's out like a light," he told her, smiling tiredly from his position on the bed. "She was asleep before I finished changing her diaper."

"You look like you're ready to join her," Chris said.

"I'm exhausted," Jonah agreed. "I had a really tough day. Lots of up and down on the ladder and lifting shitloads of wood. I hate to bail, but how 'bout really excellent morning sex?"

"Sounds like a plan," Christina said, stretching out beside him and hugging his lean torso close to her. He was sleeping deeply within moments. She looked at her husband and sighed happily. He was so awesome. She reached out and touched the long strands of brown hair that curled over his cheek and felt incredibly horny. She missed their lovemaking but knew that his job could be demanding and while he never liked to complain, sometimes he was just dog tired and in no mood.

Time enough for that in the morning, she thought, slipping off the bed. She pulled on a dark turtleneck sweater and shoved her feet into her old sneakers, tying the frayed laces.

Maura was picking her up at one AM at the corner. The can of paint was already in a tote bag on the back porch with two wide paint brushes. Christina crept noiselessly down to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of Merlot. She went into her office and checked her emails as she sipped the mellow wine. Ally was online and Chris laughed when she read the IM from her best friend.

"What? No Friday night nookie?"

"What about you?"

"It's coming. Dave's in the shower."

"Lucky girl."

"See you at lunch tomorrow."

"Yes ma'am."

Christina read the rest of her emails from friends and co-workers and took the time to finish editing a story for the magazine while she had the time. It was nearly one when she signed off.

It was time to meet Maura. She crept back upstairs to check on Clancy before leaving. The baby was snoring peacefully and she dropped a kiss

on the sweet pink cheek, gently massaging her daughter's tiny fingers before leaving.

"Mama's off to fulfill your family tradition, baby," she whispered.

In the kitchen, she rinsed out her wine glass and pulled on her dark fleece jacket. She slid her cell phone into her pocket and shoved her keys next to it. Grabbing the canvas tote from the porch, she hurried across the wide lawns toward the street.

Maura was waiting at the corner of Three Bridges and Farm Lane. Christina laughed when she opened her sister's car door and saw Maura decked from head to toes in black.

"We're so professional," she said.

"Peter would have a fit if he knew what we're up to," Maura said. "There's a flask at your feet somewhere, drink from it. You need to feel the burn to pull this off. I know, because I've heard stories."

"I had wine," Christina said.

"Oh you need more than wine. You need the true Irish elixir. It's Jameson's, darling sis."

"Well, in that case." Christina retrieved the silver cylinder from the floor and took a big swig.

Main Street was deserted. There were only stores and lunch places on the main thoroughfare of Sandy Creek. The bars and restaurants were all on the beach road. The street was dark and quiet.

Maura parked on a side street next to the bakery.

"Pop and his brothers always did the stretch of street from here to Gallinson's Hardware. I think that should be sufficient for our virgin run," Maura said.

"And the boys never even did that much," Chris said. "They did the Bakery to Oswald's Pharmacy, not even a full block."

"Okay, you have two containers? We can each start at one end and meet in the middle."

While Christina poured the green paint into a deep Tupperware container, Maura had a shot from the flask.

The sisters separated at the corner, Christina running down to Gallinson's to start and Maura beginning from the bakery. They finished covering the long band of yellow in the middle of the road in twenty minutes, miraculously without encountering any obstacles. Once, they heard the rumble of a car approaching but as they plastered themselves against the buildings, it turned onto a side road before reaching them and damaging their handiwork.

They met at Maura's car and did a silent high five. Back in the car, they both had a swig of Jameson's and then drove silently away.

"Let's ditch the paint and evidence before we go home," Christina said.

They drove in a wide circle back toward Maura's old complex and while Maura kept the car idling with the lights off, Christina tossed the garbage bag of their tools and paint containers into the big dumpster behind the condos.

They were parked back at the corner of Three Bridges and Farm Lane just after two in the morning.

"Mission accomplished," Maura said. "It was fun; it was a perfectly executed plan. We are the Clancy women, do not cross us."

"Kate will be jealous if we ever tell her," Chris said. "So, I'll see you tomorrow night. I'm making

crab dip and that bacon cheese with pita chips. Need beer?"

"God, no," her sister said. "We have a keg of Guinness and a keg of Miller and about two cases of Corona."

"To the death," Chris said, making a sloppy cross over her heart. "We will keep our secret."

"Yeah, yeah," said Maura. "Or until the first hard spank."

"Bite your friggin' tongue," Chris laughed. "We better not get caught. Jonah hates St. Patrick's Day as it is."

Maura leaned over and hugged her and then Christina was running down the street toward her big front yard.

The house was quiet and she silently hung her jacket in the closet, slipped out of her sneakers and pushed them into the back of the closet. She tore off the bulky turtleneck and tossed it in the hamper in the laundry room before going into her office. She puttered around on the computer for a while, checking email and acting the way she would normally act if she woke up and couldn't sleep. When nothing happened – Jonah didn't suddenly appear and ask for an accounting of her time, she slipped upstairs. Clancy was snoring gently. Jonah was sleeping heavily, his arm sprawled over her pillow. She left her tee shirt in the bathroom hamper and quietly slid into bed, naked except for her thong panties. He groaned when she accidentally dislodged his hand from her pillow but he didn't wake. She held her breath until she finally fell asleep, her hand clutching his, her head against his neck.

"Christina?" the voice was like a moth against her cheek.

"What?" she muttered, flipping her hand up to dislodge the annoyance.

The annoyance just grew more insistent and her eyelids fluttered open; she found her husband staring into her face.

"Hi, babe," Jonah said. "Happy Saturday."

Christina groaned. It was early and she was tired.

"Morning," she mumbled, diving back under the covers.

"Somebody's tired," Jonah said. "Were you on the computer until all hours? I woke up once and it was late but you weren't in bed."

"Mmm," she murmured. "I was editing a story."

"Bad girl," he said. "You need to go to bed at a decent hour. Your body's tired."

"Thank you, Dr. Pendleton, can I go back to sleep now?"

"I made a promise last night," he said. "I don't want to be known as a promise breaker."

"I officially let you off the hook," she said. "No hard feelings."

"Oh, definitely some hard feelings," he told her. "Shall I demonstrate?"

Christina laughed despite her tiredness. She lifted up the comforter and invited her husband to join her. He did. They spent a delicious half hour exploring his hard feelings until they were both satisfied. Christina was almost drifting back to sleep when she heard Clancy cooing from her room across the hall.

"I'll get her," Jonah said. "Meet us in the kitchen when you're ready." He kissed her on the nose and she caught him in her arms, pulling him down so she could give him a proper kiss.

"Thank you, honey," she told him.

She felt a little guilty about her street painting excursion but hopefully, what happened in Sandy Creek center would stay in Sandy Creek center.

After breakfast, Jonah left to go surfing with Dave.

"Don't freeze your ass off," Christina warned.

"Got it covered," Jonah joked, waving his wet suit at her.

Just before noon, Christina dressed the baby in a warm fleece jumpsuit and bundled her into her tiny sheepskin coat to take her for lunch with Allison. They were meeting at La Crepe, a little lunch bistro downtown.

She didn't notice the police car blocking Main Street until she had parked in the Municipal lot and was pushing Clancy's stroller toward the restaurant on Linden Place. The cop lounging against the car was a friend of her brother Tim's.

"Hey Mike," she called. "What happened?"

"Some joker decided to paint the street green," he said. "They're just getting a few samples for forensics before they repaint it."

Christina's stomach plummeted at his words but she managed to muster a laugh.

"Telling me we've got some Tim Clancy wannabe out there?"

"Now, that's a scary thought," Mike laughed. "Good thing I was with your brother at Murphy's all night or for sure they'd be looking at him for this job."

She waved and continued to the restaurant. Ally was sitting at a table in the window. Christina maneuvered the stroller around the tables and parked it in the niche beside the table, pulling Clancy's jacket off and tucking it into the pocket in the back. She put a little container of cheerios on

the tray in front of her daughter and settled into the comfortable chair across from Ally. All the while, her mind was repeating Mike's ominous words.

Forensics.

"Somebody painted the street last night," Ally said without preamble. "Was it you, Madame Lawbreaker?"

Christina nearly choked on her water.

"It was," Ally exclaimed. "I knew it. Who? You and Maura? You and Tim? All three of you?"

"Shut up, Ally," Christina said in a low voice, looking around furtively. There wasn't anybody sitting near them. "Me and Maura."

"Holy crap, the tradition goes on."

"Someone had to do it," Chris said. "It's been three years since Tim made his last stand. And my father and Uncle Sean really shouldn't be out in the middle of the night anymore. And since Uncle Mike moved to Florida they just haven't had the heart."

"Does anyone else know you did it?"

"Not a soul."

"Well, you better hope that your dear husbands don't find out," Ally laughed. "Somehow I think that Jonah would take exception to his wife committing vandalism. And Peter may be more urbane than our Neanderthals but it seems like he doesn't put up with much bullshit."

"I know," Christina giggled. "He had us all fooled. But Maura married him so I guess she likes it."

"Is it snowing?" Ally peered out the window and they both noticed the swirling snowflakes for the first time. "Dave better get his ass off that surfboard."

"They won't even notice it, Ally," Christina said. "They'll think it's the spray in their faces, not a blizzard."

"It's just a flurry anyway," Ally sighed. "What time are you going to Maura's?"

"She wants me to come early so whenever Aunt Margaret comes, we'll be on our way."

They ordered and ate their crepes, talking about their week at work. This was their usual time to catch up, on Saturdays when their husbands were surfing.

Ally walked with Christina back to her car, pushing the stroller and making Clancy shout gleefully as she exaggerated every bump and stop.

"Thanks for lulling her to sleep, evil aunt," Christina said as she buckled the squealing baby in her car seat. "See you at Maura's and remember, mums the word about the aintingpay."

"Clancy probably understands pig latin better than English," Ally commented. "You better hope she doesn't sing like a parrot."

"Ha ha," said Christina dryly.

On the way home she called Maura.

"Hear anything?" she said shortly to her sister.

"Oh yeah," Maura whispered. "Shitloads. I'll tell you tonight. But rest assured, we are the talk of the town, sis."

They chatted about the upcoming party and Christina was surprised to see Jonah's truck when she pulled into the driveway. It was still snowing so she assumed he had decided against freezing his extremities off in the frigid air on the ocean.

She was still talking to Maura when she reached behind and began undoing the clasps of the car seat restraints.

She was surprised when the back door of the Subaru was suddenly yanked open.

"Hang up, Christina," Jonah said furiously, lifting Clancy from the car.

Christina hurriedly said goodbye to her sister and flipped her phone shut, tossing it in her bag. Her stomach had plummeted at her husband's irate tone.

Oh shit, he knows, she thought frantically, following him toward the house.

Once inside he put the baby in her playpen in the den and turned to face Christina, his green eyes dark with anger.

"How many times do we have to have this conversation?" he asked, walking toward her menacingly.

