

-Celtic Knot-

Book I of the Second Chances Trilogy

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PROLOGUE

March

Carolyn shouldn't watch Scott like this. She was a married woman and simply because a guy had a great body didn't mean she should sit there checking him out while he was on the phone. The problem was that he didn't just have a great body. He was a great guy, too.

His back was to her, so he didn't know she was gawking - luckily. Her face was already hot with embarrassment. She resolutely turned back to her computer screen. Maybe she could write a few more lines of code before they left for their lunch time workout.

She heard the receiver clunk into place and he said, "I've got to see Bob for a minute before we leave." His voice sounded strained, and she wondered what the phone call had been about. When he came back from her boss's office, he didn't look right at her. "Sorry about that. Let's get out of here."

She followed him to the back door, suddenly more uneasy with him than she'd been since the first few days of his assignment here. Back then, he'd thought she was an obstacle to overcome rather than a partner in getting the job done.

As they walked, she pulled out her car keys. He was staying in an apartment complex only a few minutes from Providential Press, and there was a small shopping center just another block away. The athletic club where they worked out was the only place he went outside of walking distance, so he hadn't bothered with a rental car.

"I'm parked pretty far back today," she said once they got outside, more for something to say than because he needed to know.

Thirty seconds later, he said, "That was Marty on the phone." Marty was his boss, back in Chicago. "He needs me there for a new project."

Her keys hit the asphalt of the parking lot. She stood there, stupidly staring at them, until he scooped them up and handed them to her. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She blinked away the moisture in her eyes and nodded. "Just clumsy." Continuing on toward the car, she took a deep breath and asked, "When do you leave?"

"The end of next week. I told him we should be done by then. If not, you can finish things up and call with any questions."

She nodded, not sure if her voice would betray her. Too bad she'd so thoroughly convinced him of her

competence!

They were both silent on the drive to the athletic club in an elegant and gracious section of Providence's East Side and parted with the unspoken understanding that they'd meet in the lobby in an hour, as always. Carolyn hurried to change into leotard and tights before her aerobics class started and slipped into her usual spot in the front row just on time.

She tried to pay attention to her form and breathing, but her thoughts were so scattered that she was lucky to know which exercise she was supposed to be doing. It was probably a good thing that Scott was leaving soon. This - well, calling it an obsession wouldn't be inappropriate - for him was crazy. Sure, he was great-looking, fun to talk to and smart as all get out, but so was her husband. Tony wasn't interested in computers, but that didn't matter. What was more relevant was that he'd never made her heart and stomach trip over themselves in excitement the way Scott did.

Okay, so she had a crush on the guy. That was hardly of earth-shattering importance to anyone other than her, and it didn't change reality a single bit. She lived in Rhode Island, Scott lived in Chicago and she didn't matter to him the way he mattered to her. The sooner he disappeared from her life and let her start remembering how good her life with Tony was the better.

She could think that all she wanted, but she still spent the second half of the class glancing out the classroom door waiting for him to walk by. He finally did, dripping wet from the pool, his dark brown hair plastered to his head. He walked just slowly enough that she could imagine he was searching the room for a glimpse of her. She heard the low murmur of the women around her and she wondered how many were hoping that little half-grin was meant for them.

She raced through her shower and didn't bother to dry her long hair before heading to the lobby. He was already there, a vertical line creasing his forehead. "Good, you're here." On the way to the parking lot, he added, "I need to talk to you. Can we go to that park?"

He meant a park overlooking most of Providence, where they'd stopped to eat sandwiches a couple of times. "Sure. Do you want to get something to eat?" She hoped not. Her stomach wouldn't accept food right now.

"I'm not hungry, but stop at the deli for yourself if you want."

The park wasn't far and Scott didn't say anything more until they were standing by the fence at the far end. Beyond them was a cliff and way below was downtown Providence, including Providential Press. "Carolyn, I probably should keep my mouth shut about this, but I can't. I can't leave without you knowing the truth." He gulped a breath and continued, "I want you to know I don't expect anything - I mean, I know you're married, and I'd never..." He didn't seem to know how to continue.

She wrapped her fingers around the top of the fence, a ball of anticipation filling her insides. "What truth?"

He swallowed a couple of times, his Adam's apple bobbing. She smelled the clean soap scent on his skin as he turned to face her. "I love you, Carolyn."

She felt like she was flying, careening around with reckless abandon and making herself dizzy. "Oh, Scott - I love you, too!"

This was how it was supposed to feel! She'd always known love didn't feel right with Tony. It was too calm, too everyday, not at all like this crazy euphoria.

Except he didn't seem to share her happiness. He looked - troubled? "What's wrong?"

"You're married, that's what's wrong!" He spun away and stalked off a few feet. "You can't mean that the way I want you to." He threw himself onto a nearby bench.

She sat at the opposite end, careful to keep a few inches between their bodies. "I don't know how you want me to mean it, but I love you so much I've been dying inside ever since you told me you were leaving."

"So you'll miss me - big deal. I'll miss you, too - every minute of every day for the rest of my life."

"Me, too," she said quietly, knowing it was true. "But what can I say to make you believe me?"

She wasn't sure he was going to answer, but finally he turned to her and said, "Divorce your husband and come to Chicago with me." His jaw tensed and he blew out a breath. "I know that's asking a lot, but I take love very seriously. I'm not in the market to be a bored woman's plaything. Either you love me enough to walk away from everything you have here, or it's not enough." He shook his head in disgust. "I'm sorry - this is ridiculous. I should have kept my mouth shut." Before she could respond, he stood and started back toward the car.

She sat on the bench, only a few feet from a cliff no higher than the one he was asking her to jump off. She wondered how frightening it would be to take that final step, and how painful the fall would be. But the answers didn't truly matter. She had no choice.

A week later, everything was different. Scott had spent almost every moment of the intervening days with Carolyn, and it was clearer than ever that what he felt for her was true love. And miracle of miracles, she loved him, too!

He knelt here today, on the ground in the same park where he'd confessed his love. Carolyn knelt facing him, and they recited together the vows they'd written. "You are my friend, my lover, and my soul mate. My love for you will never end. I pledge to you my heart, my soul, and my life, as long as the strands of this knot intertwine." And then, they slipped the Celtic knot rings onto each other's right ring fingers.

The jeweler yesterday had told them that the Celtic knot pattern dated back a thousand years or more. It was a symbol of eternal love because the knot had no beginning and no end, but instead turned in on itself forever. These rings were made of thin strands of gold, braided together, with small open areas in between the strands.

Carolyn had originally argued against this ceremony and these rings. She felt that their love, in itself, was enough. And it was plenty - more than plenty - for most purposes.

But not when he had to leave on Sunday without her. She would join him in Chicago soon, but not yet. Her husband had been away on business for the last several weeks, and she insisted on breaking the news to him in person. As much as Scott hated the prospect of being apart from her for even a single day, he had to admire her for not taking the easy way out.

He was the happiest and luckiest man on earth. And when he and Carolyn exchanged these vows again at their wedding, all would be right with the world.

CHAPTER ONE

June, Four Years Later

Carolyn repositioned the chair slightly before sitting down. She didn't mind men wearing cologne, but this guy didn't know how much was too much.

He gave her a too-bright smile and said, "I hope everyone's making you feel welcome today at Adams-Worthington." He put just enough extra emphasis on the Adams part to remind her that his last name was Adams. He couldn't be Mr. Worthington's partner, could he?

"They are, thanks. Excuse me for asking, but are you the Adams the company is named for?"

He laughed, an unpleasant sound. "Definitely not. That was my brother George. He's the creative genius responsible for the company's existence. He died several years ago."

She felt herself flush. "Oh. I'm sorry." Not a good way to start off a job interview.

He shrugged and glanced at her résumé, the only object on top of his desk. "I hear you wowed Seth at that conference this week."

"Mr. Worthington seemed interested in the paper I gave," she answered stiffly. "He says Adams-Worthington needs someone with my experience and skill-set."

"I suppose. Plus, we could use a female engineer - we've never had one. Do you think you could take being the only woman?" His look was challenging enough that she imagined an environment full of nude pin-ups and grossly explicit jokes.

That wasn't anything like the company she'd seen today. Everyone had been professional and polite, although the jury was still out on this guy. There was something a little creepy about him. "I'm sure I could."

Now, what was his first name? Tony used to tell her how using a customer's name made him feel more important, and she figured the principle applied in this case, too. "So, Bill, would you like me to outline my qualifications verbally?"

He smiled lazily as his gaze strayed down her body. "I don't think that's necessary, Carolyn. I can see that your qualifications are excellent."

She fought the urge to slide her chair even further from his. She'd pretend he was simply demonstrating the double entendres she might face in an otherwise-male work group. To prove that she was unfazed, she stayed silent waiting for him to ask a question.

Looking amused, he said, "Why don't you tell me why you want to work at A-W? That's what we all call it, by the way. Adams-Worthington takes too long."

"To be honest, I hadn't considered changing jobs until I met Mr. Worthington the other day." She ignored his obvious disbelief and continued, "I've worked at Providential Press for ten years now and it's a great place. It's small enough that I haven't been pigeonholed into doing any one type of thing, yet I've had plenty of chance to grow into new responsibilities and learn new skills."

"Oh, sign me up," he muttered. "It's clearly Heaven on earth. Yet you're going to give up your wings and rejoin us mortals?"

She ignored his sarcasm, determined to answer him even if he didn't care about the answer. "The thing about possibly working here that appeals to me is the chance to develop software that will be broadly used. The code I write at Providential is important, but it's only used internally by a relatively small number of people. Here, all your customers benefit from every small efficiency or extra feature that gets

added."

He nodded - grudgingly, it seemed. "That's a double-edged sword, you realize. They see all the bugs and design butcheries, too. But I have to admit I like it when a customer buys our system, at least in part because of my code."

Apparently, Bill wasn't a complete jerk. She asked, "Have you worked here from the beginning?" The company was only about six years old, so it was possible. He seemed to be in his late twenties.

"Pretty much. When I graduated, TechDoc was in the first stages of development. None of the other engineers have been here that long. Which reminds me - who've you met so far?"

She thought through the day's interviews. "The only developer's been Jake. There's someone else I was supposed to see, but he was delayed at a customer site."

Bill nodded. "That's got to be Scott. His title's Chief Designer, but it might as well be God."

"Is he demanding?"

"Only if you have your own mind, or can't write as many lines of code a day as he can - and none of us mortals can." He snorted, shaking his head. "I keep asking Francine how she puts up with him, but I guess she's used to the type after George."

"Francine? Is she his assistant or something?" Come to think of it, she'd met a Francine today - Francine Adams her name was - but she'd seemed to be in charge of personnel, rather than being someone's assistant.

He shook his head, obviously amused. "His fiancée, George's widow, and last but not least, Seth's daughter. You must have talked to her earlier. I thought someone would have clued you in."

"Oh. No." This company might be too weird to work for. Was everyone related to everyone else?

"Well, now you know. To get back to our fearless leader, what you need to do to get along with him is let him decide everything that matters - and most everything does, from variable names to how you comment a subroutine." With a shrug that seemed more self-satisfied than anything else, he added, "I'm not real good at doing that. Then again, I've got seniority over him, and I think Seth would question it if he tried to can me. He wouldn't have the same problem with you, even though you're coming in here with Seth's stamp of approval up front."

She didn't like the not-so-subtle threat, but settled for saying, "I don't anticipate any trouble getting along with Scott." Another Scott had started out being impossible to please, too, and she'd changed his mind.

Bill smiled crookedly. "Carolyn Kelley versus Scott Richards. I wonder who'll come out on top?"

Scott *Richards*? It couldn't be!

As Scott pulled into the parking lot, he caught a glimpse of the woman waiting to turn into the street. Something about her reminded him of Carolyn - just like a thousand or more women he'd half-seen in the last four years. He was glad, now, that she'd stayed with Tony. So why wouldn't her memory leave him alone?

He stopped by his office just long enough to drop off his briefcase and let Milly, his group's administrative assistant, know he was back. Then he headed to Seth's office in the opposite end of the building. Seth

needed to know that he'd managed to satisfy the top brass at the customer site, plus he was supposed to interview that woman Seth was so high on. Would she still be around, so close to quitting time on Friday?

Seth's office door was open, so he guessed she wasn't in there. He stuck his head inside, and Seth waved him in. "Glad you're back, Scott. I hear you performed miracles today."

When he first started at A-W, a comment like that would have thrown him. Now he remembered that one of the senior VP's where he'd been was a personal friend of Seth's. No doubt they'd been on the phone sometime while Scott was on the plane. "I wouldn't call them miracles, just a little ingenuity and some of the fast talking I've learned from you. They're okay for now, and I promised them a couple of new features in the next release that'll address their longer-term needs."

"Major new features?" Seth asked with a concerned frown. "Our schedule's already tight."

He shook his head. "Nah. It won't take me more than an evening to implement both."

Seth laughed. "We *do* have other engineers, you know. People we pay to write code and nothing else. I'd rather you'd take a few more nights and weekends off - maybe do something crazy like get married." The reminder was friendly, almost jovial, but pointed underneath.

"We'll give it some consideration," he promised, knowing Seth had no idea that Francine was the one who kept putting it off. His only guess about the reason was her marriage to George. She wouldn't talk about it, though, so he ended up either pleading with her to change her mind or letting the matter ride.

Almost apologetically, Seth said, "It's not that Annabelle and I disapprove. Young people lived together without marriage in our day, too. We're simply concerned about Francine's long-term happiness - and we haven't given up on more grandchildren, either."

Scott bit the side of his mouth to keep from saying that Seth was hassling the wrong person. Couldn't he see how much Scott loved being a father to Rachel? Didn't it make sense that he'd do anything so he and Francine could have babies of their own? But there was no point being annoyed with Seth about the situation. None of it was his fault. Scott would simply have to discuss the issue again with Francine - and it wouldn't hurt if his fast talking skill didn't desert him, like it usually did when they talked about marriage.

He decided to change the subject. "How did that woman's interviews go today? I guess I missed her." He wished he remembered her name. "That woman" sounded rude or like her gender was the only possible reason to hire her.

"You did, but just temporarily. I wasn't sure when you'd get in, so I sent Carolyn back to her hotel a few minutes ago. I said we'd call to let her know when she can meet with you. Her interviews went really well, and as far as I'm concerned, we should hire her - depending on your evaluation, of course. There should be a copy of her résumé on your desk."

Had there been? "I didn't notice, but it's probably there. How soon is she flying out?" He didn't remember whether Seth had said where she was from, but if she lived in Oregon, he wouldn't have been so determined to have her interview this week.

"Tomorrow morning, I think. She has to go back to the East Coast. I thought you might meet with her over dinner."

He suppressed a sigh. There went the relaxing evening with Francine and Rachel he'd been looking

forward to. "Sure. Will you be home later or should I wait until Monday to let you know what I think?"

"I'll be home. If you're as enthusiastic about her as I am, I'd like to make her an offer tonight."

"All right. I'll go call her now." But what if he wasn't enthusiastic about her? Would Seth try to influence his decision?

Carolyn wanted nothing more than to rip off this uncomfortable business suit, kick off her shoes and throw herself onto the bed to relax. A full day of interviews should be considered cruel and inhuman torture! And she wasn't even done yet.

So, the business suit stayed on and she sat cautiously in a chair in the sitting room part of her suite, not wanting to wrinkle her skirt any worse than it already was. If this Scott guy was as demanding as Bill implied, he'd probably hold the wrinkles against her.

But what if he was *that* Scott Richards? The one she'd ruined her life for, the one who'd hung up on her the last several times they'd talked?

Well, in that case, there wouldn't be any question of her getting the job. And that meant she wouldn't have to make the agonizing decision she'd been dreading ever since Mr. Worthington asked her to come up here and interview. Providential Press and Rhode Island were home to her and the idea of leaving them was more than a little daunting.

The phone rang, its shrill summons giving her a jolt. "Hello?"

"Ms. Kelley? This is Scott Richards, from Adams-Worthington." She'd know that voice anywhere.

What should she say? He must not know who she was. But she couldn't think what to say and finally, she had to respond. "Oh, hello."

"I apologize for not being in the office earlier. I was at a customer site and things took longer than we expected. Would you mind meeting me for dinner? We'd like to finish your interviews before you head back home."

She should just blurt out her name - the name Scott knew her by. It would be over quickly then. But, now that she'd heard his voice, she couldn't. She couldn't let this one opportunity to see him again pass her by. But not for dinner. "We could meet in the bar, here at my hotel."

"All right. What time's good for you? I could be there in ten minutes."

"That's fine," she said, her stomach feeling hollow with nerves. She must be crazy.

"There are some booths on the right when you first walk into the bar there. Let's meet at the first booth - or by it, if it's already occupied."

They wouldn't have any trouble recognizing each other, but she couldn't tell him that. "Okay."

"Fine. I'm looking forward to meeting you. Good-bye for now."

She hung up the phone and went to the bathroom to freshen up. Now that it was too late, she wished she'd gotten it over with on the phone. She knew how it felt to have Scott hang up on her. She didn't know how it would feel to have him walk out.

CHAPTER TWO

Scott hung up the phone, shaking his head. He was imagining things. First he thought he saw Carolyn Fiore in a car, and now he thought she was on the other end of the phone. This woman was named Carolyn - or was it Caroline - and she worked in technical publishing, but that was probably the end of her similarities to Carolyn Fiore. Carolyn Kelley would most likely turn out to be forty-five and built like a linebacker - not that he'd think less of her for it, of course. In fact, he hoped she was. He didn't need the kind of distractions Carolyn Fiore had caused.

He gave Francine a quick call, letting her know he was back but would be tied up for dinner. Rachel insisted on saying hello and as always, she had to be told that he was in a hurry three times before she finally said good-bye. He didn't really mind, of course and, if he was a couple of minutes late meeting Carolyn Kelley, that was life. As it turned out, the parking lot at the hotel was full, so he was more like five minutes late by the time he walked into the bar.

And Carolyn was sitting there in the first booth. Carolyn Fiore. *His* Carolyn - or rather, Tony's Carolyn. That thought was enough to break through his paralysis and propel him to the table. "Carolyn *Kelley*, I presume?"

She winced at the anger in his voice. Too bad. "It's my maiden name. I took it back after the divorce."

Divorce? Did she pull that same my-husband's-out-of-town-and-our-marriage-is-over-anyway trick once too often? But that wasn't the point, so he said, "Well, I didn't change mine. What the heck do you think you're doing, applying for a job at A-W?"

"I didn't know you worked here," she insisted, blushing bright red.

He caught himself checking whether the blush extended to the tips of her ears. Reminding himself that he didn't care, he said, "Well, I do and now you've got Seth all worked up about how great you are. How am I supposed to tell him he shouldn't hire you?"

"I don't know." She looked down at the table. "I'm sorry, Scott. I wouldn't have come here if I'd known."

He sighed, his anger spent, just like that. "No, I realize that." It felt stupid towering over her like this, and he suddenly didn't want to turn around and walk out of the bar, so he dropped into the opposite side of the booth.

Her hair was short now, a neat little cap hugging her skull rather than the lush fall that used to cascade past her waist. Remembering how it was then gave him an all-too-real image of her leaning over his desk, her hair tickling his bare arm, the scent of her vanilla shampoo filling his nostrils. Did it still smell the same? Was it still so incredibly silky?

"I could tell Mr. Worthington that I decided to stay at Providential Press," she offered. "He knows I wasn't sure I wanted to leave there."

A waitress appeared where Scott had been standing a few moments ago. "What can I get you folks?"

"A pint of microbrew," he said quickly, then waited impatiently while she listed the locally-brewed beers on tap. He named one at random. The flavor wasn't important. The alcohol content was.

She turned to Carolyn, who said, "The same for me."

But when the waitress left, he discovered he didn't know what to say. Carolyn finally ventured, "So, I guess you're doing okay. Good job, engaged, all that."

She knew about Francine. That felt weird. "Yeah, I'm fine. How about you?"

Her blush darkened from the earlier cherry color to more of a beet red. "I'm okay. Still at Providential Press. I live in Providence now, so I don't have much of a commute."

"That's nice." He opened his mouth to ask about her divorce, but why bother? The past was behind them, and when and why she and Tony split up was none of his business.

"Adams-Worthington seems like a nice company," she said tentatively, but before he could say it was, she shook her head and looked straight at him. Her eyes really *were* that blue-green color he'd been sure he'd imagined! "This is pointless. You don't want to waste time on small talk with me when you've just gotten back from a trip."

He didn't need to respond, but he did. "No. This is fine." This was insane! Four years, and all that pain, and sitting across the table from her still felt - no. It definitely wasn't right, and he wasn't going to fall into that same old trap.

A crease appeared between her eyebrows. "You don't need to be polite. This is a job interview, and we both know you're not going to hire me." She sighed. "I *knew* I should have said who I was on the phone."

"Why didn't you? You must have recognized my voice - I thought I recognized yours, but I was sure I must be mistaken."

The waitress delivered their beers then, and Carolyn carefully repositioned hers on its coaster until the waitress was out of earshot. "I meant to tell you," she told the beer glass. "I just... Well, I wanted to see you again." She looked up resolutely. "And now I have, so you can go see Francine or whatever you were planning to do this evening. I'm sorry I interfered."

She started to slide out of the booth and Scott felt a stab of panic. "Wait a second!" She gave him a quizzical look, and his panic increased. What was he going to say? "What about the job?"

She settled back into the booth, her mouth a tense line. "What about it? I'll call Mr. Worthington on Monday and tell him I decided to stay at PP."

There it was, a nice simple solution. He'd never need to admit that Carolyn could do the job with both eyes closed, but that he couldn't hire her because she'd broken his heart. Instead of grabbing the solution, he asked, "Could we work together, do you think?"

Her look said he was crazy and he guessed she was right. "Could we? Sure. But why?"

"Because you're the best programmer I've ever worked with," he answered honestly. "And I know I can trust your design decisions, unlike anyone currently on my team - they're good, don't get me wrong, but they jump the wrong way on space-time tradeoffs half the time."

With a bitter half-smile, she said, "Whereas with me, you simply don't trust my word."

"If you wanted me to trust you, you should have said something halfway believable," he snapped before realizing how irrelevant that old baggage was. He pushed it away and said calmly, "In any case, that doesn't have anything to do with us working together." He drank some beer, demonstrating his lack of concern with the subject.

Her jaw tightened and he thought she might pursue the argument. Instead, she took a sip of her own beer and set the glass carefully on its coaster again. "Okay, so I'd be useful on your team. That doesn't mean you can completely ignore the personal issues. From your reaction, I'd say you're still angry with me. Don't you think it would be distracting to see me every day?"

Distracting? No question. It had been distracting four years ago in Rhode Island, too. "It wouldn't be a problem," he assured both of them.

"What about Francine? Wouldn't it seem funny to her?"

He shrugged. "Why should she care about something that happened before I met her?" A selfish idea occurred to him - a little bit of jealousy about his old lover coming to work at A-W just might spur Francine into finally marrying him.

She frowned at her beer and said slowly, "Look, Scott. I'm not going to lie to you. This job sounds great to me, and I'm at a point where I think it would do me good to get out of Rhode Island. But I'm not an idiot. I know us working together again could be a nightmare. If this is some kind of a joke to you, or if you're trying to prove a point to yourself - or me, or Francine, or who knows who - then I'm not interested."

He shook his head. "I'm completely serious about this." He could handle a nice simple straightforward working relationship with this woman and that's all there would ever be.

She let her breath out slowly and nodded. "Okay. What are you going to tell people about our past?"

"Nothing. Why should I?"

"You're going to pretend like you just met me?" Her voice rose incredulously.

"Well, what *should* I say?" he demanded. "That if you hadn't dumped me, I wouldn't have come out here? If I say that, it's the same thing as saying I wouldn't be with Francine and Rachel if I'd had my choice."

Color drained out of her face. "I didn't know you and Francine had a baby."

He guessed it made sense for her to jump to that conclusion, but he was annoyed, anyway. "Rachel's not mine - not the way you mean. But you didn't answer my question."

"Question?" She shook her head as though to clear it, then said, "Oh, right. What I think is that you'd need to tell Francine the full story. But, with other people couldn't you just say that we worked together at PP? That way, it's okay if something comes up about the project we did or whatever, but the personal stuff is kept quiet."

"I guess that makes sense." He'd have to caution Francine not to tell Bill everything. For some reason, she actually liked her former brother-in-law - and Bill would find a way to use the truth against Scott.

Carolyn barely had time to change into her jeans and T-shirt and order a taco salad from room service before the phone rang. It was Mr. Worthington, offering her the job.

She told herself she shouldn't be surprised. After all, the end of her conversation with Scott had been based on the assumption that she would soon be an A-W employee. But she *was* surprised - and knew she'd be even more so when she had a chance to really digest the salary and bonus information he rattled off.

While her mouth was still gaping open in shock, he said, "Now, Carolyn, I realize that you'll need some time to make your decision. That's fine and you shouldn't feel pressured to give us an answer right away. We simply wanted to let you know that we're very much hoping that you'll join us at Adams-Worthington."

He paused and she managed to say, "Thank you." Should she promise her decision by a certain day?