"What conversation?" Christina asked, clueless now.

"The one where I tell you that you are not to talk on your cell phone when you're driving."

Oh, damn.

"I'm sorry," she said, relief flooding her but then she started backing up when she realized he was still stalking her. "It was only a minute, Jonah."

"Let me see your phone," he said grimly.

Oh, shit. With trepidation, she retrieved her phone from her oversized bag and handed it to him.

He pressed the button to check her last dialed calls and he studied it for a second, and then glared at her.

"You talked to her the whole way home from town," he accused. "Don't lie to me, Christina, I don't like it."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I really didn't know it was so long but I was paying attention the whole time, Jonah."

"Let's make sure you don't do it again," he said ominously.

Before she could escape his firm grip, he had turned her around and pushed her over the butcher block in the center of the kitchen. He grabbed one of the big wooden spoons that were conveniently displayed in the crock on the counter and smacked her butt hard with it.

"Ouch," Christina yelled. Even through her jeans, the damn thing felt like an iron shovel.

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

He punished her poor bottom with the hard spoon for a good minute. Christina yelped and cursed but she didn't try to move out of position; she'd learned that any attempts at evasion only brought her more wallops. Finally, he tossed the spoon back on the counter and straightened her up.

"It's fucking dangerous," he said, his face so close to hers, she could feel his breath in her nostrils. "You should know better, especially with Clancy in the car. It only takes a second for an accident, Christina."

"I know," she sniffed. "I'm sorry."

"And I don't appreciate being lied to," he continued. "Do that again and I'll make this little episode seem like foreplay."

"I won't," she promised. "So, how were the waves?"

Finally he smiled.

"Awesome," he told her. "Made even better with that little squall we got."

"You were surfing in a squall?" she asked incredulously. "It's only been flurries here."

"It was cool," he said. "Waves picked up with the snow."

"Jonah Pendleton," she yelled. "How many times do we have to have this same conversation?" She reached behind him and grabbed the wicked wooden spoon from the counter. Before he could dance away from her she landed a few solid whacks on his butt.

"Okay, okay," he conceded, putting up his arms in mock surrender. "But Clancy wasn't on my surfboard."

"Oh, but it's okay to leave her fatherless?" Christina demanded.

"I know the ocean, babe," he told her. "I'd never surf when it's dangerous. You know that."

She did know that, but it felt good to turn the tables for once. She grinned at him and reached up on tiptoes to kiss him.

"Maybe now you'll think twice before using such a deadly instrument on my poor unprotected rear," she whispered in his ear.

"No," he said bluntly. "Just makes me think I've been going too easy on you. That was nothing."

"Jonah," she complained, darting her tongue into his mouth and locking her hands behind his neck.

"Christina," he countered huskily. They held each other and kissed until Clancy's demanding cries returned them to earth, to the kitchen where they looked at each other sheepishly.

"Baby," Christina said.

"I'll heat her milk," Jonah said.

Aunt Margaret arrived by five and they went upstairs to get ready. When Christina had showered earlier, she'd laid out the Kelly green cambric shirt for Jonah as well as the green felt derby.

"Do I have to?" he asked morosely.

"Yes."

Her own outfit consisted of a forest green skirt with a matching top that laced up the front and her green and brown leather cowboy boots. She wore the chunky white gold and emerald pendant that Jonah had given her for their tenth anniversary as well as a pair of dangling Celtic earrings with emeralds in white gold.

"You look like a fairie queen," Jonah told her, smoothing his hand over her gleaming dark hair. "What is it about St. Patrick's Day that brings out the fey in you?"

"Duh," she retorted. "I am fey, hear me incant spells. I'm Irish, it's what we do."

"Okay." He dutifully buttoned the green shirt and slammed the hat over his head.

"Can I tie a ribbon at the bottom of your braid?" she asked hopefully.

"Over my dead body," he said.

"Fine," she said. "Be less festive if you want."

"I want."

Margaret clapped her hands enthusiastically when she saw the couple descend the stairs.

"My, you look handsome," the older woman gushed. "Christina, you look like my own mother when she'd get gussied up for the St. Patrick's Day Festival, back in the old town."

Margaret's mother was Christina's great-grandmother and she'd never made the great journey to America, living out her days in County Roscommon on the lovely farm where she'd always lived after marrying Padraic Clancy.

Maura and Peter lived in a charming cottage across from the beach. They'd both sold their former homes and jumped on the chance to buy the nineteenth century cottage that had a huge deck

and even a widow's walk around the twentieth century turret that had been added by the previous owners. The Irish flag was waving below Old Glory from the flagpole and the windows were lit with strings of shamrock lights.

"Very colorful," Jonah said, helping her carry the baskets of dips and crackers inside.

They were helping Maura set out the hors d'oeuvres when Pat and Faith Clancy arrived, bearing baskets of hot Irish Soda Bread and a casserole of sausage and potato pie.

Christina hugged her father and complimented him on his shamrock suspenders and wool knickers.

"Very nice, Pop," she said. "I especially like your lid, is it new?"

"Got it the last time we were in the old sod," he said, doffing the bright plaid cap and showing off his thick gray curls. "Your mother hates it."

"I hate anything that covers your nice curls, Patrick," Faith corrected. "But *that* is a heinous color."

"Bite your tongue, woman," Pat laughed. "Where's the Guinness?"

Peter got drinks for everyone and they sat in front of the fireplace, nibbling on the appetizers as more guests began to trickle in.

Christina's Uncle Sean arrived with his wife Sally and joined them around the fire.

"I understand someone tried to replicate our work, Paddy," Sean said with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "But I hear it was crooked, a real half-assed job."

"What are you talking about, Sean?" Faith asked.

"Why, someone painted Main Street green last night," her brother-in-law told her.

Christina took a gulp of her wine and avoided Maura's eyes.

At that moment Tim and his girlfriend walked in the room, carrying their drinks and a basket of chips Tim had filched from the kitchen table.

"Timothy Clancy," Faith yelled. "Was that painting job your handiwork?"

"What?" Tim looked affronted. "I have a solid alibi, what about you, Pop?"

"He was with me all night," Faith said. "He had a solid alibi, too."

"Is that what you're calling it these days, Faithie," Patrick chuckled.

"Eww," their children collectively groaned.

"Well, it had to be a Clancy," Sean said speculatively, glancing around the room.

Christina's oldest sister Kate was lounging beside the fireplace; she shook her head energetically.

"Wasn't me," she said.

Christina could feel Jonah stiffening beside her and she jumped up quickly.

"Let me check on the crab dip," she babbled. "It must be almost done."

"I'll help you," Maura volunteered, handing her empty glass to Peter. "Would you get me another beer, hon?"

Christina glared at her sister as she bent down to open the oven door.

"Smooth, Maury, real smooth," she hissed. "Nothing like acting totally out of character. When do you ever help me?"

"I panicked," Maura admitted. "I could feel Peter's eyes boring a hole through my head."

The sisters busied themselves with getting the hot crab dip on a tray and checking on the bubbling

bacon swiss dip. More guests were arriving all the time and the cozy kitchen filled up with friends and relatives in the overspill from the living room and dining room.

Thankfully, the subject had been changed by the time they rejoined their spouses.

Once during a lull in the conversation, Jonah leaned over and captured her attention.

"Did you have anything to do with that little street painting escapade?" he asked her outright.

"Of course not, Jonah," she said indignantly, crossing her fingers behind her back.

"When I woke up that time, you weren't in bed," he pointed out.

"I told you I was editing a story," she said huffily. "God."

"I had to ask," he said. "Sorry." He gave her a quick hug and reached down to swipe a cracker with the hot crab dip.

"It's okay," she said.

Peter put in some Irish CD's and the elder Clancy brothers entertained the party by doing their famous Irish jig.

Maura set out the corned beef and cabbage at around eight and everyone devoured the succulent meat and her lightly seasoned cabbage; there were also roasted potatoes and the casserole her mother brought as well as the hot loaves of her father's Irish soda bread.

Christina was feeling giddy from the success of their street painting episode. Even her brother Michael made a comment about the thoroughness of the vandalism.

"This guy beat us, Timmy," he shouted to his younger brother. "He did the whole stretch from the corner to Gallinson's."

"Just like you and me, Paddy," cried Sean, lifting his mug of Guinness and toasting the crowd. "I still say it had to be a Clancy."

"We're all accounted for, Uncle Sean," Maura said innocently. "Must have been a wannabe."

Christina was talking to Ally and Dave when her Aunt Sally tried to walk around her and accidentally knocked over a basket of chips onto the hardwood dining room floor.

"Shit," the older woman said. "What a klutz I am. Where's a broom?"

"I'll get it, Sally," Peter called, retreating into the kitchen.

Maura was standing at the stove, measuring coffee into the percolator when her husband suddenly appeared in front of her, holding the dustpan in one hand and a pair of black Keds with green paint splattered on the soles in the other.

"Care to explain this, Maura?"

"Uh, it's used to pick up dust and other debris," Maura ventured.

"So not the right answer," Peter said sternly. "Go get your sister."

"Peter," Maura put out her hand pleadingly. "Christina had nothing to do with this."

"Yeah, right," he snorted. "I notice you didn't say Kate. So why'll you're at it, get Jonah, too."

"Oh fuck," Maura muttered. "Can I at least put the coffee on?"

"Now!" he barked.

Maura hurried into the other room where there was so much dancing and laughing going on, that no one noticed her crestfallen expression. She pulled her sister away from Ally and whispered something in her ear.

"Damn," Christina said. "I think Jonah is dancing with Mom. Maybe you should leave him alone."

"I can't, Peter will just come in and make a scene," Maura said. "Do you want everyone talking about this tomorrow? We could go to fucking jail."

"Jail might be easier," Christina commented.

Christina looked at Ally and her best friend shrugged apologetically.

"Pray for me," she said dejectedly as she went into the kitchen.

Only Peter was there. Most of the party had sprawled out onto the big, front wraparound porch where the chiminea was burning merrily and the music spilled out the open windows.

"What's that?" she tried for innocent surprise when he dangled the sneaker in front of her.

"Your sister's shoe," he said dryly. "Something tells me you have a pair just like it at home."

"No way, I know better than to walk in wet paint and I was very careful," she said.

Maura returned, pulling a perspiring Jonah by the hand.

"I was finally getting the hang of it," he complained. "What's going on?"

"I think what's going on is that we're married to a couple of criminals," Peter said.

"That's a little extreme," Christina said. "We're hardly criminals."

"Want me to outline the extent of the crime, Christina?" Peter asked. "I could fill you in on the legal ramifications of your actions, if you'd like."

"Spare me," Christina drawled.

"Is that what I think it is?" Jonah asked, his gaze narrowing as he studied the sneaker.

"Caught, green-footed," Maura said, giggling at her joke. "At least there was no blood."

"Yet," Peter said ominously.

"It was you," Jonah said, staring incredulously at his wife. "You lied to me."

Christina's heart sank at his words. She suddenly felt so much worse. She'd promised him only that afternoon that she wouldn't lie to him again.

"I'm sorry about that," she said softly.

"Save it," he said shortly. "So what happens now, Pete?"

"Well, frankly, I doubt they'll ever find any evidence that will point to these two miscreants. I see no reason to expose them. However, I for one, am going to impose the maximum penalty and you," he pointed to Maura, "won't be sitting easily for the next week. And you better think about how you're going to make restitution to the town."

Maura blushed.

"I'll do volunteer work with the township beautification league," she said. "Christina will help me."

"Hey," Christina began but quickly shut up when Jonah leveled his intense gaze on her. "I'd be happy to pull weeds and paint planters," she amended hastily.

"Seeing as how you're so careful not to get any on you, that's a good deal," Peter told her. "Make the coffee, Maura. People will be looking for dessert soon."

Jonah took Christina's arm and pulled her into the tiny powder room off the kitchen. In the small space, he towered over her and Christina felt very insignificant. He planted his hands on the minute

vanity, trapping her in the space between his powerful forearms.

"I'm really disappointed in you," he said. "Not because you did the painting thing – that was bad and you would have gotten paddled for it, but you flat out lied to me, for the second time today. What's up with that, Christina?"

Christina swallowed hard. She had no glib excuse to offer him. He was her husband, her partner and lover and there was no reason to lie to him ever, even if it was to save her butt.

"I don't know," she said, her eyes tearing up at the harshness of his expression. "I didn't mean to, Jonah, I really didn't. I probably would have told you about the painting thing, but it was just too much, everyone was around."

"Do I have to snip your tongue to cure you of it?" he asked.

"Shut up," she said, wiping the tears off her cheek. "I won't do it again but don't be so scary all the time."

"I'm scary?" he asked, rolling his eyes. "I'm wearing a fucking green felt derby. My shirt can be seen from space and I have a shamrock sticker on my ass." He turned around so she could see the little green decal that someone had stuck on his jeans.

"You look great," she said breathlessly. "But you're always so good and true and I have my failings, Jonah. I am not always good like you."

"Says who?"

"I'm Irish," she said.

"I'm English," he retaliated. "So what?"

"So, story telling is in my veins," she said. "So is self-preservation. But I *will* try to get past that.

Maybe you could make me something – a bracelet, or a ring that will always remind me.”

“A truth bracelet?”

“Sure and begorrah, that’d be the very thing,” she said in a soft lilting voice. “So how bad will it be?”

“Bad enough to leave you hot and aching,” he promised her. “When we get home, you’ll be wearing the red, missus, forget the green.”

“Okay,” she said, acquiescing to the inevitable. “Can we party now?”

“Let me show you my jig,” he said, leading her out of the bathroom.

They danced in the living room, next to her parents who were doing a jig of a different sort – one that involved a lot of smooching and hugging.

“You two should really get a room,” Christina quipped as she tumbled into Jonah’s arms.

“Aye and I’ve got a solid alibi,” Patrick said, lapsing into his childhood brogue.

“Ewww,” his children exclaimed again.

The party was still hopping when Christina and Jonah made their goodbyes at midnight.

“Good luck,” she whispered in Maura’s ear. “But it was awesome, well worth it.”

“Somehow I think I’m going to doubt that,” Maura retorted. “I intend to drink like a fish until the diehards leave and then hopefully I’ll get sick and my husband will feel sorry for me.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Christina told her, giving her a big hug. “But we are Clancy, we can take it.”

Back at home, Jonah handed Margaret the doggie bag of food they’d packed for her and gave her a big kiss after she assured him once more that she didn’t need a ride home and she didn’t want to

stay the night. They watched her get into her big Crown Victoria and pull out onto the country lane heading toward her retirement complex on the inlet. Margaret was the youngest of the great aunt and uncle Clancy's but she usually didn't go to the crazier parties. At eighty-two, she felt her partying days were behind her.

"She's wonderful," Jonah told Christina as they waved goodbye. "Now, you need attending to."

It always amazed her how Jonah could be the fun loving husband in one minute and the stern disciplinarian in the next.

"In the morning?" she asked hopefully.

"Right now." He pulled a dining room chair into the center of the living room.

"Ugh," Christina said. Slowly she approached him and stopped when her boot touched the toe of his boot.

He toppled her over his lap in one easy movement and slid the folds of her skirt up over her back, pinning them up with his one hand while his other yanked down her thong.

"Painting the street was bad enough," he said. "Criminal mischief at the least and hard core vandalism at the most. But lying to me is unacceptable, Christina. You will not do it again."

"I won't," she said.

SMACK! His hand came down on her vulnerable bottom and she shuddered. He spanked her harder than he ever had before.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

The next volley of blows left her breathless and tears slid down her nose into her mouth. She'd never experienced such a fury of pain from his hand.

"Stop, please," she whimpered.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

He didn't stop even when she began to beg, plead for his forgiveness. He spanked her long and without mercy until she was sobbing, her face a wet mess when he finally laid his hot hand on her hotter bottom.

"That's one red ass," he said satisfied. "I hope you'll feel this for the next few days, and every time you think you want to lie to me in the future, you'll remember this."

God, he could be such a stickler. Who would think a long-haired hippie-carpenter-surfer-musician would be such a goddamn stickler, Christina thought ruefully.

"Can we jig?" she asked tremulously.

"Sure and begorrah," he answered in his phony brogue. Gently, he turned her over so that she was lying in his lap, cradled by his arms. "I'd love to jig with you."

They danced into the hallway, up the stairs, into their bedroom and then they really found their rhythm and jigged all night long.

"Happy St. Patrick's Day," Jonah whispered.

"Pog mo thoin," Christina replied sweetly.

And of course, he did.

A Memorial Day to Remember

Chapter One

May was sweet at the Jersey shore. The air was warm enough to lounge on the beach, but not hot enough to fry while doing so. Christina would bring Clancy down early on a weekend morning to watch Jonah surf. The baby was delighted to see her father dressed in his blue-streaked wetsuit, perched on his board, skillfully riding the crest of a wave into the shallows. On the bright Saturday morning a week before Memorial Day weekend, Christina carried Clancy to the water's edge, and they watched the surfers and the gulls, jumping over the waves that rolled onto the shore. The baby laughed excitedly when Christina dipped her tiny toes into the cool ocean. Then they sat on a blanket in the sand, enjoying the mild sea breeze, while Chris fed Clancy a jar of Beechnut pears. Jonah plopped down on the sand next to them, and Clancy giggled happily when he splashed sea water from his wet hair onto her.

"You know, I realize that she can't actually see that far, but it really looks like she recognizes you out there in the ocean," Christina said. "She says 'Dada' and points toward the waves."

"I probably can't actually see that far, either," Jonah laughed. "But I'll always recognize her and you, my two favorite girls. Maybe she just sees me walking out and figures that's where I've been."

"Before I forget," Christina said. "My parents want to know, if we're coming over next weekend, for their big Memorial Day bash."

"Sunday?"

"Yeah, and then we have Ally and Dave's barbecue on Monday."

"Remember that we were going to paint the new peach shed next weekend? So that leaves Saturday to do that. Are you up to it?" He smiled, as he tweaked one of her dark braids.

Christina grimaced. She hated the idea of wasting one day of the holiday weekend doing something so mundane as painting.

Jonah was in the process of building a new shed in the peach orchard for their summer business. In addition to the shed, he had built a much improved fruit stand, which would hold up to twenty baskets of peaches, with a scale and shelf for bags and a cash box. It was far better than the old table and sign they had been using. A professional-looking sign saying "Pendleton Whitehouse Farm" topped the structure with a painted banner advertising "*Fresh Peaches Picked Today*" below it.

"Ally mentioned going out on the cat on Saturday," she said, hopefully.

"Christina, I have jobs lined up for every weekend in June, so next weekend is the only chance I'll have to do it. I should be done with the construction by Thursday, and I don't want to leave it unpainted for over a month."

"Couldn't you just do it at night sometime?" she asked, realizing it was a mistake when she saw the dark expression on his face.

"Sure, I'll just fit it in after my regular job, after my side job and after I spend some quality time with my wife and daughter. Are you really that

selfish? So childish as to quibble about one little chore."

Christina wasn't thinking; she was never thinking when Jonah got her Irish up – something he did quite frequently.

"I have a busy life too, you know," she hissed. "I work hard, and forgive me, if I'd like to have off on the holiday weekend. You're so fucking inconsiderate, Jonah."

She backed away involuntarily when she saw his eyes narrow. But he ignored her. Unzipping the wetsuit, he peeled it off, dropping it in the sand next to his sandals. She couldn't help admiring the golden physique of his torso, the drops of water glistening on his broad shoulders and the sun-streaked chestnut rope of hair that hung down his back.

But, his green eyes were cold when he finally looked at her.

"Go home, Christina," he said. "I'm not going to deal with one of your temper tantrums here."

"You don't have to deal with it!" she shouted, irked beyond belief at his calm, neutral tone. "And it's not a temper tantrum; it's a legitimate complaint. Big, stupid bully."

"And, you tell me it's not a temper tantrum?" he asked in that silky, dangerous voice she dreaded. "I beg to differ. And, I think you know my method for dealing with that kind of behavior."

"Cut it out," she said.

"I'll see you at home," he said shortly. "I have to leave to meet Jake at the Bait Shop by one o'clock. It's just a little roof repair; won't take me longer than four or five hours."

"Will you be stopping by for dinner?" Chris asked sarcastically.

"Lose the attitude, Christina," Jonah said. "He's paying me five hundred, cash. I think we could use it."

"We should be millionaires for all the jobs you take, but surprisingly, we're not," she said cuttingly.

"Why are you in such a foul mood?" he asked, as he gathered his wetsuit and yanked his board out of the sand. "Come on."

She stuck her tongue out at his back, as he strode past her, not caring that she was amusing Dave, who had been surfing as well and was following up the beach at a discreet distance. Sighing, she lifted the baby from the blanket and waited for Dave to catch up, so she could walk with him to the parking lot behind the Crab Shack.

"Why is he such a jerk, Dave?" she asked. "He's so damn inflexible."

"He's been under a lot of pressure at work, you know," Dave offered. "Did he tell you about this latest snafu?"

"He never tells me anything," she said.

"Do you ask?"

Christina made a face at Dave. Eh tu, Brutus.

"I always ask him about his day, but you know, I got stuff going on, too."

"Yeah, Jonah told me about the merger," Dave said. "But, at least, they're not changing the concept of the magazine or affecting any of the staff."

Christina felt a niggling sensation of guilt.

"So, what's going on with his work?" she finally asked.

"Maybe you should ask him. Look, there he is, all ready and willing." Dave chuckled.

Jonah was leaning against his truck, which was parked next to her Subaru. He did not look happy.

Christina really wished she could just keep walking.

Her husband and his friend made some uniquely male knuckle-knocking gesture, as Dave passed by on the way to his own truck. Jonah took the baby from her arms and buckled her into her car seat. Then he turned to face his wife.