"We'll express a formal offer letter to you on Monday, but please don't hesitate to call with any questions. Scott and I will both be in the office most of next week."

But the real question was whether she was crazy to attempt the feat of working platonically with the man who still made her insides tremble. And that was something even Scott couldn't answer for her.

Scott didn't have any trouble introducing the subject of Carolyn that night. Francine was eager to hear all about their interview, as well as what he'd told her father when he called him right after getting home.

He started by saying that Carolyn had excellent qualifications and that he'd concurred with Seth's tentative decision to hire her. When he said that, Francine caught her breath momentarily and asked, "She's awfully pretty, isn't she?"

Those stupid insecurities of hers! Why couldn't Francine believe that she was pretty, too? He strained for the calm answer he always gave her at times like this. "I suppose, but certainly not any more so than you."

"But she's so tall!"

He smiled, reminding her, "She might hate being tall, you know. Or envy your shape." They'd been through variations of this conversation more times than he could remember, but this time he felt more than a tinge of disloyalty. He'd better get on with telling her the full story. "Interestingly, it turns out I already knew her. She had a different last name back then, but we worked together on the last project I did for ITL."

She frowned. "I thought she'd only worked for that place in Rhode Island."

"Providential Press," he supplied. "Yeah. I did a couple month project on-site there." He urged himself to continue, to blurt out the whole story.

Her eyes rounded in alarm. "You did? So she's a - friend?"

The hesitation before the word "friend" did it. He could see how scared she was over his relationship with this other woman. And he knew that if he told her the rest of it, she'd be even more frightened. She wouldn't be able to understand that Carolyn was his past and that she and Rachel were his present and his future. She'd need every last detail of his relationship with Carolyn, and one by one the details would increase her fear. The only way he could make her feel better would be to lie - to downplay the importance of what he'd felt for Carolyn, to make it sound like an affair that happened because they both had a week to kill. He couldn't do that.

So, he stuck to the truth, but shaded it so she would think what he now knew she needed to think. "I wouldn't call her a friend. We were, back then, but we haven't had any contact in more than four years and I don't anticipate any now, except for work. We hired her simply because she's the best person for the job." Luckily, that was completely true.

Francine let her breath out and smiled tentatively at him. "Oh. Okay. I wondered if you two might have

dated or something."

Or something, definitely. "She was married back then - that's why I didn't recognize her name." Time to change the subject. He reached for her hand and squeezed it. "Francine, honey, it wouldn't matter, anyway. You're the woman I love."

Her smile became more natural, but still shy. "I missed you this week."

He slid closer on the sofa and slipped his arm around her waist. "I missed you, too, honey. I don't like leaving you and Rachel home alone."

"We were okay," she said, snuggling closer into him.

"I know. I still don't like it." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I was thinking again about us getting married." He paused, but she didn't reply. He hadn't really expected her to. "I know I've said this before, but I wish you'd tell me why you keep putting it off. Maybe I could help you feel more comfortable with the idea."

He felt the tension in her body, and a part of him wished he hadn't even said this much. It seemed cruel to put her through such distress. "I want to," she said softly. "But you're so busy with work and Mother would want us to have a big wedding and that takes a lot of planning, and..." She was making excuses, and he was fairly sure she realized it, too.

"We could elope." The cynical part of his mind wondered what excuse she'd manufacture to get around that.

"You'd do that?" she asked, amazement in her voice.

"Of course! The important thing is us being married, not what kind of wedding we have." Picking up on what he chose to view as enthusiasm, he continued, "A month or so back, I sat next to a guy on a plane who'd recently gotten married. They went somewhere in Nevada - I don't remember where right now - and got married outdoors in a really pretty spot, and spent their honeymoon in a luxury suite at one of the resort hotels. We could do something like that or something more traditional - whatever you'd like."

"It might be fun to go to one of those resorts. They have gambling, don't they?"

"Yeah. I've always wondered what a casino would be like." He hadn't been terribly curious or he would have gone to one before this, but if Francine would like to try her hand at gambling, he'd be more than happy to indulge her. "A lot of the resorts have big-name entertainers, too."

"Could Rachel go with us? She'd want to be part of our wedding."

"Of course," he said, willing to agree to whatever she wanted. "Your parents, too, if you'd like."

That was the wrong thing to say apparently. "But we really ought to get married here. Mother would be so disappointed."

Annabelle would be thrilled to have her daughter finally marry Scott, but Scott knew better than to admit he and Seth had discussed the subject just today. "I'm not so sure of that. Why don't you ask her?" He immediately realized that suggestion was doomed to never be implemented. "Or better yet, I'll ask her. I could mention that we're thinking of going to a resort for a few days and that we might get married there. See what she says in response." When Francine didn't respond, he gave her a hug and said, "Would that be okay, honey?"

He knew the answer by how long it took her to reply. "Could I think about it for a little while first?"

He minimized his sigh as much as he could. "Of course. I don't want to rush you into anything." Although, after three years of being engaged and living together, he doubted an outside observer would consider this rushing her.

"Thank you, Scott," she said with a humbleness that hurt him to hear. "It's not that I don't want to marry you, I hope you know that."

But he was no closer to knowing what it *was* and that was difficult to accept.

Hours later, Scott's eyes jerked fully open in the darkness of the bedroom. Carolyn had been wearing her Celtic knot ring tonight in the bar. Why?

Could it be that she still loved him?

CHAPTER THREE

Bill drove by the office before going to see Francine and Rachel. It was worth going out of his way to avoid running into Scott pretending to be the perfect family man. If the jerk was so damn sincere about it, he'd have married Francine long ago. He'd have bought a house for them to live in, too - instead of camping out in the one George had paid for all this time.

Rachel looked somewhat like her mother, but a lot more like the Adams side of the family. That white-blond hair, those ice-blue eyes - and "the face of an angel," to use a phrase Bill still hated from his childhood. Both he and George had been described that way until their early teens. Being labeled like that was probably less of a burden to a girl. For Rachel's sake, he hoped so.

He tried to get over to see her once a week, most often on Saturday since Scott usually worked that day. He didn't make a big deal out of it, but Rachel only had one uncle - him - and never saw any other relatives on her father's side of the family. He thought it was important for Francine to be reminded of George regularly, too. She might have replaced George in her life, but Scott would never be Rachel's real father.

Besides, Francine sometimes got juicy tidbits from Scott that Bill would never hear any other way. "Did Scott say anything about interviewing that Carolyn woman?" he asked soon after he arrived.

"He met her at her hotel after he got back," she said in the sly way that he knew meant she had more information, but was planning to make him work for it.

"Is that so?" That news was mildly interesting in itself, although Bill had already figured that Seth was hot on the woman. Whether it was her technical skills or her personally, he hadn't decided. "Are they going to offer her a job?"

She shook her head minutely. "Daddy already did. Scott called him when he got home and Daddy was going to call her last night."

"I don't suppose you know her answer?" She must. That must be the reason for her near-smirk.

"No, but I know something else." She paused and he fleetingly considered wrapping his hands around her neck - in a friendly fashion, of course - to speed up her delivery. "Scott knew her before," she said, her bravado suddenly wearing thin.

Francine's attitude made sense all at once. "You mean she's an old flame?" Francine didn't have much self-confidence at the best of times, but that flash of naked fear he'd just seen wasn't caused by something trivial.

She shook her head unconvincingly. "They worked together on a project when he was at ITI, and she was married back then."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"No, I know. But Scott says they didn't date."

He searched her face, then asked, "Do you believe him?"

She nodded half-heartedly. "He tells me the truth."

He knew what that meant. She *wanted* to believe Scott, but couldn't quite make herself do it. Bill thought Scott was probably innocent, primarily because he couldn't imagine the guy unbending from his moral self-satisfaction long enough to indulge his carnal needs.

Still, it wouldn't hurt to keep his eyes open. If he could knock Scott off that high horse of his, maybe Seth would have to admit that Bill deserved the Chief Designer job - and always had.

Carolyn called Tony when she got back to her apartment in Providence. "How come you're home on a Saturday night?" she asked.

He laughed in delight, like he always did when she called, not at all bothered by her question. "I didn't know you were home, babe."

"I just got in a little while ago." She took a deep breath. "You'll never believe what happened this week - I got a new job."

"You did? Tell me about it."

She told him about meeting Mr. Worthington at the conference, him inviting her to interview with A-W, the job and her impressions of Oregon. Tony was thrilled for her. "The move will do you good," he said, not needing to mention that her life had been in a holding pattern for the past four years.

She was incredibly lucky to have Tony as her friend. Most divorced people she knew hated their former partners - and who would blame Tony if he felt that way about her? But he didn't, and she honestly believed that her happiness and well being were higher priority to him than his own were.

There was one last thing to tell him about her new job - that she'd be working with Scott. He was the only person other than Scott who knew what had happened back then, and he knew far better than Scott had what it had cost her to lose him. Yet she knew he wouldn't second-guess her. He wouldn't say she was being foolish and asking for trouble. He would support her decision.

But somehow, she couldn't find the words she needed to say. So she stayed silent about the most important aspect of her new job, knowing that he would understand that, too.

Scott sat at the head of the table, the same as he'd done every week for the last four years. It was a different conference room than they'd used back then and there were more people around the table, but this was his meeting, as always.

It felt unreal, though, like they were all actors and this was a movie set. The normal procedures of checking on the status of each person's work and making announcements seemed awkward and meaningless today.

He knew why. Carolyn was sitting there, at the far end of one of the sides of the oblong table. This was her first project meeting and half the guys in the room were waiting for her to say something stupid to prove that she didn't deserve the job. The other half - well, he was fairly sure they were simply watching her because she was an attractive woman.

She wasn't pretty, he decided, despite what Francine thought. Francine was pretty. Her features were delicate and her smooth porcelain-like skin didn't need makeup. Carolyn's face was actually almost ordinary, although he guessed her turned-up nose and freckles took her out of the ordinary realm. The thing that was special about Carolyn's looks was the person who peeked out from inside - the intelligent, interested, oh-so-alive person. She didn't let the casual observer know what was going on in that mind of hers, but it was clear that something always was.

Bill took advantage of a momentary pause in the meeting to say to Carolyn, "So, I hear you worked with Scott before. You must be pretty good or he wouldn't have hired you."

Color flooded her cheeks, and Scott saw the triumph in Bill's eyes. He answered for her, "She is. The project we did involved modifying code I knew but that she'd never seen before. By the time we finished, she was an expert in it. I expect her to learn TechDoc's innards quickly and thoroughly."

Bill's smile was sly. "That'll be nice. Maybe then I won't get stuck with all the difficult changes."

Scott knew he was being baited and forced himself to ignore it. He glanced at several other team members and saw their rolling eyes and shaking heads. They all knew Bill was posturing.

Bill turned his attention to Carolyn again. "I'm curious about what our fearless leader was like back then. Quite the lady-killer, I imagine?"

A couple of the guys laughed, but most seemed to realize that this was another installment in Bill's sabotage-Scott campaign and they stayed silent. Scott opened his mouth to tell Bill to lay off, but shut it without speaking. Carolyn would have to learn to answer for herself. It was the only way to deal with Bill.

"I didn't see any sign of that," she said in a crisp voice that dripped disdain. "Not that I would have considered it any of my business, if he was. He was at Providential Press to do a job and he did it. That's what we cared about."

Despite himself, he wondered if that was true. He'd always thought Carolyn had integrity and told the truth religiously. But maybe she'd been lying back then. Maybe she wanted to have an affair with him and just pretended to love him. Maybe that was why she could sit here so coolly today, when he could barely remember his name.

But if that was true, then why was she still wearing the Celtic knot ring he'd bought for her? She wouldn't have kept it all this time if it didn't mean as much to her as his did to him. He started breathing again, relieved despite himself that the whole thing hadn't been an act.

Except then he noticed that she wasn't wearing the ring today. Had it been his imagination that she'd had it on in the bar?

Carolyn closed the suite door behind her and sagged into a chair. She was exhausted - mentally, physically and emotionally. Working with Scott wasn't going to be easy.

She opened her eyes and found herself face-to-face with Princess, her Abyssinian cat. "Hello, sweetie. Did you miss me?" Princess's answer was apparently yes, since she began purring and rubbing faces with Carolyn. "I missed you, too."

They moved on to petting and Princess yowled several times, expressing her displeasure at being left alone in a strange place all day. "I'm sorry, Princess. I had to go to work - and I have to go out tonight, too. I need to find us someplace to live." Princess didn't seem very impressed by that argument, but then she rarely approved of anything that took her owner away from her.

But she wouldn't go just yet. She'd change clothes and relax for a while first. Phillip, whose office was next to hers, had told her that Ashford Woods was a nice place and close to work. He lived there and so did several other people from A-W. He didn't know if they accepted pets, but she'd check there first. If not, she had the thick apartment guide she'd picked up in the lobby yesterday.

Phillip seemed very nice. He was young - probably only a couple of years out of college, but he seemed quite serious about work and friendly in a casual way. In fact, she liked everyone she'd met at A-W so far, with the exception of Bill Adams. He was just too pleased with himself.

She even liked Francine, although part of her would be happier if Scott was engaged to a shrew who clearly didn't deserve him. Instead, Francine was friendly in a shy way, and the questions she'd asked today made it apparent that she was extremely curious about Carolyn.

Carolyn supposed that made sense. Francine would wonder what Scott had seen in Carolyn, and no matter how completely Scott had tried to explain the situation, she would have questions about what had happened to end things between them. Carolyn herself still had questions about that part.

The part she didn't have questions about was that it was over. She was a reminder of a time gone by to Scott - a reminder he didn't much like.

To her, he was a reminder that for one short week, love had lived up to its reputation.

Carolyn looked around her new apartment after the moving van left on Saturday. How could it be that this little bit of furniture and these few piles of boxes were all she had to show for her thirty-two years of life? Princess, too, of course, but still...

She'd had more once, she reminded herself brutally. She'd had a loving husband and a wonderful condo. By now, they would have traded the condo for a house in the country and added a baby or two. Her life would center on home and family, and despite her fears, she probably would have learned to enjoy that.

Meeting Scott had been like opening Pandora's box. It wasn't his fault that her marriage to Tony had always had more to do with friendship than with romantic love. And it wasn't his fault that, after she discovered the reality of what she'd been missing, she couldn't face a lifetime with the imitation. Maybe it hadn't been her fault either, but she'd chosen the life she now led. She'd better make the most of it.

So, she walked around the nearly-empty apartment, making lists of the things she'd need to make this her home. She thought of putting Scott's name on the list as a joke, but refused to indulge herself.

Scott was engaged to Francine, and she would not allow herself to pretend otherwise.

Scott took a slight detour on the way home Saturday. He'd overheard Carolyn telling Phillip that she was going to move into an apartment at Ashford Woods today, and he thought he'd see if she needed any help.

She was doing well at work, of course. He'd assigned Phillip to be her mentor, although he suspected that Phillip would learn more from his association with Carolyn than vice versa. Phillip was a good programmer, but A-W was his first job out of college and he was still pretty inexperienced.

After the initial awkwardness on Monday, Scott had found that having Carolyn around wasn't as distracting as he'd thought it might be. She stayed in her office at the other end of the hall and didn't manufacture reasons to ask him questions. She didn't even join the bull-sessions around the coffee machine near his office.

He pulled into the complex parking lot, but as he searched for a parking place, he began to have second thoughts. Should he really be here? Carolyn hadn't asked for any help moving, as far as he knew - and if it turned out that somebody from work *was* there, they might think it was strange for him to just show up out of the blue.

Besides, Rachel probably had something cooked up for them to do this afternoon, and he should see if Francine had thought more about them getting married.

Francine and Rachel were his life. Not Carolyn.

CHAPTER FOUR

Carolyn blinked hard to make the screen come back into focus. Just a couple more minutes and she'd have this working. *This* was her first programming assignment at A- W, and it had been a challenge.

Phillip had told her that Scott never coddled new hires, but even he had been surprised at how complex this routine turned out to be. She'd smiled and said she was used to Scott expecting a lot from her, then told him the story of when Scott first started his stint at PP.

Her boss had told him that she was their best programmer, but he'd also mentioned that Carolyn was in charge of maintenance and upgrades to all their old COBOL systems. Scott had assumed that meant she didn't have the skills to truly understand his project, and he'd gone about his work on his own.

But Carolyn knew she would be maintaining the software Scott wrote, so she asked questions, studied code, and asked more questions. Gradually, the code began to make sense, and finally, she dared to write a subroutine she knew Scott would soon need. She left it on his desk chair on the way to her lunch time workout one day, too nervous to be there when he found it.

When she came back, a list of subroutines was waiting for her. Scott never explicitly said her code had been satisfactory, but after that he treated her like a colleague instead of a burden.

Phillip asked a thousand questions after that, and she realized he'd soon be spreading everything she said far and wide. She was careful to stick to strictly work-related answers, knowing it would be dangerous to imply that she and Scott had ever been more than co- workers.

She crossed her fingers now and ran her test again. It worked! Okay, how about the trickier cases? They worked, too!

She jumped up and ran halfway into the hall before she remembered that it was six- thirty in the evening. Phillip had gone home long ago. She'd have to wait until morning to tell him about this.

But Scott might still be here. She'd noticed that he stayed late most nights. He walked by her office sometimes, probably on the way to or from the rest room.

She could go by his office now. If he was still there and not too busy, she could tell him she'd finished her first assignment. Maybe he'd even like to see it in action.

Yeah, right. Like the project team didn't finish a hundred or more routines a year. That was just an excuse to talk to Scott and she knew it.

Scott pushed back from his desk and stretched. If he headed home now, he could spend a little time with Rachel before bedtime. She was a great kid and he'd been working too many hours recently. If he hadn't been responsible for getting her up, fed, and to the baby-sitter's each morning, he would have hardly seen her in days.

He didn't bother calling home, since Francine and Rachel would have eaten a long time ago. Francine had probably saved him some leftovers, and if not, he could always make himself a sandwich.

On the way out, he decided to stop by Carolyn's office and suggest that she leave, too. He'd noticed that she worked late almost every day and he should let her know that wasn't expected. Besides, he should check that she was enjoying the job and had all the information and supplies she needed.

He wasn't doing it because of who she used to be, but of whom she was now - someone who worked for him. In fact, he should have talked to her before this and would have, if she'd been anyone else.

But when he got there, Carolyn's office was dark and empty. Good - she'd already gone home. He hurried out to his car, eager to do the same thing.

And if he drove by her apartment complex on the way home, it was just happenstance, because he liked to vary his route from time to time. He wasn't wishing he'd see her car or anything.

The next day, Bill strolled into Carolyn's office and dropped into her visitor's chair. "So, how are you liking A-W?"

She spun around to face him so quickly that she must have gotten dizzy. "Bill!" She had to be faking the shock.

"That's me," he said with one of the lazy smiles that melted women's hearts. "I've been watching you, and you work entirely too hard. That's why I'm here - to take you to lunch and give you a well-earned chance to relax." And to spill a few beans about her relationship with Scott, but he wouldn't mention that part.

He caught a flash of some amazing turquoise color when her eyes widened. "It's noon already? I meant to..." Her voice trailed off as she checked her watch.

"No, it's not noon, but restaurants around here tend to get crowded, so I thought we'd go a few minutes early." Because he expected an objection, he added, "We'll be back before one, I promise - although no one would care if we weren't."

She shook her head immediately. "I don't eat lunch."

He sighed. "Come on, Carolyn. I've stopped by a couple of times at lunch time before this, and you're never here. If you don't eat, you must be running off every day for a nooner."

To say she blushed would be an extreme understatement. Her whole face and neck turned the color of sunburn and he had to wonder whether the parts of her he couldn't see were a similar shade. She didn't appeal all that much to him physically, but hey - he'd be glad to give her a try. Sometimes the ones who weren't such great lookers made up for it with enthusiasm.

"I have an exercise class at noon," she said snottily.

Like she *needed* more exercise! She was too damn skinny already. This wasn't about his desires, though. He needed to find out the truth about her and Scott. He shrugged casually. "So, skip it this once. I'll even take you to a salad place, if that'll make you happy. I was thinking more like really great fresh seafood, but I'm flexible."

She shook her head again. "No, thanks. My system wouldn't know what to do with food at this hour." And then she sat there, obviously waiting for him to leave. No polite "maybe some other time," not even an "I'm sorry."

Well, he wasn't going to be rushed. This wouldn't be as comfortable a place to talk as a restaurant, and he certainly wouldn't get as much out of her, but he'd do what he could. "So, I hear Scott underestimated you when he first met you. I can't say I'm surprised - he thinks he's pretty hot stuff."

She sighed and glanced at her watch again. "Look, Bill, I've really got to go." She reached down and grabbed her purse, then stood. "My class starts right at noon and I have to change first." And she walked right past him and out her door.

Damn her! He hated bitches like her - and the worst part was that he couldn't even entertain himself with fantasies of her in a leotard and tights. She probably had about as much shape as a ten-year-old boy.

A couple of weeks later, Scott read the last of the CHAPTER out loud and closed the book, ignoring Rachel's ritual begging for just another few pages. "Sorry, sweetie. It's already late." She groaned, but her eyelids were heavy and he knew she'd be asleep before he got back to the living room.

Francine clicked off the TV when he sat down next to her. "You were in with Rachel quite a while."

"The CHAPTER was longer than usual, but I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were waiting for me." He'd been in the mood for some mindless entertainment, but apparently that wasn't in the cards.

"Oh, not really," she said in the way he knew meant she'd been waiting. "I was just thinking that we haven't talked much recently."

From her tone of voice, he knew she didn't want to discuss getting married. "No, I guess we haven't. I've been working later the last few weeks and I apologize for that. There just never seems to be enough time in the day to get everything taken care of and after people leave, I like to spend an hour or so programming." It was more than an hour or so most nights, he had to admit and unfortunately, he wasn't getting all that much accomplished during that time. He slipped his arm around Francine's waist and said, "I hope you don't think I wouldn't rather be home."

"Oh, no," she said, but her protest was weak. "And I understand about your hours - really, I do. I just miss having you around, and I was thinking earlier that I don't even know how your project is going these days."

"Pretty good," he answered, relaxing slightly. "Our schedule's tight, but then it always is."

She nodded. "Daddy says you put too much pressure on yourself. The customers would be happy with

fewer features each release."

He laughed. "Not happy, I assure you. They might accept it, but only because no one else can meet as many of their needs as we can."

"So, how's Carolyn doing? Are you glad you hired her?"

He held his body very still for a few seconds, then let his breath out carefully. "She's doing fine. She picked things up in no time, as I expected."

She was zipping through coding assignments like they were nothing these days. And that was one of the reasons he wasn't accomplishing as much as he expected of himself - he spent far too much time admiring her code. Reading the subroutines his team produced was one of his responsibilities and one he took seriously. He wanted to be the first person to know if someone was slacking off on documentation or not abiding by the project's coding standards or especially if someone needed some remedial help in data structures or the art of writing software.

Carolyn's code was elegant and correct, as always. So all he really needed to do was give it a quick spot-check once in a while for the sake of consistency. Instead, reading her latest routine was the reward he gave himself for finishing some odious task, like the weekly project schedule or the latest set of budget numbers. And when he read it, he'd sit there and simply stare at it, admiring the way it looked on the screen as much as its content. Time disappeared and soon he was enjoying the way her mind worked, just as he'd done four years ago.

"So, what do you think?" Francine asked, turning to look at him quizzically.

"I'm sorry," he apologized again, with a guilty start this time. "What did you ask me?"

"I said I thought we should invite Carolyn to dinner. Don't you think that would be nice?"

"No!" He stopped and forced himself to sound calm. "I mean it would be nice, but we don't entertain people from work as a rule. Unless we want to start having more people over, it seems kind of rude to just invite her." He thought that was a safe argument. Francine got incredibly nervous whenever they entertained.

"Oh, but since you two are old friends, it would be okay. And she seems really nice. I'd like to get to know her better."

Just what he needed. "She *is* nice, I guess, but I wouldn't really say we were friends before." That was perilously close to a lie and he didn't lie. "Besides, from what I hear, she's not big on socializing with people from work." At least not when the socializing involved going out on dates with his team members. He'd heard of her refusing dates with Phillip, Rollie and Bill.

Francine sighed. "All right, if you don't want to ..."

Normally, her saying it that way would have him changing his mind in nothing flat. Tonight, he simply changed the subject. "Have you thought any more about us going away somewhere for a few days?"

"You mean the casino resort thing?"

The getting married thing, but he wouldn't say that. "Well, yes, although we could go anywhere you'd like." Anywhere with a minister or justice of the peace or someone similar.

"I wasn't sure if you'd really have time to go," she said, hesitantly. "What with all the hours you've been

working, and everything."

He clenched a wad of the sofa cushion in his hand until he could speak calmly. "Sweetheart, I know I work a lot of hours. I enjoy my job and I like to do well at it. But you and Rachel are much more important, and if the three of us could go away somewhere for a few days, I wouldn't miss work at all." Could that possibly be the reason for her hesitation about getting married all this time? If so, he'd solve that right now. "In fact, if you'd like to take a trip somewhere and get married, I promise I'll take two weeks off from work - whenever you say."

"You'd really do that?" She sounded so completely amazed that he almost thought it was put-on. But then he remembered. Francine didn't believe she was worth loving.