"I'll meet you at home," he told her. "We're going to have a little talk before I go to Jake's."

"I can't wait," she said, not happy at the prospect of having one of his *talks*.

"Maybe we should start the talk now," he said, leaning close to her and caging her against the car with his arms.

Christina hated the helpless way he could make her feel sometimes. His chest was inches from her neck, and she was forced to tilt her head back to look into his face.

"Christina, your mood just shifted 180 degrees," he said. "And why? Because I reminded you of something you actually volunteered to do. Remember that?"

She stared at him, stubbornly mute.

"I'll remind you," he continued. "You told me that you didn't want me doing so much around the house by myself. You offered to help me paint the shed when I finished building it."

"Not on Memorial Day weekend," she said.

"We're going to two parties already, so what's one day helping your husband paint a goddamn shed?"

"One day too many?" she snapped.

"Fine," he said. "I can see this discussion is going nowhere. We'll finish it at home."

"Maybe," she said.

"Definitely," he corrected.

Christina hopped in the car and waited until Jonah pulled his truck out of the lot. She watched him take the right turn toward home, and when he was far enough away, she pulled out, turning left. He could just stew at home for a while. She wasn't going to endure one of his lectures right now. She felt a little guilty about giving him such grief about next weekend, but she was actually hoping, if she complained enough, he would feel motivated to do the painting without her.

She decided to go see her parents and let them spoil Clancy for a couple of hours. She was just pulling into their driveway when her cell phone erupted in sound.

She didn't want to speak to her husband right now. He was sure to be livid with her for defying him. Tough.

She was enjoying a cup of coffee on the patio with her mother while Patrick Clancy pushed his granddaughter on the baby swing in the yard.

"Did you forget where we live?" a deep voice made her jump, and she splashed coffee down her shirt.

"Shit, Jonah, you scared me," she cried.

"Hi, Jonah," Faith said. "Good waves this morning?"

"Really nice, Faith, thanks," he said, grinning at his mother-in-law. "I came to fetch my wife."

"Why don't you leave Clancy with us for a while," Faith offered. "We'll give her some lunch, and she can take a nap here."

Thanks, Mama Judas, Christina thought, glaring at her mother.

"Sounds great," Jonah said. "Let's go, Christina. This time, I'll follow you."

If Faith Clancy wondered why her normally mild son-in-law was standing there barking orders to her now sullen daughter, she didn't let on. She just smiled, as the pair exchanged heated looks.

"I'm finishing my coffee," Christina said stubbornly.

"We have coffee at home," Jonah said.

"Mom's is better."

"Christina."

The admonishing tone in which he said her name made her blush, and sighing, she gulped down the rest of her coffee.

"I'll be back in a little while, Mom," she said. "My caveman beckons."

Faith waved them away, shaking her head in amusement.

Both Jonah and Christina went to give Clancy a kiss goodbye before slipping out the side gate to the driveway.

"Straight home," Jonah said shortly.

Christina made a face at his back when he walked past her.

This time, Christina had no choice but to go home, with Jonah's truck tailing her like a big, blue vulture the whole way.

She was still pissed when she shot into the driveway, screeching to a halt in front of the flagstone patio behind the back porch. She leaned against her car, arms folded in front of her, while she watched her husband pull in more sedately and park beside her.

"Better get a broom," he said, nodding toward the spray of white pebbles that littered the patio from her angry park job.

"You don't want to know what I'd do with a broom," she muttered.

"I *do* know what you'll do with it," he replied evenly. "You'll sweep the goddamn pebbles off the patio that you just put there."

"They were there before," Christina lied. "Your truck always does that."

"Christina, are we going to stand here and argue about this when clearly, you know you're wrong?"

"No, I know *you're* wrong," she cried. "How could you come storming into my parents' yard like some raving lunatic, ready to carry me off as if I were a wayward bride? What the hell, Jonah? I was having coffee with my mother."

"And you were supposed to be home, having a discussion with me about next weekend."

"That doesn't matter."

"I think it does," he said seriously. He looked at her, and she felt ensnared by the depths of his green eyes. He could do that; he had powerful eyes.

"I know how your discussions end up," she said. "Usually, with my end up. So, call it self preservation."

"I hadn't planned on it ending up that way," he told her surprisingly. "But, it sure as hell will now."

"No," she said.

"No?" It was just one word, but the way he said it made her stomach flip over.

"But why?" She was whining, and she knew it. She could hear it in her head.

"Because you have to know that I won't tolerate this kind of disrespect. It's like a slap in the face, Christina," he sighed. "Like I don't get enough crap at work, now I have to get it from my wife, too? What's next? Clancy giving me the finger, saying, fuck off, daddy?"

"She would never," Christina gasped, appalled at the mere idea of it. "She loves you."

"Yeah, well you do, too."

Christina was trapped. Caught well and truly in the "*if you loved me you wouldn't disrespect me*" web of guilt.

Fiend.

"Yes, I do love you," she said. "That's different. We're adults, partners. This is not a dictatorship."

"I agree. But, I asked you to go home."

"No fucking way, you never asked," she yelled. "You *told* me to go home."

"And, what if I had asked?"

"I might have said yes, but you got all pissy and brooding and starting giving me the cold eye. What did you expect me to do?"

"Go home," he said simply. "Because you knew I was right. You made a promise to me, and you owed me the courtesy of discussing it."

Christina hated, absolutely hated it when Jonah was right. It was supremely unfair. She knew that he was right. She shouldn't have made the detour to her parents' house; it was a childish escape. Not only was he right, but she had been wrong. Crap.

"So, what's going on at work?" she asked innocently.

"No way we're talking about work now," he told her grimly. "I come home every night and ask about your day; that's when we talk about work. You don't ask then, why ask now?"

"I want to know," she said.

"Tough, I don't want to talk about work now," he said firmly. "What I do want to talk about is how you could let your offer to help paint the peach shed slip your mind? What I want to know is why a

grown woman runs to hide behind her mother when she has to face something important."

"Why is it so important?" she cried, waving her hands excitedly. "It's a stupid shed, Jonah. Who gives a fuck if it's painted or not?"

"I do," he said. "And, I'm the master carpenter on this job, get it?"

It would be so easy to acquiesce, to just eat some humble pie and apologize, to accept the fact that she would be painting the peach shed next Saturday; but Christina felt a thorn of perversity sticking in her throat.

"You can't make me," she said. "There's no way you can make me paint the shed, if I don't want to. What are you going to do? Strap the paint brush to my hand?"

"Excuse me," Jonah said. "But did someone tell you to let your inner child out today? Because I sure as hell didn't." He strode over to his workshop/garage and grabbed the broom from its clip on the wall. He shoved it in her hand. "Now, I *am* going to make you. Sweep the patio, Christina."

"Fuck that." She tossed the broom to the ground.

He bent and picked it up and put it in her hand again.

"Sweep," he repeated.

God, he was a bully. She stared at him, holding the broom, not moving it an inch.

WHACK!

She was so busy staring him down, she didn't see his hand move, but she felt the explosion on her backside.

"Ouch!" she yelped. "Asshole."

WHACK!

He did it again.

She finally moved the broom, lifting it up and bringing the handle down squarely on his head. He flinched.

"That was a mistake," he said. "Now sweep the damn patio."

She felt a little sick when she noticed the red mark on his forehead.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Did I hurt you?"

He leaned down and cupped her cheeks with both his hands, forcing her to look at him; he was so close, he was breathing in her face.

"Right now I want you to obey me, Christina Pendleton," he said quietly. "I'm going inside to make lunch, and when you're finished sweeping the patio, I want you to come inside. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good." He turned and went into the house.

He knew how to use that word, oh man, did he. When he told her to obey him, she felt her legs go rubbery and her stomach turn over again and again. It reminded her of their wedding when she first balked at learning that he wanted 'obey' to be part of her vows...

"It's archaic," she protested, even though she already knew he was a bit archaic.

"Christina, I'm not going to compromise on this. There can't be two bosses in a marriage, not if you want it to last. I promise that I'll always cherish you, protect you and care for you. You know I'll always love you and respect you; I'm asking the same, with one little stipulation."

"To obey you? That's little? Seems more like gargantuan to me."

"Yes, I can see that you'd think so. But do you think I'm asking this in a superficial way? This is me, asking for your trust."

"What if I say yes and then don't?" she quipped.

"Then I'd have to spank you," he replied solemnly, a grin teasing his lips.

"Nothing new about that."

But in the end, she agreed. And, normally, he never called her on it. But whenever he did say the words, she felt a trigger release inside her heart where she was shot back to that day twelve years ago when she gave her life to this awesome, wonderful man. Deep inside, she had wanted to obey him. She loved being his woman, the one he loved.

But it was hard; difficult to put the twenty-first century professional woman on a back burner and just give in to her husband. Ally had the same kind of relationship with Dave, and the two best friends were forever sharing notes and grievances; commiserating, but always sticking up for their mates when their other friends made catty comments.

Deep down, they recognized the tinge of jealousy that accompanied those catty comments because, for all their natural dominance on the homefront, both Dave and Jonah were true romantics who loved the hell out of their wives.

Christina knew she was living in a bit of a time warp—one in which her long haired, brawny husband was truly in charge. And, Jonah was always perfectly respectful of her, which made her recent bad temper even more disagreeable to stomach. In truth, she had been wrong to cause such a ruckus over a little painting.

She finally swept the patio, pushing the stones back into the driveway and carefully replacing the broom when she was finished. Sighing, she walked slowly up the back stairs onto the porch. She could smell frying butter and cheese.

Jonah was making grilled cheese and tomato sandwiches on the thick, crusty Italian bread she had bought at Natale's Bakery yesterday.

His ass looked so cute in the tie-dyed patterned board shorts he was wearing, and the dark blue tee shirt made his broad back look warm and inviting. He had combed out his long hair and left it loose to dry—it nearly reached his waist. She loved his hair; it was so silky and thick, the chestnut strands streaked by the sun.

"I'm sorry," she said to his back. "I was a brat."

"Yeah, you were," he agreed.

She crept up behind him and wrapped her hands around his waist, hugging him hard, pressing her face into his warm back, inhaling his hair.

He lowered the heat under the frying pan.

He turned around and shifted her hands behind his back, and she felt a pang of remorse when she saw the red welt on his forehead.

"I am so sorry, Jonah," she whispered, standing on tiptoes, so she could kiss the injury.

"Are you really?" he asked, tilting her chin up, dropping one lone kiss on her lips.

"You know I am," she mumbled. "It was awful of me to hit you with the broom handle, but you did hit me, you know, and that hurt, too."

"Yeah, I'm not sorry, Christina," he said flatly.

"I know."

He never apologized for spanking her, and she had long ago stopped expecting him to be sorry for what he deemed a necessity.

"I think you need punishment," he said, in a voice hoarse from the ocean and wind and the emotion of the moment.

"But, I said I was sorry," she said.