He kissed her forehead right along her hairline. "Yes, gladly." He kissed her again, then asked the critical question, "When would you like to leave?"

She caught her breath and said softly, "Oh, Scott. You make me want to say right this minute."

Then why didn't she, he asked himself. Forcing a chuckle, he said, "That's maybe a little quick, but I'll bet we could manage to leave Friday night. And we'd either invite your folks or not, depending on what you'd like."

She didn't respond right away, and after a minute, he realized she was struggling not to cry. He was pushing marriage too hard again. He forgot sometimes how fragile she was inside and how completely unable to talk about the things that overwhelmed her. He had to let her be the one to decide she was ready to marry him.

He sighed and gave her a squeeze. "It's okay, sweetheart. We don't have to get married right away."

She let her breath out in a huge gust of relief. "I'm sorry, Scott. You're so good to me, and I'm such a mess!"

"I love you, Francine. That's why I want to marry you, and it's also why I don't want to push you into anything you don't feel comfortable with. We'll have plenty of time to get married later."

But how was he ever going to persuade her that it was safe to marry him?

CHAPTER FIVE

By the time Rachel decided to watch TV instead of talk to her uncle, Bill was ready for the change. He knew she was smart and maybe even brilliant, but he had a hell of a time understanding what she was saying half the time. He guessed that all little kids were like that.

He wandered into the kitchen where Francine was busy cooking. He hadn't seen the least little clue that anything was fishy between Scott and Carolyn, but figured he'd see what Francine thought. "So, now that Carolyn's been around a month or so, have you decided whether Scott's hiding anything about her?"

A measuring cup fell onto the counter and then the floor. He leaned down and picked it up, glad that it was empty or he might have had to help her clean up the mess. She took it absently and stood there holding it. "There's something," she said weakly, like she hadn't taken a good breath in ages. "Maybe it's not her, but it started then."

Normally, he hated all the endless analysis women did about relationships, but when it came to Scott, Bill needed some sort of an edge to get him out of the way. If George had known he was going to die, he

would have wanted - even expected - that Bill would get his job. Instead, Seth had brought Scott in out of nowhere, plunked him down in a dream job and then let him get his mitts into Francine. Bill wouldn't want her for himself - he wouldn't want any *one* woman - but she shouldn't have fallen right into Scott's arms like that. Didn't George mean *anything* to her? Plus, it griped him the way Rachel called Scott "Daddy" all the time - *George* was her real Daddy.

"What started then?" he coaxed. When she didn't answer right away, he added, "Maybe I can help, but not unless you tell me what the problem is."

She sighed and her shoulders slumped. He pulled a kitchen chair over near her and she sat. "He's working so many hours and even when he's home, it's kind of like he isn't."

Well, that was nice and specific. He'd have to probe some more. "He always works a lot - sixty hours or so a week, I'd guess."

She shook her head. "It's more than that now. At least eight o'clock most nights, and eight or ten hours both Saturday and Sunday." With another sigh and a shrug, she added, "It's not so much the hours, though. It's when he's home. He's always off in some dream world, and I can ask him something and he doesn't even know I said anything."

Bill could sympathize with Scott. He'd never lived with a woman - wouldn't want to confine himself like that - but he knew how even the best of them could go on and on about crap that didn't matter. But saying that wouldn't endear himself to Francine, and he wouldn't end up knowing any more than when he'd started out. "If he's working that many hours, maybe he's just wiped out. That happens to the best of us, you know."

She blew her breath out in disgust. "You're just like him, making excuses all the time. If he's so da - darn tired, then why doesn't he sleep at night?"

Had Francine started to say "damn"? The situation must be more serious than he'd thought. "He's not sleeping?"

"Well, some, obviously, but not a full night." Her cheeks got blotchy with color and she looked around the room in embarrassment.

If he didn't miss his bet, there was more wrong in the bedroom than lack of sleep. But Francine had always seemed embarrassed at the most casual of references to sex, so he wasn't sure how or what to ask. Well, he might as well be blunt. "Guys sometimes have trouble performing when they're tired or stressed out." Not him, but other guys did. "And that freaks them out and makes the problem worse." From the wide-eyed way she looked at him, he knew he was right. "Is that what's happening?"

She gave a little nod and asked in a scared voice, "It isn't because he doesn't love me anymore?"

He shook his head, although he supposed it could be because of that or any of a thousand other reasons - including that he was getting it on with Carolyn so often that he didn't have anything left for Francine. Maybe Bill had better do a little more checking on the two of them. "Scott's the kind of guy who'd tell you that," he said definitely.

She nodded eagerly. "You're right. He would. And maybe there's something about work that's worrying him. That could be why he's working so many more hours, and he wouldn't want to burden me with that." A frown appeared, creasing her forehead. "And I've been making it worse. I keep - I mean we usually..." Her voice trailed off in terminal embarrassment.

He dredged around in his memory for something he'd read about the sexual habits of long-married couples. "You have, like, a regular night or something?" The idea made his skin crawl. To reduce making love to the equivalent of taking out the garbage!

"Every night, pretty much," she said, her voice almost a whisper.

Geez! The jerk was getting more than Bill? Talk about unfair! Well, but it *was* Francine every damn time - unless he was doing Carolyn, too. And while Bill wouldn't throw either of them out of bed, he needed plenty of variety.

"But now," she added, staring at the fingernails of one hand, "I have to kind of push for even a couple of times a week...But if it's like you said, what should I do? Should I just forget about it?"

For a second, he thought about how much he'd hate it if some woman discussed his sexual performance with another guy like this. It would never happen, of course, so he dismissed the concern. "It depends," he said airily. "If you just let the issue drop, the problem'll probably go away on its own before long, and he'll feel less pressure to do something just because you expect it." That was sensible advice, but he didn't actually care about helping Scott and Francine solve their problems.

He *did*, however, want Francine to think he was being helpful. That way, she'd keep confiding in him, and he'd eventually find out something that was truly useful to him. "Another idea is for you to change your approach. Surprise him into wanting sex." He flipped through sexy scenarios in his head, looking for one tame enough that Francine might actually manage it. "For instance, what do you normally wear to bed?"

"A nightgown."

"Long or short? Flannel or something silky?" He could guess.

"Long and either flannel or cotton. Are you saying I should wear a short one? Mother gave me one - " She started to her feet, and he was sure she was going to show it to him.

He touched her arm. "I'm sure it's lovely, but that's not what I mean. I'm talking about something sexy - the kind of thing a guy can't help but need to touch." Or rip off, he added to himself. "There's a store at Washington Square that sells the kind I'm talking about." He liked shopping there. The sales clerks were so helpful - and when he finally admitted he didn't have a girlfriend to wear the super-sexy item they'd just picked out, it wasn't difficult to talk them into a date. In fact, he was seeing one of the clerks tonight. Tanya was built like a fantasy and she loved to model the store's wares for him.

Her eyes got huge. "I've never been there. I - um - " She swallowed and the red blotches on her cheeks got redder.

Well, he wasn't going to take her there! "You could wear nothing instead. I'll bet Scott would love to see you walking around the room naked." He'd have to, assuming the guy wasn't a complete eunuch. He might think Francine had gone off her rocker, but he'd be turned on enough that he didn't care.

"I couldn't do that!"

What was she doing asking for his help, if she was going to reject all his ideas? He sighed. He'd give it one more shot. "Okay. How about this? You go to bed like usual. After he's sound asleep, you crawl under the covers and suck his cock. Do it real gentle at first, so he doesn't wake up for a while." That was the absolute best way to wake up. He got hard just thinking about it. He'd have to tell Tanya he wanted her to do that when she slept over tonight. She had the hottest sweetest suction-mouth he'd

encountered in a long time. Suddenly, tonight was awfully far off. Maybe she was home right now...

"You think he'd like that?" she asked hesitantly. "I don't think I do it right."

He actually considered volunteering to help perfect her technique - for about half a second. If she wasn't the boss's daughter and the fiancée of the guy he wanted to get rid of, he'd do it. But something like that could easily get turned around against him and that wouldn't be good. "He'll like it," he said flatly, then added, "Look, Francine. I've got to run. But give it a try - sometimes all that's needed is a little something different, to spice things up."

On his way to Tanya's, Bill wondered if Scott's sex life actually needed spicing up. He'd have to check out the idea that Scott was spending a few of those extra hours Francine thought he was working at Carolyn's apartment. Conveniently, Carolyn's apartment was just across the green from Bill's.

Carolyn was still pissed when she got home. "Do you know what he did just now?" she asked Princess. "Nothing. Can you believe that?"

Princess inclined her head quizzically and slowly blinked her greenish gold eyes - a clear request that her human explain herself. "I mean Scott," she said. Princess waited for more. "We were the only ones at work this afternoon, and I didn't go out of my way to run into him or anything."

She hurried on, "I don't mean I ran into him literally! But I went to make a copy of this page of a book I borrowed from Phillip's office and he was using the machine. So I waited for maybe a minute until he finished and I was thinking the whole time about what to say when he turned around, because he didn't seem to know I was there. I figured I'd say something nice about Oregon - even though I haven't really seen anything other than Beaverton - but when he finished, he just walked right out the door. It was like he didn't know who I was and was glad not to!"

Princess still seemed to be waiting for an explanation. "Don't you see how rude that was? I mean, just because he's engaged doesn't mean we can't have a simple conversation. And I understand he worries about us talking at work when other people are around - even though I'd think they'd wonder even more if we never talk. But we were alone today! He could have asked how I was doing - " A sob burst out of her gut and she sank to the floor next to Princess.

"We shouldn't be here!" she cried, wrapping her arms around herself and rocking. "He said he wanted to hire me, and I thought..." What *had* she thought? That they were going to have a wild clandestine affair behind Francine's back? Hardly.

Four years ago, Scott had hated the fact that she was married. He'd made her swear to divorce Tony and marry him, even before they kissed the first time. He would have behaved similarly this time, if he'd wanted them to have a relationship. He wouldn't have hired her - he'd have broken up with Francine, left his job and started over with Carolyn.

If he'd wanted them to be together. But he didn't. And Carolyn did.

Princess touched Carolyn's cheek with her paw, and Carolyn gladly let that provide a little comfort.

Because now she realized that she'd taken this job hoping that seeing her again would make Scott remember how much he loved her. Instead, seeing him again every day made the pain of him not wanting her even worse.

Scott hated nighttime. During the day, he had work and in the morning and early evening, Rachel. He was alone with Francine at night.

He loved Francine; it wasn't that. She was a wonderful and sweet woman and he was thrilled he'd found her. He didn't even mind her lack of self-confidence normally.

It was just impossible to deal with her needs right now. He was so tired - exhausted, really - all the time and she was a rock dragging him down. If she could just back off and let him deal with this at his own pace, he'd be fine.

He might as well ask rain to fall up. He was her stability, and when he was shaky, so was she. And when she was shaky, she needed the surface things so much more than normal - the conversations about nothing, where he showed how he valued her and her opinions - the easy agreement to any activity she suggested - and especially, the sex every night.

He wasn't the most highly-sexed guy around. He'd happily gone years of his adult life without a sex partner, and while he enjoyed making love to Francine, it wasn't the be-all and end-all of their relationship.

He'd learned early on, though, that Francine felt rejected if they didn't have sex every night. During her period, she didn't usually mind if they just did some heavy petting, but other nights, she wanted the whole deal.

Not for her physical satisfaction, either. She rarely had an orgasm, no matter the stimulation, and she seemed to prefer not having one. Sometimes he felt like a performing monkey, going through a routine he'd rather avoid for a pleasure that wasn't worth the effort.

Recently, he'd been finding it more and more impossible to summon the necessary energy, and he'd taken to turning his back and telling her flatly that he was too tired. That wasn't nice of him, he knew, but having a real conversation about the issue was beyond him. He couldn't keep putting it off, though.

Scott's dream was wonderful - he felt so light and happy and full of life. Oh, and the most delightful urgency was building inside. His whole body was drawing itself into a coil of need that kept tightening into something he could only barely remember feeling ever before.

He wanted - oh, God, he *needed* so much more of this! If it could only last forever, just like this, only better - more...

Someplace deep inside his head, he realized what was happening. She had him in her mouth, and he was so incredibly close to coming. He needed to stop her, to make the swirling wonder stop while he made her ready to hit the moon with him.

But he couldn't. It had been so damned long since anything felt a particle as good as this.

Later. He'd take care of her later. After -

Oh, God. After *that*.

He couldn't move for the longest time. And just before he found a tiny parcel of energy for loving her back, he felt her tears wetting his thigh.

He lay silently, not twitching a muscle, trying to understand. In a minute or two, she carefully rolled over and lay her head on the pillow.

He slid up behind her in bed, his hand moving to her flannel-covered breast. She twisted away, as though his hand carried a jolt of electricity. "No. Leave me alone." He pulled his hand back, but after a few seconds, she jerked closer to the edge of the bed. "I *said* leave me alone."

She'd never said no before. She'd never wanted him to leave her alone before, either. Why now? How had he hurt her? He'd meant to hold back, to show her how much he loved her first - but she didn't blame him for that, did she? Other times, she'd wanted him to come that way - and if she hadn't this time, she shouldn't have aroused him so thoroughly while he slept.

He didn't want to have to ask, but he had to know. "What's the matter, honey? I'd like to make it better."

"My name is Francine, and what *I'd* like is for you to leave me alone." She moved even farther away.

He gave up and retreated to his side of the bed. Maybe they could talk about it tomorrow.

CHAPTER SIX

Carolyn felt sick when she walked into the living room and saw the remains of last night's pity party. She'd been ridiculously self-indulgent - adding real melted butter to her microwave popcorn and then drowning her thirst with three bottles of beer. What was next? A container of ice cream washed down with margaritas?

It hadn't done a bit of good either. She was still the invisible woman, pining over Scott like an awkward teen with a crush on the star quarterback. And she might as well admit that, no matter how well she did her job, he wasn't going to suddenly decide he couldn't live without her.

That meant she'd better find a way to live without him and working long hours wasn't a long-term solution. In Providence after her divorce, she'd gotten involved with charitable groups. The one she'd liked best was dedicated to helping senior citizens stay active and in their own homes as long as possible. She'd spent time with her "regulars" every week, taking them places they couldn't go by themselves, doing errands for them and even helping them with their bill-paying. Several had become dear friends and, now that she'd moved, she exchanged letters with two of them. There must be a similar group in the Portland area, and she decided on the spot that she'd search them out and get involved this next week.

What else had she done to fill her empty life back then? Exercise, of course, but she was already doing that. She went to the athletic club every day at lunch time - and if the truth be told, she sometimes went again in the evening just for something to do.

The other big thing she'd done was find a few friends. None were close friends, not like the college roommate she'd been best friends with until her divorce, but she'd enjoyed having someone to go to the movies or out to dinner with.

She guessed she could consider Phillip a friend. He still wanted to date her, though, so there was a tension between them that wasn't entirely comfortable. *Why* he wanted to go out with her was a mystery. She was eight years older, and to a guy in his early twenties, age was usually a big deal. They didn't share a lot of interests, either. He was crazy about jazz-style music and a visit to his apartment often ended with her ears ringing from the effects of his stereo. And if she could ignore all that, he was allergic to Princess so a relationship with him was out of the question.

In the interests of honesty, she had to admit she wouldn't rule out a relationship with Scott based on any of those same issues. Bottom line, Phillip was a great guy, but he didn't ring any bells for her. Might there be someone - other than Scott - who did? She didn't think so, but then again, she hadn't expected Scott

to affect her the way he did, either.

No, the best bet was to stay single and unattached. Her experience with relationships had involved a lot more pain than happiness and she wasn't in the market for any more pain.

And along those lines, she would learn to develop a thicker skin. There was no point letting Scott hurt her continually simply by living his chosen life.

If possible, Scott slept worse that night than he had been the last several weeks. He lay awake for hours, at first knowing that Francine was awake and miserable on her side of the bed, and later wishing she hadn't fallen asleep so he could try to get her to explain the problem.

He'd been sure he wouldn't sleep at all, but he did. It had been starting to get light the last he remembered, and now suddenly, it was mid-morning. And Francine was already up.

He hurried out of bed and into the kitchen, not bothering to shower or dress. She and Rachel were eating - or more precisely, Rachel was eating and Francine was sitting at the table with her.

"Good morning," he said, although what was good about it he couldn't guess.

Rachel greeted him happily. "Guess what, Daddy? Mommy made me waffles! I bet she'll make some for you, too."

Not likely going by the chill he felt from Francine's direction. He looked closer and saw that the waffles were the frozen kind made in the toaster. Francine must feel as wiped out as he did, because normally she insisted on making breakfast from scratch. "I'm not really hungry this morning, sweetheart. I think I'll just have a cup of coffee."

But the pot was empty, and when he fumbled the basket open to make some more, he noticed that there were hardly any grounds in the filter. Francine had only made enough for herself.

Once he got the new pot started - a full pot - he asked, "Do you think your parents are busy today?" He had his back to her, not brave enough to face her anger. She didn't answer, so he continued, "If not, Rachel could maybe spend part of the day with them. There are some things we need to get taken care of." He hoped she'd translate that to mean they needed to talk.

He'd known the minute he woke up this morning that he needed to level with Francine. He had to tell her about Carolyn - the full story, from the minute she greeted him in the lobby of Providential Press to the way she invaded his thoughts continually. It would be horribly difficult to explain it all to her in a way she could understand, but she was his only hope. If she would become his ally in this quest to forget Carolyn, he knew he could do it. If not - well, this situation was impossible.

"Are you through with your waffle, Rachel?" Francine asked in a fake-sweet way that made his stomach twist into knots. Rachel must have nodded, because Francine went on, "Then you can go watch TV." TV? Rachel wasn't allowed to watch much TV, and they never let her choose her what to watch all by herself.

He heard the living room TV come on, loud enough to drown out any possible conversation, and he turned to face Francine. Before he decided what to say, she said, "I'm going out. You can watch her for once."

For once? What about every weekday morning? And where was Francine going on a Sunday morning? She wasn't dressed for church.

"You'll be back, won't you?" Irrationally, he wasn't sure, although rationally he knew she wouldn't walk out without taking Rachel. And why would she walk out anyway? This house belonged to her, not him. She couldn't possibly be that angry because he came too quickly in the middle of the night. "I'll get a baby-sitter and we'll talk things out."

"Don't bother, you lying, cheating, piece of scum. And I *will* be back, I promise you!" She stomped out of the kitchen and he heard her car roar to life and race away from the house.

Lying and cheating? What the hell was she talking about?

Bill had figured out another reason never to live with a woman. If she was anywhere near as sexy and inventive as Tanya, they wouldn't survive their first week together. For once, he was almost sorry he couldn't post a "No Trespassing" sign to keep her all to himself - at least until he'd had his fill of her.

He had strict rules about sleepovers. They were only ever for one night at a time and they ended by nine-thirty in the morning at the latest. Otherwise, the woman would just stay and stay, and he'd be forced to feed her and entertain her - and eventually, to let her stay over a second night.

But nine-thirty had come and gone in the middle of lovemaking that had surged between unrestrained and tender for a seemingly endless time. Tanya was gone now - to the store to pick up some pastries for breakfast - and he was seriously considering whether the single-night rule would be broken if he sent her home just long enough to get clothes for work tomorrow. Of course, it was his own damn rule, so he guessed that he could decide what it meant and whether it applied to the current situation.

When the doorbell rang, he answered the door in the nude, standing out of sight of anyone outside, but sure to be seen immediately when Tanya stepped inside. They wouldn't make it out of the entryway before she was flat on her back on the floor.

Only it wasn't Tanya at the door. It was Francine, looking like she'd thrown on the first clothes she'd seen this morning and staring at him like she'd never seen a naked man before. Hell, maybe she hadn't. George had certainly been a prude, and for all he knew, Scott might be, too. He guessed he ought to apologize.

Before he did, she burst out, "I was right, and now you've got to help me!"

She was right? "What were you right about?" It couldn't be Scott and Carolyn, although he couldn't think of anything else that she could be referring to.

"He's - " She broke off, sobbing. "I - I did like you said, but..." She was crying too much to continue.

He sighed and said, "Come in and sit down. I'll put on a robe." He wasn't falsely modest about his body, but he felt strange about his sister-in-law eyeing his erection - or right this second, his lack of one.

As he took the robe off the hanger and slipped it on, he wondered what she'd been talking about. It sounded like she'd tried waking Scott up with oral sex, but something had gone wrong. Was there something physically wrong with the guy? The thought made him cringe. Not being able to get it up - not even a jerk like Scott deserved that.

He went back into the living room and sat next to her on the sofa. "What happened, Francine? Why are you so upset?"

Her eyes puddled with tears. "He was supposed to like it and want to make love - right?"

"Like it" and "want to make love" seemed rather mild descriptions, but he nodded. "He didn't like it?"

Her face contorted angrily and the tears dried. "Oh, he liked it just fine. He liked it so fine that he called out her name!"

Her name? "He said Carolyn's name?"

A tight nod. "I did it just like you said - real gentle so he didn't wake up for a long time. And by the time I could tell he was awake, it was too late to make love, but I didn't mind." She rushed on, "I thought if it worked once, he wouldn't worry so much about trying another time - and anyway, maybe he'd sleep better."

For a second, Bill felt a little stab of envy. Assuming he ever had performance problems, none of the women he went to bed with would react generously like that. And Scott didn't have the brains to appreciate what he had! "Are you sure he said her name?"

"It was more like a groan," she spat. "'Oh, Carolyn' - right when I was choking on all that gross stuff."

"Oh, geez," he muttered, his mind reeling as though he'd been the one to do such an unthinkable thing. "Maybe he was just dreaming..." He trailed off, knowing that the idea a guy might fantasize about another woman was almost as abhorrent to most women as him actually doing something about the fantasy.

"You think *this* is a dream?" she demanded, shoving something at him. When he didn't react right away, she continued, "Well, go ahead - open it!"

It was an envelope with "Scott" written on the front in writing that looked a lot like Carolyn's. The envelope wasn't sealed, so he reached inside and pulled out a mostly-white greeting card. The front contained a simplistic drawing of a beach at sunset, with one set of footprints visible. It read, "I won't miss you." Inside, the words "because you're so much a part of me" appeared, and below that, a handwritten message. "I tried to believe that was true until tonight. Now I know that every second we're apart will seem like hours, and I won't ever be myself again until we're reunited. Love with you is all I hoped it would be - and so much more. The rest of our lives will be truly spectacular. I can't wait!" There was no signature.

The envelope still bulged, so he reached into it again and found a ring. The gold band was made of numerous thin strands of gold, seemingly woven together into a complex pattern. It looked large enough to fit Scott.

One more item remained in the envelope. A picture - no, two photos in a strip, with a crooked cut at the top of one of them indicating there had originally been more. In the pictures, Scott and Carolyn grinned at the camera, their heads pressed close together. Carolyn's hair was long, and they were younger than they were now. Years younger and incredibly happy.

Bill looked up at Francine. "Where did you get this?" His voice scratched unevenly.

"His dresser," she said stiffly, as though afraid of disapproval. "It's been there all along. I just didn't look at it until today."

In his hand, Bill held pure dynamite. One look at the card and pictures, and Seth would kick Scott's ass out of A-W. Even if he wasn't fooling around on Francine, hiring his former lover was the definition of inappropriate, and Seth was nothing if not a protective father.

Scott stared into his sock drawer, trying to stay calm. Maybe Carolyn's card was in another drawer - or maybe it caught on something and fell behind the drawer. Yeah, that was probably it. He'd pull the

drawer out all the way and it would be there.

Except it had been in the bottom of the drawer and he'd seen it there no more than a week ago. He hadn't touched it. He never touched it. But it had been there.

Francine must have it! She must have taken it out of the drawer sometime - last night? No, because she wouldn't have been loving like that after she'd seen the card. Another woman might try to lull him that way before going in for the kill, but not Francine. She was too honest and straightforward.

So, this morning? Probably while he was sleeping. That would explain her cold anger - and the crack about him being a lying, cheating piece of scum.

Except he wasn't. Well, technically, he'd lied when Francine asked if they'd dated. Spending virtually every moment together for nine-plus days was way more than dating, in fact. But he hadn't cheated. He'd been free when he was with Carolyn, and he'd been ever so careful to keep his behavior above reproach since she came to A-W. If Francine only knew how many times he'd fought the temptation to simply walk down to Carolyn's office and have a simple conversation.

He shook his head in disgust. Telling her that wouldn't make her feel any better. He needed to explain how he truly felt - how what he'd had with Carolyn didn't compare with what he had with Francine and Rachel.

That was weak. He'd better get some more compelling arguments lined up - and damn soon - if he expected to patch things up with her. If only his brain would work...

The shrill ring of the phone gave him a start. Was it Francine? He should have called Linda to see if she could watch Rachel today. "Hello?"

"You've got to get over here!" The voice was distorted with urgency, but it sounded like Bill. "Francine's having one of those - allergy things - "

"Call 911!" he yelled into the phone and took off at a dead run. Maybe he could get there quicker than the paramedics. He knew how to give Francine the shot that would save her life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Scott hit the brakes at the end of the drive. Rachel! He couldn't leave her home alone - but he couldn't take her with him either. He saw movement in the front yard next door, and jumped out to check.

"Mrs. Lewis!" he called.

The older woman looked up. "Good morning, Scott." She continued sweeping. "It's a lovely - "

"Excuse me," he interrupted. "Could you possibly watch Rachel for a few minutes? I just found out that Francine's taken ill and I have to get over there."

She put the broom down and started toward him. "Of course. Is Rachel in the house?"

He nodded. "Watching TV, I think."

"Well, then, go on about your business."

"Thanks. I'll get a baby-sitter over here as soon as I can."

She waved her hand in dismissal. "Don't worry about it. Rachel and I will be just fine. Give my best to

Francine."

He got back in the car and tore off down the street.

Bill took another look at Francine. Where the hell was Scott? Their house wasn't *that* far away.

This allergic reaction was scary as shit. He guessed the pastries that Tanya had gotten must have had peanuts in them, although he hadn't noticed them. Francine had reacted like this to one of the dishes at the company potluck last year. Scott and Seth had been right there, though, so Bill hadn't had to do anything. He'd seen them rushing around and bending over Francine and after a minute or two, she'd been okay.

She wasn't okay now, that was for sure. She had these funny blotches on her face and arms, and she'd been scratching at them up until a minute ago. Her breathing was getting worse all the time, and he didn't think she really knew what was going on. Tanya was on the phone with 911, but he had the awful feeling they weren't going to get here in time.

Scott burst through the door right then and rushed to where Francine was lying on the couch. "Francine honey, come on, wake up," he urged, and pulled her into a sitting position. "You shouldn't have let her lay down," he bitched. "She's having trouble breathing. Where's her kit?"

"Kit?" She'd said something about her kit, back when this first came on, but he didn't know what she was talking about.

"Her purse! Where the hell's her purse?"

"I don't know," he said, then forced himself to think back to when she first arrived. "She didn't bring a purse."

"Shit!" He was poking at Francine, like he thought she was asleep. "You at least called 911?" he demanded, as though it was Bill's fault Francine didn't have her purse.

Before he answered, paramedics appeared in the apartment and took over. Bill moved out of their way, and soon they were gone, taking Francine with them. Scott started to follow, but turned back to say, "We're going to St. Vincent's. Call Seth and Annabelle and have them meet us there. If they're not home, try to catch them at church."

Bill watched him go, disgusted by the devoted-fiancé act. The guy might seem concerned about Francine now, but he sure as hell hadn't been very damn concerned last night.

Scott drove slowly into the garage, wishing he could put this moment off a little - or a lot - longer. But he couldn't, so he lifted himself out of the car and quietly opened the door into the house.

Mrs. Lewis was in the living room by herself. She frowned when she saw him. "It isn't good news, is it?"

He shook his head. "Where's Rachel?"

"In her room," she said in a hushed voice. "She was upset about her mother being sick and wanted to play nurse with her dolls." After a short hesitation, she asked, "What happened?"

"She's - " He swallowed and corrected himself. "Francine was allergic to peanuts, and she ate part of a pastry that had some in the filling. She usually carried a shot for when that happened, but for some reason

she didn't have it today, and 911 didn't get there fast enough."

Mrs. Lewis pressed her lips together. "She died?" He nodded and she shook her head. "That's awful. Would you like me to stay with Rachel for a while longer?"

"No, thanks. I - I have to tell her, and then we're going down to her grandparents' in Lake Oswego."

She nodded and stood. "That's what you need at a time like this - family. But if there's anything I can do to help - anytime - just let me know."

"Thanks. I will," he promised, although he couldn't imagine what anyone could do to help.

As she passed, she gave him a hug. "I'm so sorry."

He thanked her again and stood motionless in the middle of the room, summoning the strength he'd need for Rachel. He wouldn't be like his parents had been when Emily died. He would be there to explain, to reassure - and most of all, to love.

Carolyn felt much more in control of her life by Sunday evening. She'd done a little research in the phone book and found some volunteer agencies to call on Monday. She'd also called one of the women in her exercise class and arranged to meet for dinner on Tuesday.

So, when she answered her doorbell just after dark and discovered Scott standing at her door, her first thought was to shut the door in his face. She didn't need him messing up her life one second longer.

Except something was definitely very wrong with him. His eyes were hollow and his expression empty, and under that, she sensed desperation eating him alive. "What's the matter, Scott?"

"Francine's dead."

"Really?" The question was ridiculous, since she had no thought that he was lying. "That's awful - come on in." He didn't move right away, so she took his arm and led him inside to a chair.

His movements were vague, as though his brain wasn't really in charge of his body. He sat in her recliner and looked at her with haunted eyes. "Annabelle said to go home and get some sleep, but I can't. I can't go inside. I tried - honest I did," he said, his voice suddenly urgent.

"That's okay," she soothed, hoping that he wasn't expecting to spend the night here. "Do you feel up to telling me what happened?"

"What happened?" He looked mystified for a couple of seconds, then his face cleared. "Oh, you mean with Francine. It was her peanut allergy - she's always supposed to have her kit with her, but she didn't take it..." He winced. "She was so mad this morning, I guess she forgot. I wish I knew what I did wrong."

A cruel voice in Carolyn's head suggested that he probably didn't even know what he'd done to hurt *her*, either past or present. Her nicer side made her say, "She might have forgotten for an entirely different reason."

He sighed heavily. "I suppose. I guess it doesn't matter that much anyway. The point is she's dead, and Rachel doesn't completely understand it yet." He frowned and sat up straighter. "I should be down there. She's going to wake up and need her Mommy, and - "

She interrupted, wanting to keep his agitation from increasing. "Where is she? With the Worthingtons?" He nodded and she continued, "They're her grandparents. I'm sure they can do what's necessary."

"But I'm her daddy - " He looked suddenly stricken. "Oh, God. I'm going to lose her!"

With an effort, she followed his train of thought. "Because you and Francine weren't married, you mean? Doesn't it make sense for her to live with blood relatives?"

"Only if you're a heartless fool!" he snapped.

She fought the urge to snap right back at him. This wasn't the time. He was confused and in pain tonight.

"I was going to adopt her," he said more softly. "After Francine and I got married - but she kept putting it off, and I didn't think it was important enough to hassle about."

Francine had put off the wedding? That was interesting, and completely the opposite of the purportedly-authentic stories she'd heard at work. She tended to believe him rather than the stories, though. After his insistence on her divorcing Tony and marrying him, she found it hard to fathom that he'd gotten cold feet about the institution of marriage.

He looked right into her eyes and said, "You don't know what it's like to have a child you're responsible for. It's the greatest thing - like this unlimited power trip, but still you know you're powerless when it comes right down to it." The vague expression was completely gone now, replaced by intensity. "I've been her father for all intents and purposes since before she was a year old. I helped her take her first steps and to learn to talk. I taught her to ride a tricycle. Every morning, I get her up and feed her breakfast before I take her to the baby-sitter's." He shook his head. "You can say all you want about Seth and Annabelle being more related to her than I am, but it's just not true."

She didn't say that it wasn't her interpretation of the situation that mattered, but she could tell he understood that. It was also clear he knew what the Worthingtons would think, and that their opinions would be what counted. She wished there was something good about all this that she could point out to him, but she couldn't think of anything.

Somehow, the fact that Francine's death had set Scott free to be with Carolyn didn't seem likely to mean a lot. *He'd* been the one to break things off with her four years ago, after all, not vice versa.

Scott couldn't keep from feeling guilty for being here with Carolyn. His brain knew that Francine was dead and that he couldn't cheat on a dead woman. His brain also said that he was just sitting here in Carolyn's apartment, not doing anything that even remotely resembled cheating. But then again, his brain said a lot of things that he couldn't really trust.

Not telling Francine about Carolyn had been one of them. His brain had said that was the right thing to do, that telling Francine the full story would worry her for no reason. Instead, it had driven a wedge between them, and now the wedge would last forever.

"You look tired," Carolyn commented. "Maybe you could sleep now, if you went home."

Home? Without Francine and Rachel, what home did he have? That house would be no more home to him than the house he'd grown up in, after Emily died. People who cared were what made a home, not four walls and a roof. Carolyn cared - maybe not a lot, but at least a little. That was why he'd come here tonight. "I thought I could maybe stay here," he said, trying to sound like he wasn't begging.

She shook her head definitely. "No, Scott. I feel sorry for what you're going through, but that wouldn't be

a good idea."

"I could sleep on the couch."

"That's what I assumed you meant," she said, blushing.

It hadn't been. The only way he could imagine sleeping was in bed with her, their bodies intertwined the same as years ago. "I wouldn't bother you," he promised, not sure that he could follow through, but willing to try.

She sighed and looked annoyed. "Look, Scott. I said no and I meant it. But if you really can't face going home, there's got to be somewhere else you can stay. Maybe down at the Worthingtons?"

He shook his head. "Not there. Annabelle's great, but she fusses too much. Anyway, they've got Rachel to worry about."

"I'll call Phillip, then. He lives just a couple of buildings over, and I'm sure he wouldn't mind." She got up and came toward the phone on the table next to him.

He put his hand on hers as she reached for the phone. She froze, barely seeming to breathe, and gazed at him out of those blue-green eyes of hers. He had the sense that if he pulled on her hand, she'd come willingly into his arms and then there'd be no question of him leaving.

Instead, he took his hand back and stood. "Don't bother. I'll go."

She followed him to the door. "Will you be okay?"

He smiled grimly. "I'll be okay."

He ought to be. He'd spent enough of his life alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Scott took a wrong turn somewhere and ended up in totally the wrong part of the parking lot. As he headed to his car, he saw a car that looked a lot like Francine's. Was she - ?

Oh. Right. She was dead. But that still might be her car, and he guessed they'd have to do something about it. It couldn't sit here forever.

He detoured slightly to check that it was really hers. The car seat in the back and the total lack of clutter proved it. And her purse sitting on the passenger seat -

Her purse? So, *that's* where it had been this morning! Why hadn't she taken it with her to Bill's?

For that matter, why had she *been* at Bill's? They were friends, true, but he couldn't remember her ever going to see Bill before - and he couldn't imagine Francine blithely disturbing such an avid womanizer on a Sunday morning.

Seth had asked the same question today, several times, and Scott hadn't given him a decent answer even once. All he knew was that Francine had been mad at him this morning, and that she'd apparently come right here after leaving the house. That seemed to indicate that the visit to Bill had something to do with her being angry at Scott. But what?

Well, it didn't look like he'd ever find out. He certainly wasn't going to ask Bill what he and Francine had discussed and neither was he going to admit to Seth that Francine had been angry with him. He hoped

Seth had finally given up on getting a logical explanation.

If he was lucky, figuring out where Francine's purse had been might satisfy Seth's need for answers.

Carolyn had second thoughts after Scott left. Well, not exactly second thoughts. She knew darn well that she'd done the only sensible thing to protect herself. Scott wouldn't mean to hurt her, but he was in pain right now and he'd do it without thinking.

She just wished that thinking about Scott lost in his empty house didn't make her feel so selfish.

Scott ended up sleeping better than he expected. He used the guest room, only going into the room he'd shared with Francine long enough to get his shaver and fresh clothes.

He wasn't due at the Worthingtons' until nine-thirty, but he was up early. He didn't see any point in hanging around trying to kill time, so got there before nine. Seth greeted him at the door. "Annabelle's upstairs with Rachel. Would you like coffee and a muffin?"

For politeness sake, he took a muffin with his coffee. Annabelle would have made them fresh this morning and she deserved to feel that her efforts were appreciated. He didn't have any appetite, though, so only picked off and ate a little of the crust. He mentioned finding Francine's car with her purse in it last night, and Seth seemed pleased that the mystery was resolved. Scott thought he might go back to the question of why Francine was at Bill's, but he didn't.

Instead, he said, "Actually, I'm glad you're early. I have a call in to our attorney, but I was wondering if you knew whether Francine had changed her will recently."

He shook his head. "She didn't say anything about it." But would she have with the strain between them the last month or so?

Seth nodded like he'd expected that answer. He looked much the same as usual today - still the successful in-charge businessman, but grief and strain showed around the edges. "I don't know if she told you the provisions she made - " Scott shook his head and Seth continued, "Basically, everything goes to Rachel, in trust with me as trustee because she's so young. As far as I know, she didn't name a guardian - not that it would be binding on the court, if she had, but we'd do our best to follow through on her wishes."

Scott had been dismantling the muffin, pulling the paper away from the edges and breaking off small pieces, but he forced himself to stop fidgeting. "You're saying that you're going to take Rachel away from me."

"Don't look at it like that," Seth said, reaching out and placing his hand on Scott's arm. "You've been wonderful to her and I can't tell you how much we appreciate that, but she's not your responsibility."

He jerked several feet back from the table, dislodging Seth's hand. "That's what you say, and I don't doubt that the legal system will agree with you. But to me, and to Rachel, I'm her father, and nothing on earth's going to change that. How can you even think of doing this to her, right after losing her mother?"

That scored a direct hit. Seth's calm faltered and he didn't have an answer for a long few moments. "She's all we have left," he said, his voice a raw plea. "Don't you understand?"

His insides boiling, he stared right back at the man he most respected in the whole universe. "Yes, I understand. You're putting your own needs ahead of Rachel's, and I think it stinks."

"She'll adjust, and we'll take wonderful care of her!"

Scott thought about making a nasty remark, about asking if they'd raise Rachel to be as lacking in self-esteem as Francine had been. But he honestly couldn't imagine that happening to Rachel, and he seriously doubted if Francine's problems had been Seth and Annabelle's fault to begin with.

Rachel would be happy with them in the long run, he knew. She'd miss Scott, just like she'd miss her mother, but he couldn't prevent either of those things from happening. He had no power here, and if he tried to fight them, he'd be completely cut off from her. All he could do was cooperate and work with Seth and Annabelle for Rachel's benefit. "I don't agree with your decision, but you've got all the cards. I'll do whatever you say."

Seth sighed in profound relief. "Thank you, Scott. We both thank you. We don't want to be at odds with you."

They just wanted their own way, and damn it to hell, they were going to get it. "I don't want that, either. Now, how is this going to work?"

"We think it's best for Rachel to move in here right away. She's upset already, and there's no point in making her think things are going back to the way they were."

He nodded. He hadn't really expected anything different. "Do you want me to pack up her room?"

Seth shook his head. "That's not necessary. After Rachel starts back with the baby-sitter, Annabelle can sort through her things and decide what to move."

So, his house wasn't really going to be his, either. But then, it had been Francine's, so it didn't belong to him. "How soon do you want me out of the house?"

The question seemed to surprise Seth. "We hadn't thought about the house. Would you want to buy it? We'd sell it to you for a good price, as a gesture of appreciation."

He steeled himself to answer politely. "No. I don't have any need for such a large place." Nor did he want the memories. Memories of happier times weren't always a blessing. Sometimes they just prolonged the pain.

"You're right, it is big for one person. In that case, I suppose we'll sell it eventually, but you shouldn't feel rushed to find somewhere else."

Seth's generosity was apparently like most people's - since he and Annabelle didn't want the house for themselves, Scott was welcome to use it temporarily. He wanted to point that out somehow, to make Seth see that he was treating Scott like cast-off furniture. But it wouldn't change a thing, so why bother?

Right then, Rachel ran into the room and threw herself into Scott's arms. "Daddy, Daddy! Is it true that Mommy won't ever come back?"

He buried his face in her white-blond hair. "I'm afraid so, sweetie. But not on purpose. She loved you very much, and she wouldn't go away if she could help it."

"I know that," she said in the disgusted voice she used when adults said overly sentimental things to her. "But Grandma says I have to wear dress-up clothes today, and Mommy never makes me except when we go to church."

For tomboy Rachel, wearing dress-up clothes was a trial. "Today's a little like going to church, honey."

You remember I told you about how we're going to have a funeral, to say goodbye to Mommy?" She nodded, her lower lip quivering slightly. "Well, we're getting ready for that today, and Grandma wants you to look pretty when we go places to talk about it." That didn't completely do the trick, so he added, "See? I got dressed up, too, and you know how much I hate wearing ties."

She nodded again, smiling now. "I know. You don't like being choked," she said, quoting his words back at him. With a put-on sigh, she turned to look at Annabelle. "If Daddy has to suffer, I'll suffer, too."

Scott almost felt a little sorry for Seth and Annabelle. They had a tough road ahead of them trying to make Rachel forget that he was her father.

Carolyn went to work at the usual time on Monday. The parking lot was empty and a sign posted on the door: "Due to Francine Worthington Adams's death, Adams-Worthington will be closed until Thursday."

Thursday? How was she going to survive until Thursday without work to keep her mind occupied? Then she remembered that her access card got her into the building on weekends and evenings, when the company was officially closed. Maybe it would work today, also.

It did. On the way to her office, she stopped at the soda machine. It wasn't worth making coffee for just her, and she definitely needed some caffeine to jump-start her brain.

She worked quietly and fairly efficiently for fifteen minutes or so, until Phillip dropped into her guest chair. "Are you in the running for a prize? Most hours worked by a new hire or something?"

She spun to face him. "Not that I know of. But I was already here - it seemed silly to turn right around and go home. I guess everyone else did, though."

He shrugged. "Looks like it. I only came in because I saw your car. Did you hear that Francine died at Bill's apartment?"

Bill's apartment was in the same complex as both hers and Phillip's. "No! What was she doing over there?"

Another shrug. "Who knows? I guess they were pretty good friends - kind of amazing given how different they were."

"Do you suppose that was because of him being George's brother?"

"I assume so, although it's hard to imagine him doing anything that didn't immediately benefit him."

She nodded in agreement. "Did you hear any details about what happened?" She didn't want to mention any of what Scott told her. Phillip knew she didn't have many sources around the company for information.

"A few," he said, looking a little guilty. "I - um - well, Janis and I had talked about seeing a movie last night, and she told me what she knew when she canceled." Janis was Francine's assistant.

Before he could go on, Carolyn said, "I didn't know you two were dating - that's great." She meant it. Janis seemed very nice, and besides, if he were busy with her, he wouldn't keep asking Carolyn on dates.

He glanced at the empty white board on the opposite wall, then down at the floor. "We've gone out a couple of times, I guess," he mumbled. He went back to the original subject, and they discussed

Francine's death and what it meant for both Rachel and Scott until Carolyn was ready to scream.

Finally, she asked, "So, are you going to stick around and work today?"

He shook his head. "No way. I'm going to head out to the coast and see what's happening - maybe stay overnight." Interestingly, he didn't invite her to go with him, like he'd done a few weeks ago. Maybe he already had a date.

"Okay. Have fun." As he left, she added, "If you see Janis, say hi from me." One of his clown-size shoes caught on the door frame, sending him out her door in a tangle of gangly limbs.

As glad as she was that he'd turned his attention elsewhere, she had to admit she envied Janis. Phillip was a sweet guy and nothing if not earnest.

She couldn't say the same about Scott. And worse, she knew exactly why he'd stopped by her apartment last night. It wasn't at all the same reason as why she let him in.

Bill worked the room, letting all the young lovelies comfort him. Sure, having Francine die in his apartment had been a bummer, but nothing he couldn't deal with. Imagine them thinking he'd feel guilty or responsible for it! Still, it might have messed things up pretty permanently with Tanya, so he was glad to have volunteers to replace her.

He avoided spending much time with the guys today. Sooner or later, most of them would give him a knowing look and ask if it was true that Francine had been half-naked at the time she collapsed. If he could figure out which one of the slimes had made up that story, he'd make up a few of his own juicy rumors to pass around.

He glanced around the Worthingtons' living room and sun room every few minutes, checking to see where all the major players were. Annabelle was in major hostess mode, despite the fact that this gathering was in honor of her only daughter's death. Seth seemed to be splitting his time between being host and worrying about Annabelle and Rachel. Rachel was glued to Scott except when Seth or Annabelle took her away temporarily. And whenever *that* happened, Scott made a beeline for Carolyn.

No one else even seemed to notice and Bill found that curious. He guessed, though, that he might not have been so attuned to it if Francine hadn't told him about her suspicions - and given him that card. He kept wondering what to do with it, but he wasn't going to make a move until he was ready.

When Rachel dragged Scott away from Carolyn the next time, he sidled up to Carolyn and said, "Hey, I need comforting, too. I was very fond of my sister-in-law and watching her die was traumatic."

She gave him one of her I'm-disgusted-you're-alive looks. "I'm sure you'll find plenty of women who'll buy that garbage."

"It's not garbage," he said, defending himself for no logical reason. "I'm a human being just like you, and I have feelings."

Why he'd thought she might show a little sympathy was beyond him. Still as stiff as an ice sculpture, she said, "You'll have to excuse me. I'm feeling sick." She walked away.

Damn bitch! She'd be sorry for how she'd treated him, someday.

Carolyn wasn't surprised when she opened her apartment door that night and found Scott standing there.

She stepped back and let him in, knowing she'd soon have to set some limits.

He was a mass of pain tonight, she saw - understandable right after Francine's funeral like this. The situation with Rachel was eating him alive, too.

Before she could return to her chair, he wrapped his arms around her and cried out inarticulately. She hugged him back. "Scott, I'm so sorry. Today must have been terrible."

He nodded, the beginnings of his beard scratching at her cheek. "When I left tonight," he said, barely louder than a whisper, "Rachel threw a tantrum. I had to tell her she was going to live down there, and she said she wouldn't. She tried to run away and Seth had to stop her. She fought him so hard - I tried to help, but they wouldn't let me! Annabelle said to go right then, that Rachel would be okay." He gulped in some air. "How can they do that to her? Don't they see how much she needs me?"

His questions were rhetorical, but she tried to answer anyway. "Sometimes there isn't a good solution. Maybe this is one of those times."

He didn't respond, just held on to her tighter. Gradually, over the course of several minutes, he calmed down and she finally started to pull herself out of his arms. He resisted, and she decided that another few moments wouldn't hurt anything.

But they did. He wasn't simply a grief-stricken person seeking comfort anymore. He was a man - the only man who could make her want. One hand slipped down onto her hip and the other inched toward her breasts. He soothed the tender spots on her cheeks with gentle kisses, kisses she knew would soon reach her mouth.

She felt her muscles loosen and her body press against his in wordless invitation. She didn't care why he wanted her tonight - not even whether he truly wanted *her*. She'd waited for more than four years to feel like this again, and she wouldn't be gypped.

But if she let this happen, she'd be gypped in an even worse way. She shoved him away and said, "There are *some* limits, Scott, and this is one of them."

CHAPTER NINE

Scott staggered back a step and watched as Carolyn threw herself into her chair. "You're mad," he said, his voice wobbling between question and statement.

"You're darn right I'm mad." She glared up at him. "You're behaving like a schmuck and I've been excusing it because you're upset. But you've finally gone too far. I'm not going to bed with you because you miss Francine."

"That's not why!" he protested.

"Not because you're upset about Rachel, either - or even because you're horny." He opened his mouth, not sure what he was going to say, but she stopped him. "And don't insult my intelligence by saying that you care about me, either."

"But I do!"

"You don't treat someone you care about the way you've treated me." She barreled out of the chair and gave him a shove toward the door. "I've made all the excuses for you that I'm going to make. You go home now - or wherever else you want to go. You're not welcome here."

And one more time, he was all alone.

Carolyn made it through the whole day on Thursday without seeing Scott. He was at work, but she stayed in her office, and from what Phillip said, Scott stayed in his. Her doorbell didn't ring on Thursday night, either. Good.

Her reprieve ended on Friday morning. She arrived before most people, as was her habit. Not before Scott, though. He was sitting in her guest chair when she walked into her office. She had the childish urge to turn around and walk out, not coming back until she was sure he was gone.

Instead, she flicked on the lights and plunked into her desk chair. "Good morning." She'd be polite. This *was* a workplace, after all.

"What did you mean the other night?" He appeared tired, but neat and well-groomed, and no longer on the edge like he'd been earlier in the week.

"What, in particular, are you wondering about?" That sounded awfully stiff, but it was better than snottily defining the exact meaning of "You're not welcome here."

"You said something about the way I treated you."

"Oh, that. What I said was that you obviously don't care about me because of the way you've treated me. What don't you understand about that?" He wasn't going to try to pull the old standby, was he? The "gee, I didn't know that was important to you, I'll do better next time?" Maybe that was true sometimes, but not in this case.

A line appeared in the middle of his forehead. "But that makes it sound like I've treated you poorly."

She nodded. "You have. You treated me poorly four years ago, you've treated me poorly since I started work here a month and a half ago, and now you suddenly expect me to be there for you when you need it." He'd expected a little more than just plain being there, but she wouldn't belabor the point.

He shook his head, seemingly confused. "We broke up - and all I was trying to do was be professional..."

She almost laughed in his face. "Professional? Scott, I work for you - when was the last time you gave me even a word of direction?"

"You haven't needed any," he defended himself. "That's one of the reasons I hired you."

"And what were the *other* reasons?" she demanded. "Didn't you think you hurt me enough four years ago? Did you need to rub my nose in the fact that you were perfectly happy without me?" It probably wasn't smart to let him know how successful he'd been, but she was darn sick of this whole stupid situation.

"I wasn't hap - " His mouth slammed shut.