"And, I believe you," he told her. "But, it doesn't excuse what happened earlier, does it?"

"I guess not," she whispered.

His hands dropped down to her waist, and he deftly unbuttoned the fly on her shorts and slid them down her legs. He reached around and cupped her bottom through the silky fabric of her bikini briefs; for one instant, he held her gently, pressing her close to his body—letting her feel the heat of his skin, then he guided her over to one of the chairs at the kitchen table.

He sat down and trapped her between his thighs so that she was his captive audience.

"Remembering promises is an important part of trust, Christina," he told her. "You made me feel like an ogre for reminding you of something you volunteered to do. And then you got nasty when I held you to your promise. You totally defied me by going to your parents' house and then proceeded to act like a spoiled brat by hitting me with a broom and refusing to clean up your mess. What do you think?"

"I know," she said softly. "You're right. I was wrong."

"Then, you know you have this coming," he said, toppling her over his knees and holding her on his lap with his left hand. He tugged her underwear up into the crack of her butt, exposing her cheeks. His right hand caressed her bottom for a tender moment, and she bit her lip, knowing it would be short-lived.

CRACK! His hand descended onto naked skin, and a sensation of bee stings spread over her flesh.

"Ow," she yelped.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

"Ouch, Jonah, it hurts," she wailed.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

He was a carpenter. He had a hand that could be infinitely gentle or incredibly harsh, and it was the latter that she was feeling. It felt like a plank of wood.

"Ow," she whimpered.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

Please let it be done, she prayed into his calves.

And, it was. Gently, he lifted her and tucked her onto his lap, letting her bottom rest in the hammock of air between his thighs. He kissed her forehead, and kissed the tears that rested on her eyelashes. She wrapped her arms around his neck, leaning into his chest, loving the scent of him.

"I love you, Christina," he told her. And then he told her what she wanted to hear but wouldn't ask. "All is forgiven."

"Even this?" she queried, tracing one fingertip over the red streak on his forehead.

"Of course." He chuckled. "I have a hard head, in case you haven't noticed."

Chapter Two

While they ate their sandwiches, Jonah told Christina about the tough time he had been having at work.

"It's the project manager," he said. "He's a real ball buster. He's treating all of us like we've never built a house before.'

"Sounds like you want to quit," Christina said thoughtfully. "You never used to get stressed at work – that's why you always said you didn't want your own company. You wanted to be able to leave it at the worksite every night."

For years, Jonah had worked for himself, working as a subcontractor on jobs for his friend Sam Connelly's construction company. When Christina had become pregnant, Jonah had become a regular employee for Connelly, opting for all the benefits that went hand in hand with a normal job, knowing that the health insurance was better at Connelly than what they could get at the magazine, plus the 401K plan was very attractive.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "And, the funny thing is, I'm having a lot more fun doing all my own stuff, the side jobs, right now. But, Connelly Construction has great benefits and, for the most part, we get good jobs. I've always enjoyed working for Sam in the past."

"But, Sam has to go where the money is," she pointed out. "And, that means working for assholes sometimes."

"I know. And really, give me a few acres of tract houses rather than one McMansion with a prima donna owner and an arrogant PM."

"The owner is trouble, too?"

"Man, Christina, you must never listen to me when I talk about work lately," he sighed. "I've been talking about this woman and her designs from hell for the last two months."

"I tend to zone out when you start ranting and raving," Christina confessed.

"Brat."

She popped the last bit of her sandwich into her mouth and sighed contentedly.

"That was delicious," she told him. "Thank you for lunch."

"You're welcome."

"So, what time do you want to start painting on Saturday?"

Jonah smiled.

"Such a good girl," he said. "I figure I'll forego surfing, and we can start early and see if we can knock it out in the morning. Then, we can see if Dave and Ally want some company sailing in the afternoon."

"Perfect," Christina said happily. She looked at him and felt a quiver in her stomach. He was so perfect, so tender and yet strong. Even when he was being his inflexible self, she loved him so much.

"What are you looking at? Do I have cheese on my nose or something?"

"Your nose is beautiful," she told him. "Just like the rest of you. You don't have to go yet; it's not one o'clock."

"Were you thinking of something we could do for ten minutes?" he asked.

"Definitely."

Christina scooted off her chair and slid onto his lap, pressing her breasts into his hard chest.

"Such a vixen," he murmured, planting his lips on hers and letting his tongue meet hers in an explosive kiss.

She reached down to unbutton her shorts and wriggled out of them, kneeling on his thighs and digging her hands under his tee shirt to knead his back. He worked his finger over her clit, driving her mad, as he continuously rubbed the tiny spot that made her wet.

Jonah unlaced the tie to his shorts and pushed them down, allowing himself free movement.

His erect penis made her feel totally desirable, and she caught him between her thighs, grinding down until he impaled her, pushing her to the brink of a delicious orgasm. They rocked in their own rhythm, completely lost to the outside world, captured in the moment of their union.

Her nipples felt sore from the abrasion of rubbing against him, and she gasped, loving the way he claimed her and vice versa.

"God, I love you," she cried, as they climaxed together.

"I love you too," he said breathlessly. "But, don't call me God."

Her eyes met his, and she felt herself tumbling into the net of his love.

"Nice," she sighed.

"I can't imagine anything nicer."

"No matter what I say, no matter how much I argue, don't ever change the way you are, Jonah," she said. "I need you to always be you. You keep

me sane. You keep me safe, and you keep me being me."

"I like you being you."

"Even when I act like a bitch?"

"Yup, even then."

Christina hugged him hard, burying her face in his neck, inhaling the scent of his skin, relishing the warmth of his body.

"I have to go."

"I know."

"Have a good afternoon. Do something fun before you go get Clancy," he said. "Take advantage of your free time."

"I will."

They kissed goodbye, and she cleared the table, loading their plates into the dishwasher. She took some chicken out of the freezer for dinner, deciding it would be nice to grill tonight.

She sat at the table, thinking about their conversation. Jonah would be much happier doing his own thing at this point. It wouldn't be too expensive to add him and Clancy to her insurance plan at the magazine, and she had been selling quite a few freelance pieces lately; if she could just buckle down and start writing on a more regular basis, she could bring in even more money. Jonah's job paid well, and even if things were tight now with the baby, they still managed to save and put away something every month for Clancy's college fund. What if they just took a little hiatus from saving? Jonah was such a perfectionist, which was why he was always busy during his off hours. She knew some of the guys he worked with would choose to work for him if given the option.

She went into her office and logged onto the Internet. An hour later, she sat back in her chair,

satisfied at her accomplishment. She had purchased Jonah's domain name for his website. Pendeleton Carpentry was now an official business undertaking; she would ask Melanie at the magazine to build the site – she had a nice little side business of web design.

Christina sent an email to her friend, Jane, who did graphic design for a major advertising company on Madison Avenue in New York, outlaying the ideas she had for a logo and a brochure. Jane would do a fabulous job, and the result would be a totally professional tool for Jonah's new business, and her old college friend would absolutely discount what would have been sure to be a prohibitive expense for a new business.

Christina smiled, excited at the prospect of this new career for her husband. He didn't know it yet, but he had just become an entrepreneur.

He would love the idea, she thought. He would have to.

Wouldn't he?

Jonah completed the peach shed before dinner on Thursday.

"Come look," he called in to her. She was just finishing feeding Clancy. She carefully wiped the mashed carrots from the baby's mouth and tossed the napkin onto the table.

"Coming," she called back.

She unbuckled Clancy's seat restraints and lifted the eleven month old baby from her highchair.

"Let's go see Daddy's shed," she said to her daughter.

Clancy giggled. Christina stepped out onto the front porch, not bothering to slip into her sandals. The grass was cool under her toes, and she sighed happily. It felt like summer.

Jonah was standing in front of the new structure; his tee shirt was stained with sweat and furred with wood dust.

"What do you think?" he asked proudly.

"It's awesome." Christina stepped around the building. Then Jonah noticed her feet.

"Christina," he barked. "Stop right there."

"What?" she looked at him blankly.

"You're not wearing shoes," he pointed out. "There's all sorts of crap in the grass. You could step on a nail." He had already carted off the remains of the old shed, but until he fine-tooth-combed the area with a rake and shop vac, he didn't want any bare feet walking around the site.

"Oh, for God's sake, Jonah," she snapped. "You scared the shit out of me. I thought there was a snake or something."

"Where are your shoes?"

"On the porch," she said, sighing. He would just nag her until she was safely in footwear.

"Do *not* move," he instructed, setting off for the porch. She sang softly to Clancy.

"Daddy's a big, silly worrier," she whispered. "Look at the new shed, honey." She wandered closer to the neat new building, holding Clancy up, so she could see in the window. A sharp pain pierced the ball of her foot, and she hopped back.

Holy crap. She'd stepped on something. She lifted her foot and saw a reddish colored staple poking out of the sole of her foot. Cursing, she hefted Clancy onto her hip and pulled it out, quickly wiping off the trail of blood that trickled over her skin.

"Shit," she muttered. Jonah would yell at her for moving when he told her to stay still. She

limped back to where she had been standing, waiting for him to reappear with her sandals.

Then he was there, dropping her sandals on the ground before her. She slid her feet into the well worn leather thongs and didn't say a word about her mishap.

"Lead us to the Peach mansion," she said, wincing slightly as the new injury made contact with the leather.

He had done a really great job; it was large enough to keep the riding mower and yard tools in it as well as the multitude of bushel baskets they used for peach picking. The ceiling was pretty high and there were hooks lining the beams for tools and more baskets. The electric was already hooked up, and he had added a sink with a small counter. She turned the faucet and was surprised when water poured into the basin.

"It's beautiful, honey," she told him. "When did you get the plumbing hooked up?"

"About an hour ago," he said. "Bob Mitchell stopped by; didn't you see his truck?"

"I must have missed it." Her foot was starting to throb, and she wanted to go wash it out and put some peroxide on the puncture. "I love the shutters. It's going to look like our mini farmhouse when you put them up." Six black shutters were stacked against one wall for the three windows.

"So, I can probably prime it tomorrow after work, and then Saturday morning, we'll do the painting. Deal?"

"Deal," she told him. "Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes, if you want a shower."

"What? You don't like me like this?" He nudged up against her, laughing when she recoiled and waved away the air surrounding him.

"Pungent? Nope, sorry. Go bathe, caveman."

"Anything for you, milady." He gathered up the tools that were still on the ground and walked back to the garage.

Christina made her way gingerly to the house, not putting her full weight on her left foot.

Why did these things always happen to her? Jonah said there could be crap in the grass, and she scoffed and immediately stepped on crap. Poetic justice? She wondered.

She set the baby in her playpen and went into the downstairs powder room to clean the cut. It was already red and a little puffy around the two puncture marks. She doused it liberally in peroxide and put a band-aid on it before going upstairs to change into socks.