Could that actually be true? His horror now made her wonder. But before she could imagine how to respond, she heard voices at the other end of the hall. "You've got to go. Someone will walk by any second."

"So? As you pointed out a minute ago, you work for me."

"Well, we can't talk about personal issues in the office."

His jaw tight, he asked, "Where can we talk then? You threw me out of your apartment."

Anxiety jumped in her stomach. She had to get him to leave before anyone saw them talking! She couldn't stand trying to answer the inevitable questions that would raise. "I don't know. Your house?"

"It's not mine," he said bitterly. "But okay. Seven tonight?"

"Okay." She spun to face her computer and logged in. By watching his reflection in the monitor, she saw him stand there for another few seconds, then slowly turn and walk away.

She didn't know what he thought talking would accomplish. She *did* know it wasn't going to get him anything.

Bill hurried to get to the coffee machine before Scott slipped back into his office. "How're you doing?" he asked, not that he really gave a hoot.

Scott shrugged. "Okay. Thanks for asking." He finished pouring and took a couple of steps back toward his office.

"It's got to be tough - I mean, you and Francine were together a long time."

"Yeah," he agreed, his voice flat and dead sounding.

He wanted more of a reaction than that. "Such a shame you never got around to marrying her - she probably would have left you some stuff, maybe even some company stock."

"What I care about is losing her and Rachel - not the stupid house or a chunk of money." His expression turned superior. "You wouldn't understand." He stalked off, shutting his office door behind him.

But what Bill understood was how easily he could upset Scott's apple cart and how thoroughly he'd enjoy doing it.

Scott glanced around the living room, checking primarily for Rachel's messes. He and Francine were pretty neat as a rule. Rachel was the one they had to watch.

Time-out. He was the only person who lived in this house anymore, and that was only temporary. If he hadn't messed it up, it didn't need cleaning. And since he'd cleaned after Carolyn threw him out on Wednesday night, the place was fine.

Carolyn would arrive right on time, he knew. She'd always been punctual - so much so that he used to tease her whenever she was a couple of minutes late after their lunch time workout. Did she still do aerobics? Maybe he should start going to the athletic club again. He'd given it up so he could spend more time with his family, but that wasn't an issue now.

Even though he was expecting it, the doorbell gave him a start. He let her in and led the way to the living room. "Are you hungry? I got a take-and-bake pizza."

She sat in a wing chair halfway across the room from all the other furniture. "I doubt if I'll be here long enough to eat. I don't see what point there is in us talking."

"Well, if nothing else, we have to work together. It doesn't make sense for us to be at odds like this."

"We've been working together just fine. You ignore me, I ignore you, end of story."

"But I was only ignoring you because of Francine!"

That startled her. "She was that uncomfortable about you hiring me? You should have told me before I moved out here."

He sighed and briefly stared at the carpet. Should he tell her the truth? He had to. "I didn't tell her about us. She was freaked out enough that you were an attractive woman who'd be working with me."

Her blue-green eyes flashed in outrage. "You didn't tell her? Why not?"

Would she be able to understand Francine's weakness? "It was a mistake, I realize that. But at the time, I thought I was protecting her." He struggled to find the right words. "I was going to tell her the night Seth offered you the job. But when I got home, she was already worried about you working for me. I'd never had a woman in my group before, and not even Francine could feel insecure about Milly. Right off, she started talking about how pretty you were - "

"I'm not pretty, not like she was at least."

He knew better than to answer that comment. "She was like a lot of people, I guess, always finding fault with themselves. Anyway, when I told her I knew you before, she got really scared. Just the idea that we might have dated was too much - even being friends was pushing it."

"What did you tell her?" she asked, disapproving.

"I didn't out-and-out lie, but I guess that hardly matters. I said you'd been married back then, and that we'd been friends, but we hadn't had any contact since then and I didn't anticipate any in the future beyond working together."

"In other words, pretty much like we told everyone else." He nodded, relieved that she was being understanding. His relief was premature, as evidenced when she demanded, "How could you do that to the poor woman? Don't trust and honesty mean *anything* to you?"

"Of course they do! What I did was wrong, and believe me, I paid for it. It destroyed our relationship."

She scowled. "Aren't you being a little dramatic?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. It was like a wall suddenly popped up between us. I was trapped by the story I'd told her. I had to be really careful answering questions about back then, and I couldn't talk about what it was like to see you again. And I'd always been open about things before, so she knew something was wrong." He wouldn't mention the other more private ways their relationship had changed.

"Of course, you pigheadedly persisted in the pretense," she snorted. "It didn't matter how much she was being hurt by your lies."

"I was going to tell her!" he insisted. "On Sunday."

A disbelieving laugh bubbled out. "Yeah. Right. You say that now, but I know you better than that. Scott Richards doesn't admit he was wrong."

Her insistence on that point was insulting. What did she know about him, anyway? "I certainly do! In fact just to prove it, I'll tell you that I was wrong before."

Her mouth dropped open a couple of inches. "You admit you were wrong to give me that ultimatum

about leaving Tony?"

Where had she gotten *that* idea? "Of course not. What I was wrong about is when I told you it wouldn't be distracting for you to work at A-W. It's driven me crazy, knowing you were just down the hall all this time, and feeling like I couldn't even come talk to you."

She just stared at him, and her eyes were so wide open he thought they might pop right out. Or maybe that feeling of falling was coming from inside him. Being with her, even now when she was angry - and when he was angry, too, half-buried though it was - it was like nothing else had ever been.

"Why couldn't you talk to me?" she asked, the anger displaced by curiosity for now. "You talk to Phillip and the other guys."

"You're not one of the guys." How far did he dare to go? Could he admit that he'd been afraid? If he'd allowed himself to have any contact with her, he'd been afraid he'd be helpless to stay away from her. Like he was now. No, he wasn't ready to lay himself bare like that. "I felt guilty about deceiving Francine, and I kept trying to prove to myself that the past didn't matter. And as long as we didn't have any personal interaction, I felt like that was true." He'd *tried* to feel that way, but he'd known better.

She shook her head, smiling slightly. "And I thought you were being rude because you're still angry at me."

"Oh, no," he said, not clear exactly which part of her statement he meant to deny. "I'm sorry you thought that."

"It's okay." She'd relaxed considerably, but now she seemed about ready to jump up and leave.

"How about if I bake that pizza now? You're probably getting hungry." He hoped so. Or at least that she'd stay. This house was way too big for just him, and he had nothing to look forward to all weekend except work.

She shrugged. "I guess that would be okay."

"Would you like a beer?" he asked as he hurried into the kitchen to put the pizza in the oven. He'd had it on preheat since before she'd arrived.

She followed him into the kitchen. "Sure. Oh, this is nice. Plenty of room, but not so full of appliances that it feels like a laboratory."

"Francine likes - I mean, liked - to cook," he said, as he reached into the fridge and handed her a beer. The rest of his words died unspoken. It simply didn't feel right to talk about Francine casually like this.

"Did you buy this place together?" she asked, wandering over to look out the back window. He doubted she could even see the attached deck through the dark.

"No. She and George bought it when they first got married. In fact, I'll be moving out before long." He hadn't done anything about finding a place. He guessed he'd better start.

"Oh." Her voice was quiet and contemplative. "I guess that makes sense. I never really thought of you as being the ranch-house-in-the-suburbs type. Nor being into kids that much, either, but after seeing you with Rachel, I can see I was wrong about that part."

He wanted to interpret her words personally, to think she was wondering whether they had a future together. But Carolyn was more cautious than that and he knew it. She was simply making conversation

while their pizza baked, and the fact that she was willing to stay and eat didn't mean she'd totally changed her mind about him.

For now, he needed to be satisfied that she hadn't walked away.

CHAPTER TEN

"Princess, am I an idiot?" Carolyn asked after she got home.

Princess gazed at her worshipfully, but Carolyn knew the adoration was primarily due to the pepperoni smell coming from the small plastic bag in her hand. "Yes, I know. You want your treat and you'll get it."

She sat down and took out a piece of pepperoni, which she tore in thirds before feeding it to Princess. "The thing is, his story makes sense - in a completely idiotic way. I mean, Scott would think like that, that not talking to me would somehow make up for not telling Francine the truth."

Princess said "Mao" in response, reminding Carolyn to hurry up with the next bite.

"Okay, okay." She gave her some cheese this time. "And I'm not giving in, either," she added. "If he wants anything to develop, he's going to have to deal with four years ago - and he'd better have a darn good story."

The cheese was gone now, so Carolyn took out the other piece of pepperoni. "This is the last one," she cautioned, as though the cat might actually savor the food any more.

As Princess licked the food taste off Carolyn's fingers, Carolyn thought about something Scott had said that she hadn't questioned. He said it had driven him crazy for her to be down the hall and not go see her.

Was it possible there was more behind his sudden interest than just needing comfort? Might he still feel the same way he had all those years ago?

Bill rang the Worthingtons' doorbell on Saturday morning, just about the same time as he used to visit Francine. As he'd hoped, Annabelle answered the door. "Oh, hello, Bill." She didn't invite him in - big surprise. She'd always treated him like he smelled bad.

"Good morning, Annabelle," he said with one of his winning smiles. "I'm here to see Rachel."

She frowned prettily - although she'd better cut back on the frowning, if she didn't want to turn into a mass of wrinkles. She already looked ten years older than before Francine died. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said so insincerely it made his teeth hurt. "Rachel's having a bit of trouble adjusting to the sudden changes in her life, and we're not allowing her visitors right now."

"Not allowing her visitors?" he echoed. "Is that a fancy way of saying she's a prisoner, locked in her room?"

"Of course not," she said mildly, as though he hadn't just insulted her. "We simply feel she needs a few days to adjust, with as few reminders of her old life as possible. It's going to be very difficult for her, no matter what, but she can't possibly accept the necessary changes if she continues to see you and Scott all the time."

"You're not letting Scott see her, either?" That was almost unbelievable.

"It's not a case of not letting him see her. Seth talked it over with him, and he understands that she has to begin relating to us as parents. And this is only temporary. He'll begin to come to the house to see her soon." Grudgingly, she added, "If you'd like, I'm sure we can arrange some time for you and her, also. Eventually."

"Yes, please do that," he said. "I'd be failing in my duty to George if I didn't stay in contact with her."

Just then, a high-pitched voice squealed "Daddy!" and Rachel threw herself at his legs.

He bent down and picked her up, wincing when her flailing arms caught his midsection. "Hi, Rachel."

She stared at him in shock for a second, then began to kick. "You're not Daddy!" The kicking was joined by screams that he'd normally have assumed meant she was being abused at that very minute. Instead, he was the one being abused.

"Rachel, Rachel, please calm down," Annabelle said, not anywhere near loud enough to be heard mid-tantrum. To Bill, she said, "You may as well put her down. When this happens, she's completely out-of-control, and you're likely to get hurt."

He set her on her feet and she ran off, still screaming. He turned around and went back to his car. He hadn't signed up to spend time with a monster.

Scott was trying to get some work done when Bill sauntered in and shut the door. "Being your typical wussy yes-man these days, aren't you?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?" And what was Bill doing in the office on a Saturday? Nine to five on weekdays was usually too much to ask.

"I just came from seeing Rachel, and I've got to tell you, I'm shocked."

"You saw Rachel?" Seth and Annabelle were keeping him away, but they let Bill see her?

He nodded, lazily stretching out in one of Scott's guest chairs. "Not for long, but you know I always spend time with her on Saturdays." He propped his feet on the edge of Scott's desk. "I realize you don't have any control over what's happening - not having that little piece of paper you and Francine never bothered to get - but I have to say, I'd be doing some yelling, in your position."

Scott gripped the arms of his chair and demanded, "What do you mean?"

"The poor kid's out of her mind with grief, and as far as I can tell, all Seth and Annabelle are doing is hoping she'll get over it. I went to hug her, and she nearly killed me."

His first instinct was to race down there and see the situation for himself - and have it out with Seth, if he had to. But then he remembered who the reporter was. Bill would distort the truth or outright lie without a moment's consideration - and nothing he ever said or did would be for Scott's benefit. "Too bad she didn't succeed."

Bill looked at him for a long moment, then slowly smiled. "You know, I had you pegged wrong. I thought you couldn't act worth a damn, and here you've been acting the devoted father for - what - three years now? Must be a relief to get the little brat out of your hair - has to play havoc with your sex life, for one thing." He seemed to find that particularly funny and snorted to himself for quite a while.

Scott told himself not to respond. Bill knew that Scott cared about Rachel. Everyone knew that. Still, he

couldn't just let the words sit there, unchallenged. "It's not a relief. It's hell. And I'll have you know it's not my fault Francine and I weren't married. But we weren't, and Seth and Annabelle are doing what they think is best for Rachel. I respect them enough to do as they ask at this difficult time. I'd suggest you do the same."

Bill gracefully regained his feet and started to the door. "Typical wussy yes-man, as I said."

The door clicked shut behind Bill, leaving Scott staring at its solid mahogany-colored expanse. Was Bill right? Was he abandoning his responsibility to Rachel? Maybe if he put up a fight, he could be a more active part of her life. Maybe he could even continue to raise her.

Or maybe he'd anger Seth and Annabelle and lose all contact with her. That was what he was afraid of. He and Francine and Rachel had been a family, the only family he'd had for most of his life.

He had vague memories of happy times when he was a young kid - Rachel's age and a little older. But then his little sister Emily died in a pool accident and there were no more happy times. Not any. Not even when he conquered his fear of swimming and won medals at his high school swim meets. Not even when he was valedictorian of his graduating class. Not even when he had his choice between full academic and athletic college scholarships.

There hadn't been any happy times in college, either. He hadn't partied and was too serious to bother with the type of women who thought a bookworm was a fun challenge. Computers became his passion, and for years, he thought they'd always be number one.

Then he met Carolyn, and his life turned inside out. The week they spent together was one long blast of bliss, tempered only by the knowledge that they'd soon be parted. And Scott was enough of a realist to know, even in the middle of the most wonderful few days of his life, that he might never be with her again. That one time, he was willing to push aside his fears and pretend it would be the way they wanted it to be, but he knew it might not.

So, when she told him that Tony had begged for a second chance and that she'd agreed, he wasn't surprised. He was devastated, of course. He argued with her, he tried every possible way to change her mind - and he did plenty of his own begging. But she was firm. She had to prove to Tony that their relationship was doomed. She owed it to him.

But didn't she owe Scott anything? Hadn't she made the same promises of everlasting love that he had? Hadn't she promised him her life? Instead, she expected him to idly wait - to let someone else determine the path for his life again.

He wouldn't do that. Not for her, not for anyone. And days later, this job had dropped into his lap. At the time, its major pluses were distance from Carolyn and so much work to do that he wouldn't have a chance to breathe, much less miss her.

He managed to miss her, though. After a while, he decided he might not be so miserable if he got to know someone with real problems, so he arranged to meet Francine. A twenty-one-year-old widow with a baby must be worse off than he was.

She was lonely and lacking in self-esteem, but she and Rachel were just exactly what Scott needed. Francine felt comfortable with his lack of pretense, and Rachel liked the way he paid attention to her. As time went on, they became closer, and eventually, he realized he'd already started to build a life with them.

He and Francine never had the sheer ecstasy, in bed or out, which he'd had with Carolyn, but he didn't

have the misery, either. There was a partnership he could believe in. It wasn't too good to be true or too perfect to last.

It was damned good, though. And now it was gone, just as completely as what he'd had with Carolyn.

Carolyn was getting ready to quit for the day when Scott walked into her office. Before she said anything, he said, "I checked, and we're the only two people in the building."

She smiled. "That proves that we both need lives."

He nodded. "So how about going out to dinner?"

"That's not a good idea." He appeared ready to object, so she said, "Sit down for a minute."

"Okay, but I didn't mean anything - "

She shook her head. "I wasn't assuming that you did. The point is that, for most intents and purposes, you're a brand-new widower. People are going to notice what you do and whom you do it with. If we went out somewhere, chances are that someone from work would see us - or one of the Worthingtons' friends would, and either would be embarrassing."

"But I have to eat."

"Of course, but you don't have to appear in public like that, at least not this soon."

He shrugged. "So, come over, and we'll get take-out."

"Not tonight."

"Do you have a date?" he asked suspiciously.

She sighed. "The answer is no, but it's really none of your business."

"Then why not come over?" He sounded a lot like a spoiled child, not getting his way for the first time.

"Because I don't want to." That wasn't strictly true, so she added, "I get the feeling that you think our relationship is just going to pick up where it left off four years ago. You're wrong about that."

"No, I know things have changed, but we can still be friends."

"We haven't been friends in four years. If you'd like us to be friends again - that's okay with me, but we've got some ground to cover first."

He seemed mystified. "What kind of ground?"

"I'm talking about dealing with this anger - every time we talk, I feel like strangling you for the way you hurt me. And if I'm reading you right, you feel pretty much the same about me." Her hands really were itching to close around his neck...

"It doesn't have to be that way."

She was glad he didn't bother denying how he felt. "You're right. If we talk about what happened - and why - hopefully we can resolve our differences."

He made a face like he was being forced to eat parsnips, then finally shrugged. "Okay. If that's what it'll

take. But if we can't go out to dinner, I can't go to your place and you won't come to the house for take-out, when are we going to talk?"

She guessed it was time to bury the hatchet enough to let him back into her apartment. "Come over tomorrow afternoon. We'll talk for a while, and if we feel like it, we can cook dinner together."

His response was one of his broad grins - the kind that made her toes dig into the carpet. How on earth was she going to resist him for long?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Scott didn't know what Carolyn thought they'd accomplish by rehashing the past. Where the heck did her anger come from, anyway? She said he'd hurt her - well, what did she think she'd done to him? But what was done was done, and personally, he was ready to forgive and forget.

He still wasn't sleeping well, so he got up early again on Sunday. He spent a few hours at work, then headed to the athletic club for a long swim. It was Family Swim time, though, and he almost turned right around and walked out. He'd brought Rachel here often, and to see the other fathers here with their children was heart-wrenching.

He might as well get used to it. He'd be reminded of Rachel a thousand times a day for the next who-knows-how-many years, and there was no way to keep it from happening. He'd gone through it before, with Emily, and though it never got easy, it got more bearable with time.

At least Rachel was still alive, and he'd be able to see her once in a while. He trusted Seth's word on that, and the logical part of his mind understood that it was probably better for her to get used to him not being her daddy all at once.

His lane in the pool kept being encroached on by families and other swimmers, so he wasn't able to swim as single-mindedly as usual. That wasn't all bad, he discovered, since he got winded rather quickly and was grateful for the interruptions. He definitely needed to make time for this more frequently. He'd have to see if they had open pool time at noon on weekdays.

He went to Carolyn's after his swim. She greeted him nervously, increasing his own anxiety level. Was this conversation going to be as bad as all that? He said, "I have to admit that I don't really know what we have to talk about."

She nodded seriously. "I expected that. And maybe I'm wrong, but it seems to me like you're thinking that what we had together four years ago was pretty great, and that you'd like some more of that." She paused, waiting for him to respond.

Feeling a little defensive, he said, "I wouldn't put it like that, but I guess it's fairly accurate."

"I feel the same way," she said, blushing. "The problem is what happened at the end, and how I ended up throwing away my whole life for something that never materialized."

"You threw away your whole life?" he questioned, while at the same time he was in shock at what she'd said before that. She wanted their relationship to work, too!

"Yeah. Remember my interview, when I said how I lived in Providence and all?"

"Sure. You moved there after your divorce, I guess." Wait - was she saying? "You didn't divorce Tony back then, did you?"

She nodded. "It didn't take long to prove that our marriage was never going to work. He's a great guy and I'll always love him, but not the way - " She suddenly turned a much brighter red. "Our relationship was always more friendship than anything else."

"Then why didn't you call? I told you to call." He hadn't believed she would, and in fact, he'd said it with such a bitter taste in his mouth that he could still taste it.

Her glare challenged him. "It was a little difficult to call someone who'd changed jobs and left no forwarding address or phone number."

A pit opened up in his stomach. He remembered the dozen or so change-of-address cards he'd started to address to her, and how once he'd actually gone so far as to put a stamp on one of them. But they'd all been ripped up into tiny pieces and thrown away. He'd known he'd spend his life waiting to hear from her, if he sent her one.

She went on, "I didn't call Marty. I thought he might have your address, but after the last few times we talked, I figured you'd made it pretty clear you didn't want to hear from me."

"He would have given it to you," he said, feeling hollow inside. Suddenly, he wasn't so sure. "But maybe not. He'd gotten burned real bad a few times himself, and he was the one who pushed the idea of me getting a fresh start by taking this job."

"I called you the night Tony finally gave up," she said softly. "The phone at your apartment was disconnected, but I thought maybe you'd changed the number so I couldn't call. You weren't listed, so I tried ITI - it wasn't much after six Chicago-time, and I thought you might still be there. There were a few guys working and they were really nice about it, but they didn't remember where you'd gone. Just that it had sounded like a good job, but for a company they'd never heard of."

He groaned. "I'm so sorry. I wanted to let you know, but - " Did he dare admit how scared he'd been of giving himself that little bit of hope? "I thought it would be less painful that way. To know that it was over."

He expected her to be angry, or at least disgusted, by his weakness. Instead, she nodded. "I understand."

"But you still went ahead with the divorce?" he questioned. When she nodded, he asked, "Why? Wouldn't Tony let you stay?" But the real question was how could Tony have let her go?

She shifted positions, and he saw for the first time that a cat was sharing the chair with her. "I'm sure he would have, if I'd asked," she said. "But it wouldn't have been fair, to either of us. Our marriage was over."

His throat dried. She was telling him she'd been alone for the past four years - because of him! "How awful. No wonder you're angry."

A smile came and went so quickly on her face that he wasn't totally sure he hadn't imagined it. "That's part of it, I admit, but not the major part."

"What is?" What had he done that could possibly be worse?

"The way you were the last few times we talked. The way you wouldn't listen to me - wouldn't trust me." She leaned forward urgently. "We were in love, Scott. You'd already demanded that I walk away from my whole previous life, and I'd agreed. Why couldn't you be just a little bit patient? Why did it all have to be your way?"

"You went back to your husband!" The words burst out without conscious thought, but he wouldn't have changed them. That's what she'd done.

"Temporarily," she insisted. "I knew it wasn't going to work, but I had to make him see that. After ten years together, I owed him that much."

"Didn't you owe me something, too?" Like fidelity? But he couldn't say that out loud. She'd been a married woman, and he knew darn well that what they'd done together was wrong.

Her eyes were full of thunder and lightning. "I promised you my life, my heart and my soul, Scott. All I gave Tony was a little time and a kind of love that didn't take away from my love for you." She jerked to her feet and strode to the sliding glass doors. Her back stiff toward him, she said, "I think you should go. I don't want to be hateful, but I can't help it."

Seeing her pain made the hurt inside him begin to throb. He crossed the room and stood only inches behind her. "You're being honest and you're right. This is important to talk about."

She spun to face him and asked, "You really think that? You don't think I'm just throwing up roadblocks?"

He shook his head. "You're not throwing up roadblocks. You're getting rid of them."

She grinned and threw her arms around him. He reciprocated.

Bill couldn't believe what a rotten parking spot he'd gotten stuck with. It was way out near the street, and not even in the right part of the lot for his building. He ought to complain again about the lack of assigned parking spaces. Last time, management had given him some song-and-dance about how they couldn't do that anymore because so many renters had two or more cars. Too damn bad was his reaction. Assign every apartment one space, and at least some people would be happy with where they parked.

As he hiked toward his apartment, he noticed a familiar car. He checked it out, and it definitely was Scott's car - nobody else would have that combination of a totally filthy outside and a neat inside. Well, well, well! So Scott was visiting Carolyn today, was he?

He could be somewhere else, Bill reminded himself. Other A-W employees lived here, after all, and heck, the guy probably needed to find himself an apartment, too. But the thought that he was at Carolyn's was too delicious to ignore. He had to check it out.

He slipped the garlic he'd just bought at the store out of the grocery bag and into his pocket, then rang her doorbell. She answered after a minute, looking a bit flustered and mused. Interesting. She stood right in the doorway, clearly not thrilled to see him. "Hello, Bill."

He smiled as innocently as he could manage. "Sorry to bother you, but I just did the stupidest thing. I forgot to buy garlic when I was at the grocery, and I've got a guest coming pretty soon, so I don't really have time to make another trip. Do you by chance have a clove or two I could have?"

She sighed and said, "Sure. Wait right there, I'll get it."

The second she turned away from the door, he stepped inside and followed her toward the kitchen. "Oh, hello, Scott," he said casually when he caught sight of him.

"Hello," Scott replied, looking exactly like he'd been caught somewhere he shouldn't be. Now, why would that be?

Off-handedly, Bill added, "You know, I keep forgetting you two knew each other before. It must be great to have an old friend nearby at a time like this."

Scott nodded, a little more at ease now that Bill had given him a way off the hook he was on. "It sure is. Carolyn's being super."

Carolyn came toward him then, garlic in her extended hand. And surprise, surprise - she was blushing. "Here you go, Bill."

"Thanks a lot," he said. "I'll pay you back."

"No need," she replied, politely herding him toward the door.

"Oh, but I insist," he said as the door closed behind him.

Of course, she wasn't going to like the way he paid her back, but that was her problem.

Carolyn sagged against her apartment door and asked, "Was that as much of a disaster as I think it was?"

"You mean because Bill saw me here?" he asked. She nodded and he said, "He'd like to sabotage me, for sure, but I don't see how this would help his cause."

Was Scott blind or just completely oblivious? "It's the same thing as going out to dinner, except probably worse. A lot of people wouldn't think twice about it, but the way Bill's mind works, he probably figures we're sleeping together."

"But it sounded like he approved - " He suddenly shook his head, all confusion gone. "All by itself, that's a dead giveaway. Anything he thinks is a good idea has got to be terrible for me."

"Should you leave now?" she wondered, then immediately answered her own question. "No, because if he saw that, he'd be sure he'd been right. You should stay for a while - long enough for a leisurely dinner, but not too long."

"But how much trouble could he cause? Is it worth worrying about?"

She returned to her chair, momentarily distracted by the way Princess was watching Scott - as though he were an exotic animal at the zoo. Well, she guessed a man visiting her apartment for more than five minutes qualified as an unusual sight. In answer to his questions, she said, "I don't really know Bill that well, so I can't say how far he'd go. But if he wanted to, he could tell Seth that he'd seen us together, and that would bring up the whole question of our relationship before. And it's not far from there to making up stories about how I came to work at A-W so we could start up our affair again..."

His eyes suddenly got huge. "Oh, God. You don't suppose - " He bent forward from the waist, head resting on his hands. Eventually he sat back and said dully, "Francine took your card out of my dresser last weekend. Our pictures and my ring were with it."

The only card she could think of was the one she'd stuck in Scott's luggage when he left Rhode Island four years ago. "You kept that card?"

He shrugged a little defensively. "I'm not sure why, exactly. And I meant to throw them out when I moved in with her..."

"But I thought she didn't know about us! Isn't that what you said the other night?"

"I said I didn't tell her - and she never said anything about taking the card, but I noticed it missing right before Bill called about her allergy attack." Awkwardly, he added, "She was really mad at me that morning, and I think she must have taken it while I was asleep."

Something didn't make sense. "You say she 'took' it, not she 'found' it. She knew it was there?"

He nodded. "She saw me put it away when I moved in. I didn't say what it was, but - well, I don't have any other keepsakes or anything, so it was noticeable."

"It sat there for three years and she never looked at it? I find that hard to believe!" She was fairly sure she wouldn't have shown similar restraint.

"She would have said something about it, if she had," he said stubbornly. "But that's neither here nor there. The thing I'm wondering about is why she went over to Bill's that morning. She almost never went there, and she had to have known he'd have somebody there on a Sunday morning."

Carolyn would expect that herself, and she hadn't known Bill for several years, as Francine had. "So you think she took the card to him? But why?"

He shrugged and shook his head. "Beats me - except I know she talked about stuff with him that she wouldn't talk about with anybody else. I never could see why, and it drove me nuts, because I've known all along he was just itching for a chance to take me down. I was always afraid she'd tell him something that she thought wasn't important and then have him turn it into a huge deal. The only good thing is that Seth can't stand the guy. He wouldn't listen to him if he had a choice."

She thought of Bill holding that very special card in his hands and wished she'd resisted the urge to give it to Scott in the first place. Why had she thought she needed to remind him of how much she loved him?

The irony was that it hadn't done any good. Scott might have kept it all this time, but he obviously hadn't understood how she felt.

He didn't now, either. But still, that card might be their downfall.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Scott tried to believe that he and Carolyn were overreacting. They didn't know for sure that Bill had the card, after all, although Scott had looked in Francine's things this past week and not found it. Of course, even if Bill didn't have it, Francine might still have told him about it.

The card wouldn't pose a huge problem work-wise if Francine's father weren't also the CEO of Adams-Worthington. But as it was, Seth would interpret it as proof that his daughter's fiancé had at the very least been guilty of an enormous lack of judgment. He would no longer trust Scott to be Chief Designer of A-W's products, and he'd have no use for Carolyn, either.

Possibly even worse than both of them losing their jobs was the effect it would have on Scott's relationship with Rachel. He had no legal standing with her, so was dependent on remaining in Seth and Annabelle's good graces in order to stay in contact with her.

It really seemed like they should do something to salvage the situation. Carolyn was apparently thinking along those same lines, because she asked, "Would it help any if I gave notice right away?"

"I don't see how," he said, not adding that the thought made his stomach tighten up into an impossible

knot. "I'm busy hoping that Bill doesn't know and that we can keep him from finding out."

"We'd better not see each other any more, then," she said, and he hoped it wasn't his imagination that made him hear regret in her voice.

"No!" The word was ripped from deep inside. He took a deep breath and said, "Carolyn, I tried that already. It made me miserable and didn't accomplish a thing. I'll do my best to be discreet about it, but unless you absolutely refuse, I'm going to spend a lot of time with you."

Her forehead wrinkled in concern. "But if Seth ever hears about the past - or even if he just thinks you're not mourning Francine for long enough - "

He nodded. "I know. But I already lost four years I could have spent with you, and Francine's death makes me even more aware of how precious that is." What if Carolyn had been the one who died? He'd have never had another chance with her.

The intensity of her gaze made him realize she was hearing the things he wasn't able to say to her out loud, as well as the words he could say. She put her hand on top of his and said seriously, "Scott, we haven't resolved everything yet. Please don't forget that."

"I won't," he promised. "But as long as we're both willing, we can do it eventually. And as long as we're together, nothing Bill or Seth can do will destroy us." He believed that, but at the same time he hoped they'd never be tested.

She smiled shakily, her eyes wet with unshed tears. "I hope you're right. I want this, very much."

They were the sweetest words he'd heard in four years.

Carolyn hadn't planned to jump right back into a relationship with Scott. Eventually, maybe, after they dealt with the past and she could feel confident that she wasn't opening herself up for the same kind of pain all over again. But a week after Francine's death? No way.

Yet that was exactly what was happening, and this potential threat from Bill only made her chances of getting hurt worse. Scott talked a good story about not wasting any more of his life without her, but she knew all too well what would happen if he had to choose between her and staying in contact with Rachel.

Besides, Francine hadn't been gone long enough for him to know what he was doing. He was lonely and grief-stricken and didn't want to deal with either. He wanted a nice easy fix, and what could be better than an old lover waiting in the wings?

Reminding herself that she was the only person in this couple with her best interests at heart, she broke eye contact with him and stood up. "I thought we'd have big salads with chicken strips and rolls for dinner. Is that okay?"

"Sure," he said, just distractedly enough that she figured he'd agree to virtually anything. He followed her into the kitchen. "What should I do?"

She put the oven on Preheat, noticing for the first time how small her kitchen really was. His presence filled the room, and it was only a matter of time before he made a move. "You could open the wine," she said with sudden inspiration. "But after that, this is really more a one-person kitchen, and there's not very much to do, anyway."

He smiled, and she had to wonder if the oven was really heating up as fast as it felt like. "Where's the corkscrew?"

She pulled out the appropriate drawer and started to reach for it, but his hand was already there. She grabbed her hand back and gestured at a cupboard. "Wine glasses." He opened the cupboard and paused, and she realized he was looking at the cheap green wineglasses they'd bought together. "There are some nicer ones on the same shelf."

But the green ones were what he brought out. "These are just perfect."

Was his voice always that silky? Did it always make her feel like the universe consisted of just the two of them? She blinked several times, trying to bring the world back into focus again. When that failed, she grabbed the wine out of the refrigerator and escaped with it to her butcher-block table.

He was right behind her again, but somehow he didn't ever quite touch her. She wished he would. It would be easier to resist a touch than this force field.

But then his hand brushed hers as he took the wine bottle from her, and she changed her mind. No, she'd be a goner if he touched her for real.

While he was busy opening the bottle, she hurried back to the kitchen and bustled around, trying to forget who he was and how he made her feel. She got the rolls ready for baking and started assembling ingredients for their salads, but it was no use. No amount of imagination could turn Scott into a simple platonic friend.

And suddenly, he wasn't a safe ten feet away. He was next to her, handing her a glass of wine. She took it, and because she wasn't anywhere near as strong as she needed to be, she looked right at him.

"To us," he said, clinking glasses lightly.

She couldn't drink to that! It was the equivalent of saying, "Here I am. Take what you want." Instead, she offered her own toast, "To making that possible."

He looked quizzically at her. "I didn't forget what you said before."

"I'm in danger of doing that," she admitted, then slipped past him to sit at the table. He joined her, still not really understanding - and still way too attractive. "Scott, I've been alone for four years. You can't begin to comprehend how much I want our relationship to work, how much I want what we thought we were going to have back then. But I can't just believe it's going to happen this time. I have to see it first - and I have to learn to trust you all over again."

He nodded. "I see that, and I think I maybe need that, too."

Why would he? But that was the cynical part of her brain asking, and she pushed the question aside. The fact that he'd gone directly from their relationship into one with Francine didn't mean that he didn't have scars. "I don't think you understand what that means, Scott. It means that we can't go to bed yet."

He set his wineglass on the table with a clunk. "That's not why I'm here."

"I'm not saying that it is," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "But it's a natural part of us being together and important to avoid." She couldn't leave it at that, though, so she added, "Just for now."

"How long is 'for now?'" he asked, intensely watching her face.

"I don't know." She couldn't catch her breath enough to think. "Maybe - " No, she wasn't going to back down from this. It was crucial to maintain some sort of control over herself, so she'd be able to pick up the pieces if it all fell apart again. But she knew her control wouldn't last very long. "Not long," she finally murmured.

He slipped his hand into hers and interlaced fingers. "Even one day is a very long time, Carolyn."

Something sizzled inside her, a feeling that was a dim echo of what she knew it would be like to make love with him. The sizzle turned into a yearning that grew and grew until she knew that "not long" would turn out to be less than five minutes.

And just as she began to form the words of surrender in her mind, he carefully released her hand and picked up his wineglass. "But I'll wait. And I'll offer another toast - to us, and to making our being together possible."

She clinked glasses and took a symbolic sip of wine, but instead of feeling relieved at her close call, she felt deprived.

The answering machine was flashing when Scott got home. He pressed the button and heard Annabelle's voice, "Hello, Scott dear. This is Annabelle. Would you give me a call tonight, if possible? And if you think of it, you might record a new message. Hearing Francine's voice gave me a start."

He glanced at the clock, glad that it was still early. She'd probably tried him at the office, too, and he wouldn't want to have to explain where he'd been. He hit the speed-dial button and when she answered, he said, "This is Scott. I got your message, and thanks for reminding me about the answering machine. I'll take care of it tonight."

"How are you, dear? I know you must be very lonely."

"I'm okay," he said. There was no point telling her how much he missed Rachel, and how he resented them taking her away from him. Still, he had to ask, "How's Rachel?"

"Better," Annabelle said with an audible sigh. "That's really why I called. I'm going to try taking her to Linda's tomorrow and see how that goes. I've been doing some reading, and they say it's best for children to return to their normal routines as soon as possible."

"That sounds reasonable." But Rachel's normal routine was here, at this house, with him taking her to Linda's in the morning.

"I don't think I'll leave her there all day, but still, I should have a couple of hours to pack up some of her things, if that's convenient with you."

What if it wasn't convenient with him? But he didn't ask. He'd promised himself he'd cooperate as much as was humanly possible. "Certainly. Do you have a key to the house? If not, I can wait and give you one before I leave for the office."

"That's not going to disrupt your day, is it? Because I could stop by the office and pick one up, if you'd rather - or even wait for another day or two."

There was no point in putting it off. Rachel was gone and holding on to her things another few days wouldn't change that. "No, that'll be fine. I can use the time to start sorting through things. I'll be moving to an apartment before long." Did he dare to hope that he and Carolyn might be able to live together that soon?

Annabelle sounded momentarily flustered. "Oh, I suppose you will. I hadn't really thought about that." Before he responded to that in his mind, she added, "There's another reason I called, Scott. Rachel's been asking to see you, and I told her that I'd invite you to dinner this week."

Quickly, as though she'd change her mind if he gave her a chance, he asked, "When?"

"Would tomorrow be too soon? I know it's not much notice, and if you're busy, any other night would do. But she's having such a hard time right now, and she's really being very good about everything..."

"Tomorrow's fine."

"Oh, good." She sounded relieved. "I know that things are a little tense now between you and Seth, but Rachel's the one we have to be most concerned with."

"I agree," he said, before she had a chance to make any more excuses. "And I don't mean to be disrespectful, but have you talked this dinner idea over with Seth? I got the impression that it would be a good deal longer than this before I was allowed any time with Rachel."

"This is just dinner, Scott. With Rachel, Seth, and myself. What he was talking about before is - well, more like visitation, I guess - where you'd be alone with her and maybe even go out for a drive."

And that's what he was being so damn cooperative to get? When Seth had talked about setting up a schedule for seeing Rachel, he'd imagined overnight visits - maybe taking her on trips sometimes. Like a non-custodial father. Like he deserved.

But no matter what he deserved, this was all he was going to get. Resigned to that, he said, "Be sure to let me know what time."

When the doorbell rang on Monday evening, Carolyn looked at her watch. It seemed early for Scott to be back from seeing Rachel. She hoped nothing had gone wrong.

But Scott wasn't standing at her door. Bill was.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was a little difficult to eat dinner with a four-year-old plastered to him, but Scott managed. He loved every second of it, in fact.

Rachel was so happy to see him that he regretted even thinking nasty thoughts about Seth and Annabelle. They had invited him here tonight, and that was the most important thing.

She was full of important events to tell him about - what she and her dolls had been up to, places Grandma had taken her, things Grandpa and she had done. She told him three times that Linda had made a clown cake today, and that she'd gotten to sit in the "big" chair at lunch, which he knew was used only on birthdays. He made a mental note to call Linda tonight, to thank her for everything she'd done over the years and for helping Rachel through this transition, too. He'd certainly never expected day-care to be so caring and individualized to the child's needs.

Rachel also had a list of about a hundred things she wanted to do with Scott tonight, and the list seemed to be growing exponentially. If they were able to get to all of them by the time she turned eighteen, they'd be doing well! He wouldn't be here anywhere near that long, of course.

Annabelle told him this morning that she and Seth had agreed he could stay and put Rachel to bed and

read her a story tonight. They thought that might ease the trauma of having him leave.

He hoped so. He was already dreading a repeat of the scene last time.

Bill walked into Carolyn's apartment while she stared at him, then reached back and closed the door. "Thanks for being so welcoming, sweet cheeks. Did you get the garlic I left in your office?"

"That's not my name," she said, the blush that had inspired his nickname turning her cheeks scarlet.

He continued into the apartment and grabbed the recliner. He might as well be comfortable. "Course not, but you have to agree it's a great name for you. Every time you turn around, those sweet cheeks of yours are bright red. It always makes me wonder whether you're the same color all over."

Her blush intensified. "Is that why you're here? To see me blush?"

He grinned lazily at her. "I want to talk to you and lover boy. Get him over here." He'd checked the parking lot thoroughly just a few minutes ago, wanting to make sure Scott wasn't already here. It would be much more satisfying this way.

"I don't know who you mean," she said firmly, but he saw the telltale discomfort of a truthful person trying to lie.

"You don't?" He screwed up his face, making himself look confused. "I guess I must have misinterpreted something. I guess you were talking about work when you wrote, 'every second we're apart will seem like hours, and I won't ever be myself again until we're reunited. Love with you is all I hoped it would be - and so much more. The rest of our lives will be truly spectacular. I can't wait!'" He relaxed into her recliner and waited for her reaction. He bet it would be a good one.

He was mostly wrong. She blushed even brighter, but all she said was, "Scott was right. Damn." Of course, damn was the equivalent of a string of curses for most people, so maybe her reaction wasn't so disappointing after all.

And then, she totally redeemed his faith in his perceptions. She leaned forward earnestly and said, "You're not going to believe this, Bill, but that ended more than four years ago. I came to work here because of the job, and Scott and I never even had a private conversation until after Francine died."

He chuckled. "You're right, sweet cheeks. I don't believe you - because it's not in my self-interest to do that. Personally, I don't care if you're a certifiable virgin - not unless I'm the one doing the certifying, and you sure as hell won't be a virgin when I'm through with you." A different scenario for tonight flitted through his head, but he rejected it. Getting a piece of that lovely ass wasn't going to get him any closer to his goals. "All I care about is how bad I can make this situation look, and I think that's pretty bad."

The blush was fading now, being replaced by a paleness that didn't seem real healthy. He guessed that made sense. "So, anyway," he continued, "what I want you to do right now is call lover boy on the phone and get him over here."

"I can't," she said, not like she was giving him a hard time, but like she really couldn't. "He went to the Worthingtons' for dinner with Rachel. I can't call him there."

He thought about demanding that she do it. What right did that usurper have to spend time with Rachel, when he - Rachel's uncle, for Christ's sake - wasn't given the same opportunity? But personally - not that he'd admit it to anyone - he was just as happy not to have to waste his time with the little brat. She was a responsibility he didn't like having - not unless he could also get his hands on her nice fat trust fund.

After a minute's thought, he grinned at Carolyn again. "That's cool. Leave him a message at home, and I'll wait for him here. Hand me the clicker, bring me a brew, and we'll have a nice cozy evening."

She complied silently, shooting him black looks from those great turquoise eyes. He thought about demanding that she come and sit on his lap, but in the end, he decided to reserve that power. He had the sense that she was a woman who could be pushed just so far.

"No, Daddy!" Rachel screamed as Scott tried to back out her bedroom door. "You didn't finish the book!"

"I told you I could only read a CHAPTER of this one. I would have read all of one of the others."

"The other books are for babies," she pouted. "Grandma and Grandpa think I'm a baby. They never read me anything good."

For half a second, he let himself feel superior. But then he remembered how he'd been hearing Grandma and Grandpa quoted all evening, and that it didn't matter, anyway. He wasn't Rachel's daddy anymore. Not really.

He sat back down in the rocking chair that Francine had been rocked in as a baby, and said, "Sweetie, we've talked about this before, and I know Grandma and Grandpa have talked about it with you, too. You live with them now, not with me, and as much as both of us would like it if things were how they used to be, that's not going to happen."

She climbed into his lap and they sat there rocking quietly for a minute. "Maybe you could live here, too. There's a gajillion bedrooms."

"I don't think that would work," he said, wishing life was that easy.

"Was I really bad?" she asked, her eyes already brimming with tears. "Is that why you and Mommy went away?"

"No, Rachel, of course not. You couldn't possibly be that bad. Mommy died because she ate something with peanuts in it, you remember that. And it was just an accident, and she wouldn't have died if she had a choice." He took a deep breath, hoping that this next part would sound more convincing this time. "And Grandma and Grandpa and I talked about it, and it's better for you to live with them now. Grandma has plenty of time to take care of you, and you'll live in this beautiful house."

"This house is a mouse-o-leem," she said, making a face.

"A mausoleum?" he questioned. "Where did you hear that word?"

She grinned. "Mommy said we were lucky we found you, or else we would have ended up living in this - this - mouse-thing."

Funny. He'd never heard Francine use that word, although it did sound like her attitude toward this house. The Worthingtons had moved here from a much more modest neighborhood in Beaverton when Francine was about ten, and Francine had never considered this her true home.

Pouting again, Rachel said, "I wish I could find you. Then I could live with you at home again."

He didn't have a clue about how to answer, but it turned out not to matter. Seth and Annabelle were standing in the open doorway. Annabelle came into the room, saying, "I'll bet you're getting awfully

sleepy, Rachel. Let's get you into bed."

"No!" She grabbed onto Scott like she had a million suction cups on her body. "Daddy's gonna stay."

Scott felt Seth's eyes on him from across the room. He stood and began peeling Rachel off him and onto the bed. "We talked about that, Rachel. I can't stay."

"Yes, you can!" she insisted, trying to grab onto him again, but he was bigger and stronger than she was, so she didn't stand a chance. "Yes, you can!"

He saw her working herself into a tantrum again and he forced himself to back away from the bed. "I'm going now, Rachel. I love you, but I have to go."

She started after him, but Annabelle was there and the little girl didn't make it off the bed. As he started down the hall, he heard Annabelle's voice, a little more shrill than usual, saying, "Now, Rachel. We talked about this. If you make such a fuss about Scott leaving, he won't be able to come again."

Rachel's never-ending shriek of "No - No - No - No - No!" followed him all the way downstairs and out the front door. His own shriek stayed inside, but it followed him all the way to the house that was no longer a home.

Carolyn wasn't a violent woman, but that might change if Bill's occupation of her living room continued much longer. The enforced togetherness was the worst part - she'd gone into the bedroom an hour ago, just to get away from him and the constant roar of the TV - and he'd actually followed her. He said it was because she might call Scott and plot secretly with him, but she knew it was just because he could get away with it.

So, she was back sitting on the couch, pretending to read a book that might as well be written in Swahili for all the good it was doing her. Bill was clicking through the channels, stopping for a few minutes every dozen or two clicks, but eventually making a disgusted sound and moving on. At least twice an hour, he asked, "How can you live without Pay-Per-View and the movie channels?"

And that was really the biggest problem. Scott hadn't called back yet, and Bill had been here for more than two hours. When they'd talked at work today, Scott had told her he was going to stay until Rachel was in bed - but kids that age went to bed long before ten o'clock, didn't they? She didn't want to think that Rachel was so much more important than she was that she didn't even rate a return call.

"Lover boy's blowing you off," Bill said abruptly, making her wonder if he truly knew what was going on inside her head. "You get on the phone again - and this time, you make it damn clear he'd better get over here on the double."

"Maybe he didn't check the machine when he got in," she said weakly. "Or maybe something went wrong and he's still down there."

"If he doesn't answer this time, you're calling down there. I'm not wasting my whole damn night on you two."

Well, it wasn't her fault he was here, in the first place! If he were a half-decent person, he wouldn't make a huge deal out of this. It wasn't as if she and Scott were hurting anyone.

Grumbling silently, she picked up the phone and punched in Scott's number. He had to answer this time! "Hello?" He did! But he sounded - awful was the only word.

"Hi, Scott. It's Carolyn."

"Oh, hi." Depression, that was what was wrong. He was depressed. "I was going to call..." His voice trailed off vaguely.

"That's okay," she reassured him. "I understand. But you've got to come over here right away."

"Oh, no. I can't. Not tonight." He spoke slowly, with a dullness she well remembered feeling. "I don't know if they'll let me see her again."

"Oh, dear." That sounded like something one of her great-aunts would say, but it was all she could think of that was appropriate.

"Get him over here!" Bill hissed at her. "Or give me the damn phone, and I'll do it!"

"I'm sorry, Scott. You really have to come. Bill's here, and he knows."

Scott stared at the receiver. What was Carolyn talking about? What did Bill know?

Oh, that.

Suddenly he knew why otherwise-fairly-normal people sometimes picked up assault weapons and started firing randomly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bill was sick of sitting around, waiting for Scott to show. Maybe he should have waited until the guy was already here - and busy having a good time. But hey, at least he'd be here soon.

Whump! That damn cat jumped on him again! It kept sneaking up on him and flying through the air, only to land claws-extended on a very sensitive portion of his anatomy. Must be a bitch, just like its owner. "I told you what would happen if you did that again!" he threatened and grabbed it by the neck and got ready to throw it across the room.

The cat had other ideas, and somehow squirmed around to bite him. He yowled and let go, and the cat ran off happily - but only across to the TV cart, where it sat watching him smugly. He glared at Carolyn. "Your cat bit me! I ought to sue!"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right. She didn't even draw blood. I would have."

He was tempted, he really was. Tell her to take her best shot, and if she ended up on the losing end of things - and there was no doubt about that - too damn bad. But jerk-wad Scott was on his way over now and it would be just Bill's luck to have him walk in while he was in the middle of teaching the bitch a lesson. "Sorry, sweet cheeks. As pleasant as it would be to roll around on the floor with you, I've got other business to attend to."

Good decision, since the doorbell rang right about then. He jumped up. "Keep your seat. I'll let lover boy in."

Scott didn't look good - kind of like he'd already gone a few rounds with some problem or another. He made a beeline for Carolyn, like she was the only thing between him and Hell. Bill thought about making him sit in the recliner to keep the pair separated, but it really wasn't worth chancing a physical fight for such a paltry gain. Besides, the recliner was the power seat, and he was the one with all the power

tonight!

He gave them a minute to get settled in and ready to listen. "Okay, lover boy, bottom-line is that I've got the card sweet cheeks over there wrote you - plus the pictures that prove it was the two of you and not a couple of other dorks."

"How about the ring?" Scott asked, then immediately regretted asking.

He grinned. "Yep, I've got that, too. Not that I really know what it means - but hey, I can make up a good story. A note for the future - it's not real smart to keep stuff like that. It's bound to come back and bite you."

"How did you get those things?" Trust Carolyn to want to know CHAPTER-and-verse about how she was going to get blown out of the water.

"Francine brought them to me," he said with satisfaction. "She'd been suspicious of you two all along, and then after lover boy here blew it big-time - "

"What did I do?" The question was sincere.