While Jonah was in the shower, she retrieved the two boxes she had picked up that afternoon. Jane had emailed the designs she had created earlier in the week, and after Christina picked the one she liked best, she had brought the proofs to the printer they used at the magazine. The results were gorgeous; she leafed through the brochure, admiring the precise font Jane had chosen and the photos of Jonah and his woodwork that were interspersed throughout the text. It was a really professional job. She tucked the boxes containing five hundred sleek business cards and a like amount of glossy brochures back into the bottom drawer of her desk. She planned to present them to him on the weekend, after telling him her plans for his future.

Melanie had made real progress on the website; she wanted to have some links to streaming video of Jonah as well, but that would have to wait until Jonah actually knew about his website.

He was going to be so excited, she thought happily.

Saturday dawned with bright blue skies and a sun that was warm, but not too hot. It was going to be a beautiful day. As Christina showered, she noticed that her foot was not looking good. It was still hurting her, and it looked infected now, even though she had doused it with more peroxide and Neosporin. She carefully bandaged it and slipped into socks and her old sneakers. She put on a pair of khaki cargo shorts and a white tank top. Her mother was coming to pick up Clancy at eight, so they could paint without any interruptions. Jonah had primed the building after work on Friday, and it already looked so much better.

Jonah had eggs and bacon frying in the skillet when she carried the baby downstairs. Her big mug of tea was poured, and there was a sippy cup of apple juice on Clancy's high chair. A bowl of peaches was also waiting for the baby.

"Such a good daddy," Christina said, kissing her husband.

"Why are you limping?" he asked, as he noticed how she favored her left foot.

"I stubbed my damn toe," she lied. "It felt like I broke it."

"Let me see it."

"No," she said quickly. "It's fine. I didn't break it; I just clobbered it good on the door jam going into the bathroom."

"You gotta be careful," he said. "I don't need my staff nursing injuries during shed painting duty."

"Nice," she snorted. "Thanks for your concern."

"I do my best," he grinned. "Sit down, lady, your breakfast special is almost ready."

"Wise ass cooks," she complained. "Such is my lot in life."

She had to admit, he made great eggs. His scrambled eggs were like clouds, they were so fluffy, and the spices he added made them truly delectable. Accompanied with crisp bacon and slices of buttered rye toast, it was a great morning feast. As she sipped her second cup of tea, she leaned back in her seat.

"That was awesome," she told him. "I can't believe Maura doesn't do this. She still thinks pretzels are a food group. Peter just can't convert her, and I know he tries. My sister is strange."

"You think?"

"I think I should put your hair in pigtails for the painting ceremony." She reached over and parted his long ponytail.

"I think you should never try to put my hair in pigtails, if you value that sweet bottom of yours," Jonah warned.

"Spoilsport."

They heard the sound of a car in the driveway, and a moment later, Faith Clancy was knocking on the screen door of the porch.

"I've come for my baby," she called. "Give her over."

Clancy's face lit up at the sound of her grandmother's voice.

"Grummy," she squealed.

"Yes, it's Grummy coming to spoil you rotten," Christina laughed.

"Grandmama, please," Faith sighed. "Grummy sounds so much like crummy."

"I think it's cute," Chris said. "I wouldn't mind if she called me Mummy, but alas, I'm always just plain Ma."

"Ma!" Clancy cried, reaching out her sticky peach hands to her mother.

"Sweet little Clance," Christina kissed the baby's nose, as she cleaned the sticky fingers with a baby wipe.

She retrieved the baby bag from the hall table and began filling an igloo with her daughter's favorite food.

"We'd love to have her all day, so you two just take your time painting and enjoying the afternoon on the boat," Faith said. "Your dad and I are home anyway—getting ready for tomorrow, so just let me know when you're coming to pick her up."

"Thanks, Mom." Christina toted the car seat, and her mother carried the baby out to her car while Jonah lugged the bags and the stroller that was folded up on the porch. "We really appreciate it. Are you sure you don't want me to bring anything tomorrow?"

"I've got it covered, Christy, just bring yourselves and your appetites."

"We can do that," Jonah said.

They kissed their baby and waved, as Faith drove up the driveway.

"Dishes can wait," Jonah said. "Let's paint, woman."

"Yes, mastah," Chris replied.

After an hour of painting, Christina remembered why she didn't like painting. Jonah was a pain in the ass perfectionist, constantly policing her section of the shed and correcting her brushstrokes.

"You've got a ton of holidays in that part," he said, pointing up at some miniscule dots of unpainted wood.

"Holiday schmoliday," she grumbled. "Go back to your own side."

"Christina, you want it to look good, don't you?"

"Not really, I thought it could look like shit and just make the house look better," she snapped, pissed because she was hot and bothered, and her foot hurt, and he was being an ass.

"Think again," he told her calmly. "And, don't be in such a hurry. Let's do it right."

He made her crazy, but finally, finally, after hundreds of seconds spent critiquing her finished product, he declared it finished.

"Good job, sweetie," he told her, smacking her butt affectionately.

"I just want a drink," she wailed to the heavens. "A nice cold beer. I deserve it."

"Ally and Dave have subs and beer," Jonah said. "You can drink on the boat."

She raced into the house to change into her bathing suit and throw on a pair of shorts before he could change his mind and make her paint a gazillion more holidays that he found. She threw a pair of sandals into her beach bag and a sundress, in case they decided to stop somewhere for dinner.

She was waiting for him in the kitchen when he came in from the garage where he was putting away the painting supplies.

"I guess this means you want me to hurry?" he asked.

"In two minutes, I'm getting a beer from the fridge, if you're not back here ready to whisk me away to my reward," she told him.

He was back in the kitchen wearing his board shorts and a clean tee shirt in one minute forty-five seconds. And, then they were in the truck, on their way to Ally and Dave's.

Christina felt so much better when they were skimming the cool waters of the bay in the Ally Cat,

a cold beer in her hand and a napkin filled with chips in her lap.

"How was painting?" Ally asked.

"Brutal," Christina answered.

"Fine," Jonah said.

They spent an hour lazing around the water, just catching the sun and chatting.

"I need a dip," Christina said. "The sun is hot."

Dave and Jonah were already stripped down to their shorts; they dove off the side into the water. Ally stepped out of her shorts and kicked off her sandals.

"You gonna swim in your socks, wacko?" she asked, looking at Christina's feet.

Christina had pulled off her sneakers once she was on the boat but had left her socks on because of the stupid cut on her foot. Now, she peeled off the white cotton and immediately dipped her feet into the cool waters of the bay.

"Ah," she sighed. "That feels good."

"Sore puppies?" Ally said sympathetically.

"So sore. I have been worked to the bone this day, Allison," she said.

Christina paddled her feet for a while and then slipped into the inviting cool water. Immediately, Jonah was at her side, holding her and breathing suggestively in her ear.

"No way, you despot," she cried, pummeling his chest. "You don't get to play when you worked me so hard this morning."

"You did a fabulous job, Christina," he whispered. "Thank you."

"Well, since you put it that way," she murmured, turning around so she could straddle him in the water.

The four played in the water until the cold started to seep into their skin. It was only May; the water was not really great for swimming until late June.

Eventually, they climbed back onto the deck and sprawled out, enjoying the hot sun on their wet skin.

Christina was almost asleep, the sun and beer lulling her into a delicious lassitude when Jonah's voice suddenly pierced her calm like an arrow to a balloon.

"Christina, what the hell is on your foot?"

"What?" she sat up and lifted her foot, so she could examine it. "Oops, a crab must have gotten me," she said innocently.

"The same crab that was in our bedroom this morning?" he asked, leveling one of his *don't you dare lie to me* glares at her.

"It's just a cut, Jonah," she said. "Don't be such a worrywart."

"How'd you do it?"

With sudden intuition, Dave scrambled to his feet, pulling Ally up from her reclining position on the floor of the catamaran.

"We're going below to get out the sandwiches," he announced. "We'll call you when the food's ready." The two disappeared down the ladder to the cabin. A moment later, music blared from the speakers.

"Subtle," Chris said.

"You gonna answer me?" her husband asked. He had her foot in his lap and was cautiously touching the skin around the inflamed puncture wounds. "This is infected."

"I stepped on something in the yard," she finally told him. "Remember the other day when you told me to stay put, and you went to get my shoes?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I didn't stay put. And, I stepped on some wicked little nail thing."

"Was it rusty?"

"Maybe."

"Goddamn it, Christina, was it rusty?" he yelled. She jumped.

"It was a dark reddish color," she said. "So, yes, I guess it was rusty."

"You guess?" He was furious. "And, this morning you lied to me about stubbing your toe."

"Because I wanted to avoid this very thing," she cried. "You're yelling at me, and it's not even my fault."

"Excuse me?"

"Okay, so it was my fault," she conceded. "I should have listened to you and stayed put, but I wanted to look at the shed."

"You had a tetanus shot when you were pregnant, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said, remembering it was one of the first things Joy Landrum had insisted on when she learned she was trying to conceive.

Jonah nodded.

"I think the salt water will help clear it up, so you're going to sit over there," he pointed to the side of the catamaran. "And I want you to keep your foot in the water, but before you do that, you're going to get a little reminder."

"Reminder for what?" she asked.

"Reminder that you don't lie to me," he said sternly. "And, if I tell you to do something, it's generally not for my benefit, but for yours."

"You are such a fucking straight-ass," she complained.

"Ah, but remember, you like that about me," he told her.

"No, I don't," she retorted. "I hate it."

"Liar."

He was sitting on the deck, and he pulled her facedown over his lap; she rested her elbows on the gleaming fiberglass, her head propped in her hands. Her bikini clad bottom was a perfect target for him.

SMACK! It was a hot, stinging blow, and she blinked. He really meant business.

"Next time you'll obey me," he said firmly, causing her stomach to flip.

SMACK!

"Ouch," she whispered.

"And if you ever hurt yourself again, you'll tell me immediately," he continued.

SMACK! SMACK!

"And, cut out the lying, Christina," he told her. "It's totally unnecessary, and it's disrespectful to our marriage."

SMACK!

Tears pooled against her nose, and she buried her head in her arms, trying to ignore the stinging pain that was spreading over her backside.

SMACK!

"Are we clear?" He rubbed her butt, easing the ache.

"Yes," she mumbled.

"Good." He turned her over and gathered her to his chest. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

He stood up, keeping her a prisoner in his arms, and carried her over to the side of the boat. He sat

her down on one of the steps leading into the water so that she could dangle her foot in the bay.

"Yikes," she winced when her bottom made contact with the hard surface.

"Sit there," he ordered. "I'll be back with your sandwich."

Like she would want to move, after what happened the last time she disregarded his instructions.

The water actually felt good on her foot. She glanced around the bay and was embarrassed to see a sailboat fairly close by. God, what if they'd seen her getting her ass spanked.

When Jonah didn't immediately reappear, she sensed that he was deliberately prolonging her punishment by leaving her alone. It was getting hot sitting in the sun, and her rear was still stinging. Damn him. She looked behind furtively and eased herself down into the water, holding onto the chrome rail that lined the steps.