He laughed, wondering whether it would be more fun to tell him or to keep him guessing. Tell him, obviously, making him squirm in the process. "Well, you may remember that you'd been having some trouble performing - of course, that could have been just with her, but I wouldn't know about that. And she didn't say it in so many words, but I think you'd been neglecting her needs so long that she was desperate for some satisfaction. In any case, I suggested she try giving you a little wake-up present - to kind of get the juices flowing, so to speak."

He paused to enjoy the reactions of his audience. Carolyn was a predictable bright red, and Scott's color was a much darker mixture of embarrassment and anger. Their body language was fun to analyze, too. She was concerned about him, angling toward him protectively and reassuringly - and he was busy closing her out as thoroughly as he could.

"I'm sure you remember how good it felt, lover boy - " With a grin, he turned to Carolyn. "Another little hint for the future, sweet cheeks - that's a world-class way to wake up a guy. Of course, you have to be careful how you do it, if you want any action yourself. That's what Francine did wrong. She let him get way too far-gone while he was still mostly asleep - and then, he screwed up. He called out your name."

Bill relaxed back into his seat while they thought about that. Dealt with the shock is more like it. He'd been right - Scott had no idea what he'd done. "That's the kind of thing that would never happen to me - I don't use names in bed. I mean, it's just the two of you, right?" Well, there had been a few times when his bed had hosted three at once, but Scott wasn't that adventurous. "I find that 'lover' and 'honey' and names like that work just fine. Right, sweet cheeks?"

The tips of her ears looked like they'd been painted with lipstick. "I wouldn't know, asshole," she snarled. Imagine that - she was angry with him! "Get on with it, will you? I've put up with you for three hours now, and I'm sick of it. Tell us how you're going to ruin our lives." Under the fury, she was incredibly close to tears.

"Why would I want to ruin your lives?" he asked rhetorically. "I mean, sure, you both get on my nerves something fierce, but I'm a big proponent of win-win negotiations. I get something I want, and you get to not have your lives ruined."

"Do you want money?" Scott asked, finally showing some life. "I'm not Seth, but I've got some saved

up."

"I have a little," Carolyn said, frowning. "But you'd have to turn over the card and everything to get it..." Her voice trailed off and he realized she'd seen the problem.

"But that wouldn't really solve anything, would it?" he asked. "Because I can still blow up your lives by going to Seth with what I know." He paused to shake his head. "No, what we need is an understanding - a partnership, in fact."

"A partnership?" Scott looked ready to spit.

Carolyn squeezed his hand and said, "We're listening. What did you have in mind?"

He felt a click in his mind as things fell into place. He was glad he'd come up with such a good plan. He gave Carolyn a slow smile. "Get me another brew, sweet cheeks. All this talking is making me thirsty. Bring one for lover boy, too."

He watched her go, wondering if he could fit a tiny alteration into his plan. That fire and ice combo would be a blast in bed.

Carolyn hurried back to the living room, proud of herself for not shaking Bill's beer. She'd hear him out first. "Are you ready now?"

He glugged down several long swallows, then gave her that slimy smile again, making her feel dirty. "Much better. Thanks, sweet cheeks."

It sounded like Scott was grinding his teeth, so she put her hand on his thigh, trying to caution him to listen and not overreact.

Bill set down his beer and started lecturing them. "As you know, the trick in win-win negotiating is to find concessions of approximately equal value for both parties to make."

Did he actually think they needed a refresher course on something so basic? Each of them had a good six or eight years more work experience than he did - and got along with their peers and superiors a heck of a lot better than Bill did, too. He continued, "Now, if you ask me, not alienating Seth and keeping both your jobs is a pretty big win for your side. That means I need a big win, too. So, how much money are we talking about?"

Scott exchanged glances with her, clearly wondering the best way to answer. Carolyn spoke up first. "I've only got a few thousand."

Bill looked skeptical. "Is that so, sweet cheeks? I had you pegged for a saver. How about you, lover boy?"

"More than that," he said grudgingly. "I could probably get you fifty."

Would Scott really pay fifty thousand dollars for Bill's silence? How could he trust him? She opened her mouth to ask, but Bill laughed rudely before she spoke. "Fifty thousand bucks? Forget it! That's not even a year's salary. Now, if you wanted to add a zero on to the end of that, then we'd have something to talk about."

"Where do you expect either of us to get half a million dollars?" she demanded.

"I don't," he shrugged. "Now, if lover boy had been taking care of business better, he'd have sweet-talked Francine into putting him in charge of Rachel's trust, and then we'd be cool."

Rachel had that kind of money in trust? Come to think of it, Carolyn had heard that she now owned half of A-W, so it wasn't out of the question. Scott said, "That money's for Rachel. I wouldn't give it to you, even if I could."

This was Bill's idea of win-win negotiating? Asking for something he knew darn well he couldn't get, and spitting on the more modest amounts they had available?

He gave them a tight fake smile. "Okay. So now we know that money's not the answer. The question is what you two have - or control - that I want?" He milked the silence for a few seconds before he answered, "And sweet cheeks, I hate to tell you this, but you're not the one with what I'm looking for. It's old lover boy here. He's the one with the job that should be mine."

"You expect me to quit, so you can have my job?" Scott asked incredulously. "That's crazy - and besides, it wouldn't work. Seth would just go outside the company to hire my replacement."

Bill nodded. "You're right. The old bastard would do that, just like he did when he hired you. But here's where my plan's so cool - you don't quit your job, at least not soon. What you do, instead, is go to Seth and tell him you want to promote me. The group's gotten too big, you don't like wasting all your time on administrivia - whatever excuse you want to use. Give me a modest raise - say five or ten percent - and a new title - Assistant Mucky-Muck or some damn thing."

He was willing to stay quiet for a five or ten percent raise and a title, but not for fifty thousand in cash? Something didn't compute. "How is this such a big win for you?" she asked.

"A couple of reasons," he said airily. "But before you psychoanalyze me to death over there, sweet cheeks, I have to warn you, this isn't the end of my plan. What we do after my promotion is that lover boy here tells me all his secrets for running things, and I basically make myself indispensable to the company. I already am, you understand, but this time, we make sure everybody knows it."

He continued, "Then, after a few months or whatever passes, lover boy decides that it's just too painful to stay at A-W, now that Francine is gone. Everybody feels sorry for him, they have a big farewell party and he rides off into the sunset, leaving me with the job that should have been mine to begin with. Somewhere around the same time, sweet cheeks gets a very interesting job offer, and off she goes, too. You two get what you apparently want - the chance to spend eternity making the rest of the world puke because you're such a cute damn couple - and I get what I want." He grinned. "Great plan, isn't it?"

"What if Seth won't buy the idea of promoting you?" Scott asked, making Carolyn realize that he was taking the idea seriously.

"You persuade him," was the answer. A little testily, Bill added, "It's not like I'm not qualified! Seth's just prejudiced because I don't kiss his ass, like the rest of you do. And I'm not going to do anything to harm precious A-W, so Rachel'll still be a rich little brat."

"How do we know you'd keep quiet?" she asked.

"You don't, but the thing of it is, you're not losing much by agreeing. If I end up having to go to Seth about you, your jobs are toast and so are your chances for getting decent recommendations. If we do it my way, you get to look around for new jobs, and leave with people thinking you're nice upstanding citizens. At your new jobs, nobody's going to know what happened here - and chances are, they wouldn't care if they knew."

He was starting to make sense. Carolyn had to wonder if she was losing her mind. He picked up his beer bottle and drained it, then stood. "Sweet cheeks, thanks so much for your hospitality tonight. We'll do it again - say, Wednesday evening, around seven-thirty. I'm sure we'll have plenty to discuss by then."

Carolyn followed him to the door and dead-bolted it behind him. She went back to the sofa, intending to talk the situation over with Scott, but immediately changed her mind. He'd had a tough evening before this scene with Bill. Tomorrow would be time enough.

"Scott, you must be exhausted. You need some sleep."

He shook his head, as though to clear it, then slowly climbed to his feet. "Did I tell you about Rachel?"

"Not really," she said. "But we'll talk about all of it tomorrow." She started leading him to the door, acknowledging to herself that she wasn't going to make him leave. Not tonight, even though that would set a bad precedent for the future.

But he left on his own, without even a goodnight kiss.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Scott surfaced slowly, from a sleep deeper than any he'd had in weeks, if not months. He was still exhausted, though. Maybe he'd just lie there a minute and let himself fall back to sleep. Today wasn't worth getting up for, anyway.

Except there was an annoying sound coming from somewhere in the house - a kind of humming or maybe somebody who couldn't carry a tune singing? But he was supposed to be alone in the house, so he dragged out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweatpants, then went in search of the noise. It was coming from Rachel's room. Oh, damn. Annabelle.

She looked his way right then and yelped, "Scott!" She grabbed something off her head - the headphones for Rachel's tape player, he realized. That's what the noise had been. She'd been singing along with whatever tape Rachel had in there. "I'm sorry, dear. I didn't realize you were still home."

He caught a glimpse of the clock - nine-thirty? Was it possible he'd slept so late? "I guess I overslept. It's a good thing you came by, or I might have slept all day."

She took several steps toward him and touched his arm. "I hope you don't mind me saying so, but you look like you could use the rest. Have you slept at all since - ?" Her composure faltered and she didn't finish the question.

"Not a lot," he admitted, immediately shifting gears to something less emotional. "I'd better go shower and get dressed. Everyone will be wondering where I am."

She shook her head, gently but firmly, and he was reminded how very similar she was to Francine, yet how different, too. "Anyone who has a brain in their head will understand," she said. "It's not natural to face a loss like this and not need time to grieve. Take the time. Don't feel you have to be superman."

"That's not - " He couldn't finish. He couldn't speak. His throat filled with tears, and he tried to back away.

But she wouldn't let him. She wrapped her arms around him and said, "It's okay, Scott."

The tears came then, the ones he'd tried and failed to shed so many times over the last week. Annabelle cried, too, and that made him feel not so terribly alone. "She was so angry at me that morning," he

murmured, knowing it was crazy to even mention that, but still needing to. "And then she died, and I never had a chance to make things right again."

"It's okay, Scott. You loved her, and she knew that."

"But - "

"No, I know." She patted his back awkwardly, perhaps noticing that he was nearly naked. He was certainly noticing it. "I keep being sorry I didn't tell her more often how very proud of her I was. Instead, I kept trying to improve her, trying to help her realize how capable she truly was. And now, I don't know if she knew what a wonderful daughter she was."

Scott knew the answer to that. She hadn't known. She'd felt like she couldn't possibly meet her parents' expectations, and she'd been afraid to really try. But it wouldn't help Annabelle to know that now, so he didn't tell her. "The house is so empty now," he said softly.

"I know. It feels like a different place." She turned away from him briskly, returning in a few seconds to offer him a tissue. They wiped their eyes in companionable silence, then she said, "Scott, forgive me for asking, but I know how much you loved Francine. Why didn't you ever marry her?"

There was no point in protecting her now. "Because she wouldn't set a date." Annabelle looked at him sharply, and he returned the look. "Seriously. I don't know what the problem was, but she got upset every time I brought up the subject. I even suggested eloping, thinking the prospect of a big wedding might be scaring her, but that didn't do the trick."

Slowly, she said, "But I know Seth mentioned the subject to you several times, and you never said anything about this."

"I was trying to keep the pressure off of her. Maybe I was wrong, but I thought if I just let it happen naturally, she'd be okay with it. We wanted to have a baby together, and I figured that eventually she'd want that enough that she'd be willing to get married first." As he finished his explanation, he realized she'd never believe him. She didn't know the scared part of Francine like he did.

She was silent for a minute and finally asked, "You honestly would have married her?"

"In a heartbeat," he assured her. "I wouldn't have proposed to her, otherwise - and I wouldn't have moved in with her, either."

She listened intently long after he finished speaking. With a sigh, she said, "It's too bad the way it happened. If you'd been married, everything would be different now."

He nodded. "I know. I was going to legally adopt Rachel."

She gasped and pressed her hand to her mouth, then waved vaguely at the room. "I'd better get busy packing."

"And I still need to shower."

But the thought of how completely different things might have been wouldn't wash away in the shower. It stayed there, weighing him down, making him more depressed.

Carolyn didn't know the etiquette for talking privately at work with one's former - and future - lover. It would definitely be noticed if she went into his office and closed the door behind her, and they certainly

needed that much privacy. Maybe they'd just have to wait until tonight.

Shortly after she decided that, he appeared in the doorway of her office, dressed in old jeans and a T-shirt that had been washed a few hundred times too many. "I'm touching base with the whole team, checking to see if anyone needs anything from me. I - I'm going to take a couple of days off, try to get my head together."

"That's a good idea," she said. "Are you going away?" She hoped that was a reasonable question, demonstrating only friendly concern, in case someone was listening.

His eyes narrowed in surprise and he stepped inside. "No. There are things I need to do in town." He pointed in the direction of Bill's office and she nodded. "So, what are you working on today?" he asked, walking toward her computer screen.

She pointed at the code she was writing and explained what module it belonged to. He leaned over to look at it and said quietly, "We need to talk. Your place at noon?" She agreed, equally quietly, and he nodded. Standing up again, he asked, "So, is there anything you'll need from me before - say, Thursday or Friday?"

"I don't think so. Good luck."

He tried to smile at her, but it was a pathetic attempt that made her want to cry. "Thanks." Before she could say anything more, he left, and she heard him go through the same routine with Phillip next door.

She was haunted by that smile the rest of the morning. Why couldn't she have been smart enough to turn down the job offer? That moment of weakness would end up costing Scott everything.

Bill watched Scott go around, office to office, spinning his tale about taking a couple of days off. At first, he wondered if the guy was getting ready to pull a fast one on him - although he couldn't imagine a way that Scott might squirm off his hook.

A long look at the guy relieved his concern. He was on the ropes, barely able to put meaningful sentences together - thanks to that lovely card and pictures.

Bill wondered if Scott realized how beautifully his mental state fit in with the plan. Seth couldn't possibly deny that Scott needed help managing the group and doing whatever other garbage a Chief Designer was supposed to do.

Getting into the spirit of things, Bill went office-to-office in Scott's wake, telling everyone that he'd be glad to help with any questions or problems. Might as well get a head start on his new job.

Scott picked up sandwiches at the deli on the way to Carolyn's apartment, grateful that she was willing to put up with him. He sat in the parking lot until she pulled in, then got out and walked in with her. Somehow, discretion seemed a little idiotic right about now.

"Are you okay?" she asked, the second the apartment door closed behind them.

He shrugged. "I guess. I slept good, at least." He could crawl back in bed right this minute and sleep for days. Maybe that's what he should do.

"You still look exhausted," she said with a frown. "I wish I knew how to help..."

"You are helping." He felt awkward with her today, so he moved away from her scrutiny by crossing to the dining table and opening the deli bag. "I brought lunch."

"That's nice. Would you like something to drink?" She seemed more comfortable now.

"Sure." He didn't know if he'd be able to eat anything, but a glass of milk would go down well. "What do you have?"

She peered into the fridge. "Not a lot, it turns out. Water, Diet Coke, and cranberry juice." She took out a Diet Coke for herself.

"Water's fine for me." He remembered now that she didn't like milk. That had always seemed strange to him. "I got turkey and roast beef - which would you like?"

"Either's fine," she said, as she carried their drinks in to the table. He gave her the turkey, since that was what she'd ordered at the deli in Providence the few times they'd gone there.

They ate without further conversation, but he suspected she was as uninterested in the food as he was. It had as much taste as plastic and was nearly as hard to chew into swallowable bites. Finally, their lunch was gone, and cleaning it up took only a few seconds. It was time to talk.

"I've been thinking," he said, staring out the sliding glass door instead of looking at her. "If I quit and left town, Bill probably wouldn't go to Seth to get you fired."

"But you don't want to leave town. You need to be here, in case Rachel needs you."

He sighed. "But I don't think they'll let me see her anymore, anyway. It's just too disruptive. You should have seen her last night when I - " He changed his mind. "No. No one should have been there for that."

"What happened? The plan to stay for bedtime didn't help?"

"Everything was fine until I started to leave, but then it was ten times worse than before. And Seth was standing there, staring at me, reminding me of our deal, so I couldn't stay, like she needed me to. Then, Annabelle started telling her how they'd talked about it, and if she made such a fuss about me leaving, I couldn't come anymore." Suddenly, he realized that he should have asked Annabelle this morning if Rachel was okay. Maybe he'd call Linda tonight, instead.

"How sad," she said, slipping her hand into his. "I guess she has to accept that you're not her daddy anymore, but that seems an unnecessarily cruel way to do it, especially right after Francine's death."

"I wish I'd had a chance to adopt her," he said. "Then she wouldn't have to go through this."

He felt her body tense. "Couldn't you still do that?"

"Adopt her? I don't see how, considering how Seth and Annabelle feel about the situation." With a mirthless laugh, he continued, "Anyway, I've got enough other problems right now."

"I guess so," she admitted. "And if you want to leave town, that's okay with me. I don't have any reason to stay here - just as long as I can find a job somewhere, I'll be fine."

"Marty's still at ITI - he could find something for me to do, I'm sure." Hesitantly, he added, "Probably you, too, if you felt like moving to Chicago." He didn't know what was what with their relationship anymore. He wanted to be with her, but maybe she simply felt sorry for the mess he'd become over the last week and a few days.

She laughed, a low, rich sound that made him feel better just hearing it. "Scott, I don't know what's going to happen with our relationship. But I do know that I've been waiting a long time to move to Chicago with you."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Carolyn logged out and turned off her office lights, then started down the hall. Phillip hailed her as she passed. "Is this possible? Is Carolyn Kelley actually leaving work shortly after five o'clock?"

The best defense was a good offense, or so she'd been told. "You've been bugging me to leave earlier for more than a month now. What's the problem? Can't you make up your mind what you want?"

"I'm not complaining, just noticing. I don't suppose you have a hot date tonight, do you?" he asked hopefully.

She concentrated on not blushing - that she'd had much success doing that in the past, but she could always hope. "Maybe I've got a horrible case of PMS," she said with a smile, knowing the idea would embarrass him horribly. But when he looked like he was going to swallow his tongue, she took pity on him. "Or maybe I counted up all the hours I've put in here and decided it was time I got a life."

He nodded. "Good idea. Work's cool, but you've got to do other stuff, too."

"I agree. See ya," she called out, hurrying toward the exit.

She checked her watch on the way to the car. Okay, she still had time. Scott was bringing take-out food at six, and she had a bunch of things she wanted to do first.

First things first, she pulled into the grocery store parking lot. Scott was a milk drinker, so she picked up some of that, plus some bread, eggs, bacon -

All right, she was buying food for breakfast. It was getting pretty silly pretending they weren't going to end up in bed, especially considering that she'd just agreed to move halfway across the country with him - for a second time, a voice in her head reminded her.

Condoms, too, a different voice prompted. She didn't have time for a thorough study of the nearly endless variety or the experience to know the pros and cons of the various features, so she grabbed a couple of packages at random.

Home then, where she shoved the cold stuff in the fridge and stuffed the condoms into the drawer next to the bed. Quick, strip off the dirty sheets and remake the bed, stick the old ones on top of the washer and change the litter box. Take all the garbage out to the dumpster. Finally, hop in the shower to rinse off all the nervous perspiration.

Whereupon the doorbell rang, a full five minutes early. She raced through drying off and into a robe, pausing at the peephole to check that her visitor was, indeed, Scott. It was.

She let him in. "Sorry, I messed up my timing. I intended to be dressed before you got here."

"That's okay. I might be early, anyway." He tried to keep his eyes on her face, but didn't completely succeed. "Um, do you want to get dressed before we eat?"

Not really. She wanted to simply undo the tie on her robe and see what happened next. She'd been waiting four long years for this, and there was no time like the present.

But it was one thing to calmly and rationally make the decision to go to bed with him and a totally different one to throw herself at him. "Yes, I would. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I'll just be a minute."

She took a couple of minutes, actually, one of which she spent tidying up the bedroom. Somehow, she'd never learned to dress and undress without scattering belongings all over the place. Tony had laughingly called her effect on a bedroom Hurricane Carolyn.

Scott already had the table set when she came out of the bedroom. He'd brought Chinese food - and his own milk, she discovered when she proudly opened the refrigerator to offer him some.

While they ate, she said, "I was thinking this afternoon about how Bill's going to react when we give notice. Don't you suppose he'll go right to Seth?"

Scott nodded and finished chewing before answering. "Most likely. I was thinking about that, too - and about how I'm not sure I want to leave right now. We're in the middle of a lot of important changes, and I'd hate to cause problems."

She'd wondered about that. Scott was extremely dedicated to his job - she was, too - and it had seemed odd to her that he'd be so quick to leave. "What about Bill's terms?"

"I hate to give him what he wants. It rubs me the wrong way because it's him, first of all, and then being blackmailed on top of that - " He shook his head.

She was silent for a minute. She hated the idea, too. "But leaving feels a little like running away," she admitted.

"More than a little."

"But if we don't go, we have to meet his terms, don't we? Because otherwise, he'll just go to Seth and we'll get fired."

He nodded gloomily. "I wish I thought Seth would believe the truth."

She wished she hadn't caused this impossible situation. She should have known better. Well, no sense worrying about something she couldn't change. "Let's look at it another way. Is Bill capable of the promotion he wants?"

She saw Scott considering his answer carefully. Finally he said, "Well, yeah. He's a good programmer, well organized and good with people when he wants to be. The big rap against him has always been his lack of dedication and the fact that he thinks he's better than he really is."

"And I have the feeling that your job is really a couple of jobs in one - group leader and system architect. Am I right?"

He considered the question longer than she thought should be necessary, given the kind of hours he put in regularly. "I guess. I haven't really had any trouble handling both of them until just lately - " With a rueful smile, he added, "And that was thanks to you being down the hall."

She felt her ears start to burn. "Still, from what Phillip says, you've always worked more hours than anybody else."

"Sure. Seth works a lot, too - it's just part of trying to lead by example."

Didn't he see the difference in degree? "I'd buy that, if we were talking about forty- five hours a week - but isn't sixty hours more like what you've been doing?"

He took a deep breath and opened his mouth, then abruptly shut it. After fifteen or twenty seconds, he nodded. "You're right. I hadn't ever added it up. I guess I really ought to cut back."

Cautiously, she said, "I don't mean to tell you what to do, but wouldn't that be a good argument to give Seth to explain wanting to promote Bill?"

He frowned and chewed slowly. Finally he said, "I guess. The thing is, it just feels wrong, doing it so he'll keep quiet. And you're the one who deserves the promotion, not him."

"Come on, Scott," she admonished. "I've been here only a little more than a month. It wouldn't be a good idea, anyway, even without Bill to consider. If we get seriously involved, I'll have to change jobs so I don't report to you."

"It doesn't matter," he said, his voice heavy with discouragement. "Bill exists, and he's going to screw up our lives, one way or the other. I just hate messing your life up again."

She laughed briefly. "And I hate that my being here is messing things up for you."

He managed a sad smile at the irony, but that was it. He poked at the remaining food on his plate and said, "I guess I'm not as hungry as I thought I was."

On cue, Princess said "Mao" from a spot on the floor midway between their chairs. Carolyn said, "Princess is volunteering to eat anything you don't want."

He stared at the cat. "How did it know to meow right then?"

"You haven't known many cats, have you?" she asked with a grin. "Obviously, she doesn't understand everything we say, but she gets an awful lot of it - especially if it has to do with food."

"But she - " he glanced at Carolyn as though to check if he was using the right pronoun. "She wouldn't like Chinese food, would she?"

"Of course she would. All that good shrimp and chicken - she likes rice with sauce on it, too. Vegetables, she'll usually just lick off and leave on the plate." Offering to take his plate, she said, "If you don't mind, I'll chop up a little of this for her."

He handed her the plate. "Help yourself. And to answer your question, I've never had a pet or even really known one. Rachel went through a stage where she wanted a kitten, but Francine thought she was too young."

Carolyn finished cutting things up into cat-size bites and put the plate on the floor. "That was probably smart. One of my neighbors in Providence had a cat that had been raised in a house with a couple of little kids, and the cat ran and hid from everyone. You really need to let a cat keep its personal dignity, and that's a concept that's hard for kids - for some adults, too."

Princess ate methodically and daintily, as usual, and Scott watched her in amazement. "That's neat. She does like it."

Dinner was another easy-to-clean-up meal, and within ten minutes, they were sitting in the living room again and Scott was yawning. "You really haven't been getting much sleep," she commented.

He shook his head and sighed. "Last night was the first night I've slept more than a few hours at a time. I guess I ought to go home before I fall asleep right here."

How should she tell him that wasn't necessary? Straight out was best, she guessed. "You can sleep here, if you want."

He turned to look at her, no longer yawning. "But you said - "

"I also said it wouldn't be long." Just saying those words made things happen inside of her that she'd almost forgotten.

"But - " He sounded a little breathless. "I thought you meant we had to talk more first about what happened before..."

She put her hand on his thigh. She wasn't sure which was hotter. "We need to talk about that more, you're right. But you were right before, too - as long as we both want to, we can make it work out."