It felt good. A little dip wouldn't hurt anyone, and it wasn't like she hadn't learned her lesson. She pushed off from the boat and slid underwater. She swam close to the boat for a few minutes and then made her way back to the steps. A bare foot was standing on the step she had recently vacated. Her eyes traveled upward and saw a small peach tattoo.

Strong hands reached down and gripped her by the armpits, lifting her completely out of the water.

SWAT!

The noise was deafening, and Christina blushed to the roots of her hair. No way the sailboat people didn't see or hear that one.

"You're really pushing my buttons, Christina," Jonah said grimly, planting her butt back on the

step. "Foot in the water. I brought you a sub and a beer."

"It's about time," she said churlishly.

"So not the right response," he said. "Care to try again?"

"Thank you," she said softly, reaching out for the cold bottle of Corona he was offering her. "I was getting too hot, that's why I went in the water. I didn't think you'd mind."

"You weren't just making a point?"

Christina blushed again. He had the uncanny ability of reading her mind. Drat him.

"Maybe just a little," she said honestly. "I'm sorry. I'll sit here all afternoon, if it will make you stop frowning at me."

Surprisingly, he grinned.

"I didn't know I was frowning," he chuckled. "I called Doctor Malone. He'll meet us at his office at five. He wants to check your foot and see if you need an antibiotic."

"On Saturday? What strings did you pull?"

"He actually offered," Jonah said. "I was ready to promise a summer's supply of fresh peaches, but I didn't have a chance to open my mouth."

"Let's give him the peaches, anyway."

"I planned to."

Ally and Dave finally reappeared topside. Ally sat next to Chris on the steps, and the two women spent the rest of the afternoon chatting. When it was almost time to head in, Christina waved her husband over.

"Is it okay to have one last swim?" she asked.

He smiled down at her, stooping, so he could kiss her tenderly.

"Of course," he told her.

They all dove in and splashed around for another fifteen minutes.

"That was great," Christina said, as she and Jonah dried each other in a cocoon of towel.

He slanted his lips down across hers and kissed her hard, exploring her mouth with his questing tongue. She melted against him.

"My foot feels better already," she told him. "The water really helped."

"Let me see."

She lifted her leg, so he could check the bottom of her foot.

"It does look better," he said.

Doctor Malone gave her a tube of antibacterial ointment and a prescription for amoxicillin.

"Just to be safe," the older man told her. "Take it for three days and give me a call next Thursday. The salt water probably helped a lot."

"Thanks, Doctor," she said.

"Next time, wear shoes at a construction site," Jim Malone said dryly.

"I will."

As soon as they got home, Jonah got to work raking the area around the new shed, and collecting all the old hardware he found. He was using his shop vac outside when Christina left to get Clancy.

She pulled her mother aside outside on the patio and showed her the brochure and card she had had printed for Jonah.

"Isn't it great, Mom?" she asked. "He's going to love it."

"Didn't you talk to him about it, Christy?" Faith asked in confusion. "How could you do all this without asking him if he wants to do it?"

Chapter Three

Christina snorted impatiently. "Of course, he wants to do it," she said. "He hates working for a construction company."

"I thought he was doing so well. Didn't they make him a foreman?" said Faith.

"Yeah, so? He's still working for a bunch of assholes."

"He's good friends with Sam Connelly," Faith pointed out. "I didn't know he was an asshole. We play bridge with Pete and Jane every other Friday. I hate to be the one to tell them that their son is an asshole."

"Mother, please," Christina sighed. "Sam's okay, but the jobs he takes are complete shit."

"Times are pretty tough right now in the development business," Faith said. "I'm sure Sam takes what he can get, even the shit. Are you sure Jonah is going to want to leave his friend in the lurch like this?"

"Mom, you don't understand. Jonah already does so many side jobs; this would just be freeing him up to do it full time. And, Sam can get a new foreman."

"Christina, I really think you jumped the gun on this one," Faith said gently. "Men have their pride, and this might not go over so well with Jonah."

Christina was deflated by the lack of enthusiasm her mother was showing for her plans. But, her mother was old-fashioned.

She dropped the brochure and card on the wrought iron table and went to retrieve her daughter from the sliding board where Patrick was playing with her.

She left the stroller there for tomorrow and waited while her father buckled the car seat into the back of the Subaru.

"See ya tomorrow, darlin'," her father said, kissing her on the nose. "Come early and bring your suits. The pool is officially open and heated, per your mother's instructions."

Patrick Clancy liked a nice, brisk swim, but Faith preferred a warmer climate for their kidney shaped pool, complete with natural rocks and waterfall. So, Patrick usually swam in the inlet that bordered their backyard.

"Bye, Dad."

When Christina got home, she saw Jonah on a ladder, touching up some spots on the shed that they missed, or rather, she missed.

She was heating up some baby food for Clancy when the sound of the Beach Boys erupted into the kitchen. She grabbed Jonah's cell phone from the counter and checked the number. She groaned when she noticed Sam Connelly's number.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hi Christina, I'm trying to reach the man, he around?"

"He's on a ladder, Sam, can I take a message?"

"Thanks. Could you ask him to meet me at the site tomorrow morning at about eight? I hate to ask him to come in on the holiday weekend but I just need his expertise for a couple of hours."

"On Sunday?"

"We have an issue that we have to decide on right away," Sam told her. "Jonah knows this job probably better than me at this point."

Are you going to pay him for his expertise? Christina thought indignantly. Or for coming in on a Sunday?

"I'll tell him," she said shortly.

"Is something wrong?" Sam asked, concern lacing his voice. "How's Clancy?"

"Everything's fine," Christina said. "I'll give him the message." She snapped the phone shut without saying goodbye.

Grumbling, she opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer.

When Jonah finally came in, she had finished another beer and ordered a pizza. They ate outside on the porch, facing the orchard.

"You look exhausted," Jonah said when she had finally put down her second piece of pizza, unable to eat anymore.

"I am," she said.

"Go to bed," he told her. "I'll put Clancy down."

She knew she should protest; make an effort to help out, but she was dog tired, and a little tipsy.

"Thank you, honey." She kissed him and went up to bed.

She was already lying down when she realized she had never told him about Sam's call. She'd tell him in the morning.

Sunlight streaming through the open window woke her. She stretched out and reached across to feel... nothing. Jonah was already up. She sat up groggily and looked at the alarm clock. Eight forty-five!

Shit, she never slept late!

"Christina!" her husband's voice was pissed.

She jumped out of bed and raced to the top of the stairs. He was glaring at her from the landing.

"Sam just called," he said. "He wondered where the hell I was."

"I'm sorry," she cried. "I forgot all about it."

"How many times have I told you to not to answer my cell phone," he said angrily. "I can get my own messages, thank you."

"Jeez, I said I was sorry."

"Forget it," he snapped. "Clancy's in her playpen. She had farina and a piece of toast. She'll probably want some fruit."

"Okay," she said. "I really am sorry." She hurried down the stairs to the landing, so she could give him a kiss goodbye. He turned his head, and her lips grazed his cheek.

"Bye," he said.

"Bye," she said forlornly, watching him bolt down the stairs. The back door banged behind him, and she sat down on the steps, feeling miserable.

"Ma!" Clancy's voice carried up to her. "Ma?"

"Coming, Clance."

Christina felt guilty, as she ate her breakfast of cornflakes and banana. Jonah hadn't even wanted to listen to her. He was mad.

While Clancy watched her favorite Sesame Street DVD, Christina vacuumed the downstairs and cleaned the kitchen. When the baby fell asleep in her playpen around ten-thirty, she went upstairs to shower. They were planning to go to her parents by noon.

At twelve-fifteen, Jonah still wasn't home. Christina lugged Clancy's baby bag and a bag containing their bathing suits and towels out to the car and then went back to get the baby. She had

just finished buckling Clancy into the car seat when her cell phone rang.

It was Jonah.

"Hi," she said.

"A funny thing happened today, Christina," her husband said. "After Sam and I discussed the problem with the house, he told me that he wanted me to become a partner with him. An equal partner."

"Really?" she was shocked.

"Yeah, really. And when he was researching possible website names, he discovered that I already had a website, for my booming carpentry business, evidently."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh. I'm on my way home. I think we need to talk."

"I'm on my way to my parents," she lied.

"It doesn't sound like you're on your hands free," he commented.

Damn.

"No, I'm not. I'm at a light, and I saw it was you. Oops, it's green, gotta go."

She shut her phone and quickly slid behind the wheel.

He didn't seem happy about his website. In fact, he had sounded pissed. That did not bode well for the rest of her plan.

Maura and Peter were already at the Clancy home. Maura was helping her mother in the kitchen while Peter was out on the patio with Pat Clancy, discussing fishing and tides. Christina pushed Clancy on the swings, nervously looking over her shoulder—expecting her husband to appear at any moment, spoiling for a fight. Kate arrived with her husband, Richard, and their eighteen month old

son, Paddy. Tim and Bridget snuck up behind her and took over swing duties.

"How's my favorite niece?" Tim cooed to Clancy, giving her big raspberry kisses that made the baby squeal in delight. "Mom's looking for you," he told his sister.

Faith Clancy was setting a glass dish of dip on a large platter of crudités and olives. She handed the silver tray to her daughter and pointed toward the back door.

"Would you please put this out on the patio for me, Christina?" she said. "I have to go wake up that brother of yours. He was out until four o'clock this morning."

Liam was home from Seattle for the summer, and the twenty-three year old graduate student was driving his parents crazy.

"He still hasn't called Jonah about a job," Christina mentioned. "He better hurry his ass up, if he wants to work this summer. All the college kids are home now, and the jobs are going fast."

"Where is Jonah, by the way?" her mother asked.

"He got called in to work, but he should be here soon," Christina said. Her mother nodded and disappeared toward the hallway.

She set the tray down on the table closest to her father and Peter. They immediately fell upon it like starving maniacs.

She went to the outside bar and poured herself a glass of chardonnay. Her brother, Michael, and his wife, Mary, came out of the house, carrying a bottle of wine and a twelve pack of Corona and leading Nana Clancy. The old woman waved regally and plopped down in a chair beside her son.

"When did you put the pool in, Paddy?" she asked.

"Twenty years ago, Ma," Patrick Clancy said. "How would you like a nice gin and tonic?"

"Lovely," his mother said. "Just a wee one, though, I've got a Christmas party to go to later."

"Of course."

After they had kissed their grandmother, Maura turned to her sister, grabbing her elbow.

"Want to swim?" she asked, sidling up next to her. "The sun is so gorgeous, and I could use a dip."

"Sure." Christina took a swallow of wine and set her glass down, following her sister into the house.

They carried their bags into the pool house that was situated behind the waterfall. Maura changed in the bathroom while Christina slipped into her bikini in the living room/kitchen. Her parents had actually expanded the original pool house to become more of a guest cottage to accommodate the ever-flowing visitors that arrived each year at this prime location on the Jersey shore. The long rattan sofa had a pull-out bed, and the television propped on the wall shelf was equipped with cable. It was a tidy little hideaway.

"How did you manage to already get a tan?" Maura complained, looking at her sister's golden body. "I got freckles and a sunburned nose. It's not fair."

"It's the black Irish in me," Christina laughed. "Sunburn is the price you pay for being a natural redhead, sis."

"Where's Jonah?" Maura asked.

"Don't know, don't care," Christina snapped.

"Really?"

"No, he got called in to work early this morning, but he should be here by now," Christina explained. "However, I think he might be pissed at me about something, so maybe he's being deliberately late."

"What'd you do?"

"I had a website created for him," Christina said. "I thought he should go into his own business. So I got him business cards and a brochure and a really cool website. But now Sam asked him to be a partner, and obviously my efforts were in vain."

"You created a business for him as a surprise?" Maura was incredulous.

"Why is that bad?"

"Uh, Christy, this is Jonah we're talking about. A major alpha male with caveman tendencies, as you're so fond of telling us."

"Let's swim," Christina said shortly, heading outside.

She retrieved her wine and topped it before joining Maura at the pool. She gulped some of the cold Chardonnay before sliding into the comfortably heated pool.

Her sister's words echoed in her head. Maybe she *had* made a mistake in this – thinking that Jonah would appreciate her meddling in his life.

Maura had her can of Miller Lite in a koozy, advertising some golf outing in Spring Lake. She took a sip and set it on the paving stones lining the pool.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, Christina," Maura said, as they hung to the side of the pool. "But, Jonah is Jonah. You can't create a life for him. Even I know that."

"I just thought he'd be happier doing his own thing," Christina said. "I wasn't trying to emasculate him or anything."

"Maybe *you'd* be happier if he was doing his own thing," Maura said.

Christina bit back the retort that was on the edge of her tongue. Maura was probably right.

"Maybe," she said, diving under the water.

When she resurfaced and paddled back to the side of the pool, she was surprised to see Jonah sitting in one of the wrought iron chairs next to Peter. When did he come?

He glanced at her, and she felt her legs go weak at the look in his eyes. What the hell. He was furious. Then she noticed what was in his hands. Holy fuck. The brochure advertising his new business. Crap, she'd forgotten that she'd left the brochure and business card on the table yesterday.

This was all going wrong. He was supposed to be happy, pleased at her intervention in his career.

He laughed at something Peter was saying and took a swallow of his beer. Then he was walking toward the pool. She took a quick sip of her wine and retreated toward the deep end.

Splash!

Her husband dove into the pool, coming up a few feet away from her.

In a few short strokes, he had her in his arms, and she was captive. She looked into his green eyes and was ensnared by the relentless questions there.

"I thought it was what you wanted," she gasped. "I didn't mean this to be a bad thing. I thought you wanted out."

"Since when, do I not tell you what I want?" he asked evenly.

"I don't know," she whispered. "I just wanted to give you something new."

"You wanted to create a life for me, Christina," he said seriously. "I have a life. It's one I like a lot. Can you imagine how I felt when Sam was telling me all about my website? How could you?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Jonah, grow up," she snapped. "You already do this; you have a business – that's what all your side jobs are. What did I do except legitimize you?"

"Did I need to be legitimized?" he bellowed. "Did I need my wife creating a posture for me that she wanted me to have? This is all for you, Christina; it's not for me."

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is." His hands dug into her hips, and he dragged her along, as he swam to the far side of the pool. She was surprised at his strength, and then he surprised her even more by lifting her out of the water and plopping her on the stones that lined the pool, beside the pool house. "You sit there and don't move a muscle," he told her.

She couldn't move a muscle, if she tried. Her eyes teared at the awful tone of his voice. Maybe he was finally done with her. She ignored the sympathetic glances that Maura was shooting her way. She studied the leaves on the Japanese maple tree.

Then Jonah was standing over her, carrying her wine and his beer. He nodded, indicating that she was to follow him.

She followed him into the pool house.

He sat on one of the woven resin chairs at the table.

"Sit," he said.

She tried to work up some good outrage at his behavior, but found that she couldn't even muster a good sigh. He was right. She had been so foolish

to think that she could just present him with a life that she constructed and think that he would be grateful.

"I'm sorry," she said finally. "I absolutely fucked up. I thought I was doing something good for you, but maybe I was just doing something for myself. Creating a persona for you to become. I didn't mean it to be as awful as it seems now. Please know that I didn't mean to be so disrespectful of your wishes, Jonah."

"I think I know that," he said. "But the fact remains that you set things in motion that could have had real repercussions. How could you just act on something so big without my input? What if Sam had been pissed instead of curious? He offered me a partnership today, and it could have been a pink slip."

"I thought you'd be happier doing your own thing," she said miserably. "I was going to add you and Clancy to my insurance."

"Fucking great," he yelled. "So we can pay an extra four hundred bucks a month when it was totally covered for a fifty dollar deduction now."

"I said I was sorry," she said.

"I don't know what to do about this," he said. "I'm too mad to think."

"Did you accept the partnership?" she asked tentatively.

"I didn't," he said. "Because I wanted to discuss it with you first. See, that's the difference between us. I consider you and your opinions, but evidently you don't."

"Oh, God, Jonah, I *am* sorry," she said. She slipped off her chair and knelt before him, grabbing his hands and pulling them to her lips. "I was so

totally out of line. Please, please forgive me. In fact, punish me for it. Please?"

He held her hands and pulled her up onto his lap. He kissed her quivering lips and patted her back.

"I didn't mean to sound like such an ogre," he said. "Calm down, you know I love you, and nothing is so bad that you have to feel so afraid of me."

"But I did a bad thing."

"No, Christina, you did a thoughtless thing. You totally meant it to be a good thing from the bottom of your soul. I see that. I know you weren't being intentionally disrespectful. You thought you were helping me. But after twelve years of marriage, how could you ever think that this would have been a good thing?"

"Sheer stupidity," she whispered into his neck. "I just love you so much. I wanted you to have more fun."

"So, if I call the magazine tomorrow and quit for you, buy you some business cards advertising your abilities as a writer, you'd be happy?"

She swallowed hard.

"No," she said.

"How much did all this cost?" he asked.

Christina did the math in her head. She wouldn't dare lie to him now.

"About a thousand dollars," she told him. "But that was a steal. Did you see those brochures? And the website is beautiful."

"A grand?" he hissed. "You spent a thousand dollars on this little venture?"

"It was a bargain, Jonah."

He shook his head wearily.

"If you do decide to partner with Sam, maybe we could change the website to be more a Connelly Pendleton collaboration," she offered.

"I can always use the brochures and cards for my side business," he said. "It might actually be helpful in the off season. But until I see a return on this investment, this is coming out of your spending money. Got it?"

She nodded, figuring she'd have spending money again sometime after Christmas.

"And that's it?" she asked.

"That and a fanny whipping," he told her.

Her heart sank. But in effect, she had asked for this.

He didn't say another word, as he turned her over his lap. Christina fumbled for balance, as she groped the floor with her fingertips. She needn't have worried; Jonah held her firmly in place with his left hand.

SPLAT!

"Ouch," she yelped.

"Don't you ever do such a high-handed thing again," he lectured.

SPLAT! SPLAT! SPLAT!

His hand was like iron, and she cringed, as he walloped her ass.

SPLAT! SPLAT!

Her wet bathing suit wasn't helping any. She knew her butt cheeks had to be glowing by now.

"Please," she cried. "I'm sorry."

SPLAT! SPLAT! SPLAT!

Now, she felt roasted. She reared back, wailing, as he delivered painful swat after painful swat.

"Tomorrow, you'll call Sam and apologize," he roared. "I know you were rude on the phone yesterday. Enough is enough."

"I will, I promise," she cried.

SPLAT! SPLAT! SPLAT!

He rested his hand on her blistered buttocks. She arched into his palm, loving the feel of him even though he had just broiled her bottom.

"Christina?"

"Yes?"

"I love you. But I can take care of myself and my family. I appreciate your loving gesture, but I need you to know that in our family, we communicate first and act later. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Good."

He lifted her and twisted her around, cradling her in his arms.

"You're going to have to explain this red bottom of yours," he said. "If anyone asks me, I'll just say that you got your fanny whipped."

"Can you go get my shorts?" she asked, not willing to go that far.

"Yeah, I guess I can," he said. "*This* time."

"Jonah," she whispered, tracing his lips with her finger. "Take the partnership. Sam really needs you. I'll apologize to him."

"What if I complain about work?" he asked.

"I'll try to be more understanding," she told him.

"You're my life," he told her. "Thank you for being so good at it."

"My pleasure," she said, pulling him down, so she could kiss him properly.

Most of the guests had arrived by the time they wandered out of the pool house. Maura looked at her knowingly, a tiny smirk on her lips that Christina itched to knock off. Liam had made an appearance and was lounging on a raft in the pool,

a beer in his hand and dark glasses covering his sure-to-be-bloodshot eyes.

"Hey, Jonah," he called. "Connelly Construction hiring these days?"

"Don't know, Liam," Jonah said. "But I have a feeling Connelly Pendleton might be. But cut out the late nights, junior, you're not much use to me, if you're dragging your ass all day."

"Consider me reformed," Liam said, lifting his beer. "Tomorrow."

"The apple doesn't fall far from the big sister," Jonah murmured.

"What's the news, Jonah?" Patrick said. "Did I hear mention of a merger? That calls for a celebration. Why don't you call Sam and invite him over; his parents are on their way anyway, might as well make it a family production."

"Thanks, Pat."

Jonah retrieved his cell phone and walked out towards the dock to make his phone call. He turned and beckoned for Christina to follow.

"Hurry up, Jane, Tarzan's calling," Maura laughed.

Christina mock-punched her sister in the arm before joining her husband at the edge of the stone and wood piling.

"Tell him I'm sorry," Christina mouthed, as Jonah laughed at something Sam was saying.

"You can tell him yourself," her husband said, thrusting the phone into her fingers.

"Sam?" she said. "I'm sorry I was such a bitch yesterday. I was just in a pissy mood, nothing to do with you. Are you and Lianne coming over? Great. Dave and Ally are coming, too. It'll be fun."

Sam thanked her for convincing Jonah to join up with him.

"He puts a lot of faith in you, Chris," he told her. "He totally trusts your opinion. So, thanks for whatever you said to convince him. I've been thinking of this for a long time, and finally Lianne told me to just go for it and ask him."

"I'm glad," she said, handing the phone back to Jonah.

Jonah talked for a few more minutes, then snapped his phone shut and slid it into his pocket.

"All's well that ends well," Christina said hopefully.

"This time, you're right," Jonah told her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and snuggled up close to him.

"This time, *we're* right," she corrected. "Happy Memorial Day, honey. Enjoy the weekend."

Jonah kissed her gently, taking his time. She wove her fingers into his long hair and pressed up against him, enjoying the delicious scent of him.

"We still have tomorrow to get through," he whispered.

"That'll be easy," Christina laughed.

"HMMMMPH," said her husband.