He really didn't seem to be breathing. What could be wrong? "I - um, I don't know if - "

Oh, dear. Now she understood. "You mean, like what Bill was saying...?" He nodded minimally. "That's okay," she said in a voice that definitely bordered on fake cheerfulness. "We could just share the bed, if you wanted - or cuddle - or, um, however it happened to work out."

She'd blown it; she just knew it. Here he was confessing a deep dark secret, and she was acting like a deranged - well, she didn't know what she was acting like, but it wasn't the sensible mature woman he needed her to be. "Or you could go home and get the good night's sleep you obviously need, and stay over another night."

That didn't make matters any better. She'd try once more - this time, with her brain engaged. "Scott, making love with you is something I very much want to do, but right now, after four years apart, just lying in bed next to you sounds awfully good, too. I've missed you."

He met her eyes then, and she noticed the shallow rise and fall of his chest as he considered her words. Finally, he offered her his hand and said, "I've missed you, too."

Scott opened his eyes and saw that it was light in the room. He tried to catch a glimpse of the clock on the other side of the bed, but Princess was nestled behind his knees and Carolyn's arm was draped around his midsection.

He felt great this morning, even greater than their lovemaking alone would account for. For the first time in more than four years, he was happy - not just content, but happy. He had plenty of non-happy things in his life right now, but Carolyn still had the power to make his world sparkle and shine.

But wasn't she ever going to wake up? He remembered her saying she'd turned on the alarm, but it would be so much more pleasant if she woke up before it. Then, they could -

He began by kissing the top of her head through her hair - the same silky hair he'd remembered, just a whole lot shorter. Her eyes opened almost immediately, and she gave him a dreamy smile that hinted she'd be asleep again in an instant, if he didn't do something to keep her awake.

He did, and it wasn't very long before she was thoroughly awake and busy tormenting him with the touch he'd missed all this time. One thing led to another, and her alarm didn't get turned off until it had buzzed nonstop for a good five minutes. Even then, she didn't get out of bed for fifteen or twenty minutes more,

and when she did, she glared at him accusingly. "I was going to make you breakfast this morning and now there isn't time!"

He opened his mouth to tell her that the boss wasn't going to be in the office today, so she could be a little late - but then he remembered Annabelle. She'd be at his house within the hour, and he'd darn well better be there. So, he jumped out of bed, too, and tore off to the house, not even waiting to shower.

Good thing. The phone rang before he made it into his own shower. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Scott," Seth said. "I hope I didn't wake you, but I was hoping I could stop by for a few minutes this morning on my way to work."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Bill breezed into work half an hour earlier than usual. Today was the day! Oh, he wouldn't get promoted today, he was fairly sure of that, but Scott would agree to his terms and that would be almost as good.

He dropped by Carolyn's office to spread a little cheer, and she looked absolutely delectable this morning. That mint-green sweater was great with her eyes, and she seemed softer, with fewer sharp edges, than usual. He didn't have to wonder where Scott's car had spent the night.

"Good morning," he said, knowing she'd added the "sweet cheeks" part in her mind by the way she stiffened and glared at him.

"Hello, Bill."

"I just stopped by to check if there's anything I can help you with in Scott's absence." With a smile, he added, "I mean work-related, of course."

"No, there isn't," she said snottily. "It may surprise you to hear this, but I'm a professional, and I'm accustomed to working without supervision."

Bill was a realist and understood that adding a night with Carolyn to the terms of his deal with Scott would blow the whole thing. But the more he got to know Carolyn, the more he realized that was a damn shame.

Scott didn't know anything about heart attacks, but hadn't he heard somewhere that shortness of breath was one of the symptoms? He definitely had that one, and he was sweating even though the house was cool, and the combination of the two had to mean something.

Of course, maybe he was simply panicking - and for a couple of seconds, he wasn't sure which explanation he hoped was correct. If he were having a heart attack, at least he wouldn't have to deal with Seth having found out about Carolyn.

He must have, mustn't he? Otherwise, why would Seth want to come to the house?

Had Bill spilled the beans? Scott would kill him, and for once, he wasn't sure if that was just an expression or if he really meant it.

Okay, he had to calm down. Being a pitiful mess wasn't going to gain him any mercy, and if by some miracle, Seth wanted to talk about some mundane business matter, it wouldn't do to be on the edge of a breakdown.

He had time for a quick shower and a shave, since Seth had been calling from home and Lake Oswego was a good twenty minutes from this part of Beaverton. He felt better after that, a little more in control, and he thought to start a pot of coffee.

When the doorbell rang, he discovered that Annabelle was with Seth and that reassured him a little. Seth was a bit protective of his wife, so he must not be planning too horrible a scene. He offered them coffee, and they sat awkwardly in the living room.

Seth took the conversational lead, as usual. "Scott, Annabelle told me about the talk you two had yesterday, and I have to say I'm stunned."

What talk yesterday? Oh, yeah. "You mean that Francine was the one who didn't want to get married?"

"Yes. It doesn't make sense - she married George with no hesitancy."

He nodded, relaxing slightly. This wasn't a comfortable subject, but there were plenty of worse ones. "I know, sir. I didn't understand it, either - and I'm not sure she did. I have to assume that something was wrong in their marriage, but I don't know what it was. I tried any number of times to get her to talk about that or about what she was afraid would change if we got married."

Seth said definitely, "Her marriage was fine. George had his flaws - we all do - but he was devoted to her and she to him. Don't you agree?" he asked Annabelle.

She pursed her mouth and hesitated for several moments, then shook her head. "Not really. She never really said anything, but I had the feeling that she was almost afraid of him." When Seth tensed, she hurried to say, "Not physically, I don't think. More like - worried that he wouldn't approve of her."

"That's natural, don't you think?" Seth asked. "I know I worry what you'll think of me sometimes." Scott almost felt like he was eavesdropping, since neither was sparing him a glance.

"That's different, dear. What I mean is - well, as though he wouldn't care for her anymore if she didn't wear her hair a certain way or learn to cook a fancy meal."

Seth was outraged. "Why didn't you tell me at the time? She shouldn't have had to tolerate that kind of treatment."

Annabelle patted his arm. "It wasn't the kind of thing a father could fix." She turned to Scott then. "That was one of the things I found so refreshing about your relationship with her. It was obvious from the beginning that you didn't have any set expectations. You wanted her to do the things that made her happy, and you shared them with her. You were so good to her - and for her."

Seth looked at Annabelle with a bit of annoyance. "Are you saying that you believe his story? It would be easy enough for him to lie about it now." Scott felt mildly insulted that Seth didn't seem to notice he was still in the room.

Annabelle shook her head, smiling slightly. "Poor Seth. When did you lose your ability to trust? Yes, of course Scott could be lying about this, but why would he? He was, for practical purposes, Francine's husband and Rachel's father for more than three years. That's not how a commitment-shy person would behave. But, do you know the real reason I believe his story?"

She paused until Seth shook his head. "Because Scott doesn't lie. That was one of the first things Francine said to me about him, and I've always found it to be true."

But it wasn't true anymore, and he hated that fact.

Carolyn had hoped that Scott would come over for dinner again tonight. She'd even started planning something simple but more healthy than take-out. He called mid-afternoon, though, to say he was busy going through Francine's things and would be over shortly before seven-thirty. He sounded somewhat remote, so she hadn't said anything about dinner.

That was probably a good thing, she told herself as she moped over her frozen dinner. It wasn't safe to get used to having him around all the time. He had a life, too, and despite their rosy words to each other, it was perfectly possible that their relationship would last no longer than it had last time. The important thing was to cherish the time together they did have and to remember to enjoy being apart, too.

He was solemn when he arrived, and it suddenly occurred to her that they'd never made a final decision last night about how to answer Bill. She didn't have a chance to ask, since Bill arrived almost on Scott's heels. No question about his mood - he was elated.

"Hey, you two. Thanks for having me over again. Shall we have a round of brews while we discuss the nitty-gritty?"

Scott intervened with a hand on Carolyn's arm. "No. We're not drinking with you. You've put us in an impossible situation, but you can't make us like it." Bill raised his eyebrows, but before he spoke, Scott continued, "Sit down and let me go over this list of my conditions - don't worry, I have a copy for you."

"You have conditions? Aren't you forgetting something?" Bill sputtered.

"Not at all," Scott replied with a cold smile. "I'm simply telling you how you will behave after you get this promotion you're so set on. As you well know, Seth makes the decisions about job content, and if I'm going to bat for you, I need to be able to assure him that you'll do the job."

"I'll do the job, you jerk! Don't you worry about that!"

"I hope so. Sit down and we'll go over the list briefly." He handed Bill a piece of paper and offered him a dining room chair he'd moved to an empty place in front of the TV. He sat in the recliner and Carolyn on the sofa.

Bill looked rather defiant, but he finally sat down. "This list better not be insulting," he grumbled.

"It's not," Scott said, his tone somewhat more conciliatory. "It's for your benefit and toward the bottom there, it describes the new job I'll propose to Seth tomorrow, assuming you agree. First, I want you to understand that I wouldn't be doing this - no matter what the threat - if I didn't think you were capable of the job. You are, and you're also a long-time and loyal employee."

"You're damn right about that. I've been here a lot longer than you." Bill's voice and whole demeanor were sullen.

"Now, look," Scott said sharply. "That kind of attitude doesn't get you anywhere in business - and certainly not with Seth. Maybe I can get you this promotion, but if you don't demonstrate to Seth that he can count on you to be professional, there's no way in hell he'll ever give you my job."

Bill sat back in his chair, taken aback by the comment, but no longer defiant. He finally looked down at the paper in his hand. "What's this about hours?"

"Just what it says. At A-W, leadership is done by example and that includes putting in more than forty hours a week. I know you haven't been doing that, but it's part of showing everyone you work with that A-W is an important piece of your life."

"That's fine for you," he said. "But I've got a busy social life."

Scott almost appeared to be having fun now. "So busy you can't get to the office before nine in the morning? So busy that you can't work an occasional lunch hour - or until six at night? If you are that busy, then how the heck do you expect to handle the job? You'll have to deal with pressure and deadlines, and no amount of planning guarantees that either won't happen."

Bill sighed. "Okay, sure. I can manage that." He looked at the list again. "'Show proper respect to co-workers and customers at all times.' I do that!"

"No, you don't. I doubt, for example, that you've ever treated Carolyn with the basic respect she deserves as a fellow human being, much less as a valuable co-worker. Just because she's a woman and you're a man doesn't give you the right to annoy her with sexually-loaded comments - in fact, that's sexual harassment, and you could be fired for it."

"All right, all right," Bill said. "I'll leave your girlfriend alone."

Scott's eyes drilled into Bill's. "That was just an example of your lack of respect. I see you being sarcastic and insulting to the rest of the team all the time. To some extent, that's your personality, and they've learned to accept it because of that. But the minute you become their manager that changes. They need to know that their contributions are considered important by the company - and by you, as its representative."

He continued, "You need to value every person on the team and what they bring to the product. It isn't just a one- or two-person effort we've got going and the tech writers and customer support people are just as necessary to the end product as the developers. You'll need to learn how to work with and supervise people you don't personally like. You know darn well I don't like you, but I don't think you can complain that I haven't treated you fairly over the years." When Bill didn't reply, Scott pointedly asked, "Can you?"

Bill shook his head, his jaw line tight with tension. He read the rest of the list over quietly, then looked up. "If I agree to do all this, you'll get me the promotion? And you'll get out later, after Seth has a chance to see that I deserve your job?"

"Yes, to the first part, and yes to the second assuming you actually prove that you're willing to do the work." Scott nodded slowly. "I absolutely detest being blackmailed into this, but I'll live up to my promises if you live up to yours. Adams-Worthington is too fine a company to leave in incompetent hands."

"I can do the job," Bill insisted. "So I guess we have a deal."

"Deal," Scott said quietly but firmly. "I'll talk to Seth tomorrow."

Bill tried out a smile, but it must not have come out the way he intended it to, because it didn't last long. He sat there a moment longer, then stood. "I guess I'll go."

Scott and Carolyn both watched him leave without getting up or speaking. Once the door was firmly closed behind him, she said, "How did you do that? You were great!"

He breathed out a short laugh. "I had an encounter with Seth this morning, and even though it worked out fine, all day long I kept remembering the way he can make me feel like the lowest slimiest creature ever born. I figured I'd give it a shot with Bill."

She wondered what had happened with Seth, but this wasn't the time to ask. "It sure worked!" she

laughed. "Now, can I get you a beer or something?" She stood and headed to slide the dead bolt in place on her apartment door.

As she passed the recliner, Scott grabbed her arm and pulled her onto his lap. "Yeah, some something's definitely in order," he said.

She couldn't agree more.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The first thing on Thursday morning, Scott called Ellen for an appointment to meet with Seth. She said, "Welcome back, Scott. You can come down anytime. Seth wanted to see you this morning anyway."

"I'll come right away then," he said, trying not to worry about why Seth wanted to see him. It was probably business-related.

But when he went into Seth's office, Ellen shut the door behind him, and Seth said, "Thanks for coming, Scott. Annabelle tells me that I was rather overbearing yesterday morning and I wanted to apologize."

Rather awkwardly, he continued, "It isn't so much that I felt you were lying, but rather that I found it hard to understand why Francine wouldn't want to marry you. She obviously cared deeply for you, and you for her, and it just seemed - " He stopped himself abruptly. "But never mind that. We went through it yesterday. The point now is that I'd like to put that behind us and I hope you'll agree."

"Certainly, sir. I can sympathize with your feelings, and I'm sure I'd be somewhat suspicious in a similar situation."

Seth nodded. "I appreciate your understanding. Now, that brings me to the other matter I wanted to discuss - and actually it's the reason Annabelle and I descended on you yesterday morning like that. Rachel's still having a terribly difficult time adjusting, and one of the experts we talked with on Tuesday was quite critical of the way we've been handling things."

When Seth didn't continue right away, Scott asked, "In what way?"

"Her relationship with you, in specific. The expert felt that it would make it much easier for Rachel if she could continue to see you frequently. The way it is, you're being taken from her at the same time as her mother, and it just adds to her anger and confusion."

Scott felt like asking why they needed an expert to tell them something so obvious. "I can see that."

Seth adjusted the position of his pen on his nearly empty desk, one of the first signs of nervousness Scott had ever seen him exhibit. "Since Tuesday, Annabelle and I have been considering the issue, trying to see how we could make things easier for Rachel. We have some ideas, but we need to know to what extent you're willing to become involved."

"To whatever extent you're willing to let me," he answered immediately. "As I told Annabelle, I had intended to formally adopt Rachel - and I'd still do it, if I could."

"But, Scott - you're a young man," Seth said with a surprised frown. "I'm sure you'll get married someday and have a family of your own. You wouldn't want to be tied to Rachel permanently."

"Why not?" he asked. "Rachel may not have my blood running through her veins, but in every other way, I've been her father since she was less than a year old. Anyone I could ever love would welcome her into our family." That was true, wasn't it? He and Carolyn hadn't specifically talked about kids, but she had

asked him about adopting Rachel.

Seth seemed startled by his vehemence. After a few seconds, he said, "Well, that's not what we have in mind, in any case. What we thought might work was if you spent a few hours with her, at least several days a week. It wouldn't have to be down at the house - in fact, it might be good if she got used to visiting your house, or you could bring her in to the office sometimes like you used to do."

This was nearly unbelievable! "Certainly. I'd love to do that. She could stay overnight sometimes, too."

"No." Seth shook his head. "The expert was clear on that. If she's going to live with us, that needs to remain constant. Otherwise, we'd just confuse her all over again - some days, things would be a lot like they used to be, and then others, she'd be with us and it would be different." Cautioning now, he added, "And this is only a temporary measure. As she gets used to living with us and begins to handle her mother's death appropriately, we'll reduce the amount of time she spends with you."

Because otherwise Rachel would never stop thinking of him as Daddy, and Seth and Annabelle couldn't accept that. Still, what Seth was suggesting was a whole lot better for everyone than the current situation. "I'll do it. But if I may ask, why is the reason Francine and I never married relevant?"

Seth smiled, a little shamefacedly, Scott thought. "I have to admit I used it as an argument for not approaching you about this plan. I've known you cared about Rachel, but I always thought it was primarily because of how you felt about Francine..." He waved his hand, dismissing the partial explanation. "In any case, Annabelle set me straight."

Scott decided to let the matter drop. "How do you envision things working with Rachel now?"

"Well, one thought would be for you to pick her up at Linda's on whatever days you were spending time with her. When you were through, depending on what time it was, you could either bring her down to the house or drop her off here for me to take home."

Wasn't that interesting? It sounded like he'd definitely need an assistant. "That's a good idea. Perhaps I could do that every weekday, maybe leaving work around three, like Francine used to."

Seth nodded. "That sounds good. I've been picking her up, but not until five-thirty or so, and Linda told me yesterday that Rachel gets awfully tired and cranky by then." Suddenly frowning, he asked, "But how's that going to effect your work schedule? Not that I don't welcome the idea of you working fewer hours, but you've got an awful lot on your plate these days."

"That's right," Scott said, trying to console himself with the knowledge that this was a needed change. "And it's something I've been considering lately, too. I realized yesterday that I've been working sixty hours a week regularly for months - and more when we have deadlines."

"Sixty hours! Scott, that's too much. I know you're a hands-on type of leader, but don't you think it's finally time to split up your job?" Seth was the concerned father figure now.

"I think so. That's what I came down here to discuss this morning. I've taken the liberty of breaking down my current responsibilities into two groups - the ones I feel I should retain, and the ones someone else could assume." He handed Seth the list he'd typed up this morning.

Seth scanned it rapidly, but thoroughly. "Yes, this looks reasonable. You're suggesting you remain as Chief Designer and find someone else to be Group Leader. Now, it doesn't say so here, but I assume you'd want the Group Leader to report to you."

Scott nodded. "I think that's a good idea, because in essence delivering the product remains my

responsibility."

"All right. Now, this seems to me an excellent opportunity to promote from within. Do you have any thoughts on the best candidate?" After no more than a couple of seconds' pause, he said, "As I recall, both Jake and Carolyn have project leadership in their backgrounds." Seth was famous for his instant recall of every employee's personal, educational and job history.

"I think you're right, sir, but my suggestion is Bill."

Seth contained his shock well, but he was definitely surprised. "Why?"

Scott took a deep breath, ready with the arguments he'd spent hours preparing. "Primarily because he's been here the longest and not seen much thanks for his loyalty. He's highly capable - in fact, I don't think we've scratched the surface of what he can do."

"But he's been a disrespectful thorn in your side for years. Why give him this chance?" Good question.

Leap of faith time. "Because I think a big part of his problem has been his perception that he wasn't a valued employee. That doesn't excuse his behavior, but perhaps it mitigates it. If you're willing to support me in this, I'll make sure that he understands he'll need to abide by a new set of rules in order for the promotion to become permanent."

Seth considered the matter seriously for a couple of minutes, then said, "I'll tell you what. You talk to Bill about the job, tell him he's being considered for it and what behavior you'd expect from him. Then have him come see me. I want to see for myself whether he's willing to take this job more seriously than his current one."

Scott let go of the chair arm he'd been squeezing to death. "I'll do that this morning." As he stood, he remembered their conversation about Rachel. "Should I plan to pick up Rachel this afternoon?"

Seth smiled - solemnly, as usual. "I'm sure Rachel would appreciate that. And if you could bring her down to the house by seven or seven-thirty that would be great."

"Certainly."

As Scott's hand closed around the doorknob, Seth said, "Thank you, Scott."

"You're welcome, sir." But would Seth thank him if he knew the real reason Scott wanted to give the new job to Bill? Not a chance.

Bill looked up as his office door closed. Scott. Good. He must have met with Seth already. "So?" Uncharacteristically, he didn't dare say more for fear his eagerness would expose him.

"So, it's up to you now." Scott dropped into the guest chair and sighed explosively. "He's agreed to create the new job - he's just not sure you're the right candidate."

"Who does he want?" he asked. "It had better not be Carolyn."

Scott shook his head. "He doesn't have anyone particular in mind. His problem is the same as mine, wondering if you'll do a good job."

"Well, I will - not that any of you jerks'll believe it even when you see it."

"Cut it out, Bill. That attitude stinks, and it's not true. We don't play favorites here - we don't have time.

Now, the deal I made with Seth is that I'm to talk with you about the job and tell you you're in the running for it. We're supposed to talk about the job and how your behavior needs to change - "

"We already did that," he reminded him, gritting his teeth.

Scott nodded. "Right, but he doesn't know that. Anyway, after that, you're supposed to go see him."

"What for?"

"To see if he buys your act, of course!" Scott looked at him scornfully. "I sure hope you're more convincing with him than you are with me, because he's no fool."

"Oh, give me a damn break. I'll be fine - assuming he's serious about giving me a chance - and if he's not, I'm holding you responsible!"

Scott obviously didn't have an answer for that, so he said, "And by the way, if the job comes through, I expect you to return my possessions promptly."

He left before Bill could tell him that expecting and getting were two very different things.

Carolyn was thrilled for Scott, she really was. Spending time regularly with Rachel would be so good for both of them. They'd have the chance to get used to the idea of not being father and daughter any longer and to create a new less intense relationship.

And Carolyn had plenty of things to do herself, so she didn't have to just sit around waiting for him to show up after taking Rachel home. Maybe they should even consider seeing each other only on weekends, when Rachel would be with Seth and Annabelle and when they could have more than a few short hours together at a time.

Yeah, right. She felt like an addict sitting here in her living room waiting for him to show up. She tried to tell herself they had a lot to talk about and that was why she was so eager to see him, but that story was a hoot. She'd been miserably alone for four years, and no one had filled the hole that Scott had left behind, not even for a few minutes.

She ran to the door when it rang a little after six-thirty. Wasn't this early for Scott?

That was easily explained - it wasn't Scott. It was Bill, and he must have seen her disappointment. "Hi, sweet cheeks. Sorry I'm not lover boy, but that's life. Maybe I can entertain you while you wait." He tried slipping in the partially open door.

She blocked him. "Not necessary. And I thought you weren't going to call me that anymore."

He grinned. "No way I'd give that up. I love the way it makes you blush. Anyway, the deal was for work, not all the time."

She was pretty sure that's not what Scott had meant, but it wasn't really worth a hassle. "So, are you here for a reason or just to annoy me?"

"For a reason, of course," he smirked. "I brought you a present - kind of a good-will gesture, now that I'm getting my promotion." He reached into his pocket and handed her Scott's ring.

Her heart took a leap and her hand closed possessively around the ring. More calmly than she felt, she asked, "Where are the other things?"

"In a safe place. I still need a little insurance on you two - otherwise you might decide you don't need to leave A-W, after all. This promotion's nice, but the job I really want is Scott's."

"You're going to keep them? Don't you have any concept of private property?" That was a stupid question. Bill had no morals at all or he wouldn't be doing this to them.

He smiled nastily. "I haven't decided yet, but if you two are good little girls and boys, maybe I'll give them back as a going-away present. In the meantime, enjoy the ring."

As she closed the door behind him, she realized that he couldn't possibly understand how much it meant to hold Scott's ring again. Now, it seemed a little more possible to make their dreams come true.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Scott rang Linda's doorbell just after three o'clock. She greeted him with a smile. "Hello, Scott. It's nice to see you again. I was so pleased to hear that you'll be picking Rachel up for a while. She misses you terribly."

"I miss her, too," he said, trying to unobtrusively look past her shoulder to spot Rachel. "I've been meaning to call you, to thank you for everything you've done for her."

"She's such a sweet little girl at heart, I'm glad to do whatever I can. Come on inside and I'll get her."

But the minute he stepped inside, he heard a high-pitched squeal, "Daddy!" and he was nearly knocked over when Rachel tackled his legs. He bent over and picked her up and she shrieked again. Then, suddenly serious, she said, "Grandma said I couldn't see you anymore."

"She and Grandpa changed their minds. I'm going to pick you up from Linda's every day for a while, and we'll have loads of fun."

Her eyes got huge and she asked, "I get to stay with you and everything?"

"No, sweetie. You're still going to live at Grandma and Grandpa's."

"But I don't wanna!" Her lower lip protruded in a pout. He and Francine had been trying to convince her that pouting wasn't appropriate behavior, but he guessed some backsliding was to be expected.

"Well, that's where you're going to live, and there's nothing either of us can do to change that. But we can do lots of neat stuff after day-care every day and I think that's pretty great. Don't you?" He hoped he'd sold the idea sufficiently for her to buy it. He'd never realized until lately how much salesmanship was involved in raising a child.

"Uh-huh," she said, obviously planning. "Can we have pizza? Grandma and Grandpa eat boring stuff all the time."

He chuckled. Only a four-year-old would call Annabelle's exquisite meals "boring stuff." "If that's what you'd like. Now, how about I put you down and you gather up your belongings?"

"Okay." She raced off the second her feet hit the floor and, contrary to what Francine had told him about her habit of seeming to forget someone was waiting for her, she returned quickly. "All ready, Daddy." She grabbed his hand and started tugging him out the door. "Bye, Linda."

When they got settled in the car, she asked, "Are we gonna go to the toy store?"

"Not today, Rachel. You already have a million toys." Probably a million and a half by now. She'd been living with Seth and Annabelle close to two weeks. "I thought you might like to spend some time at the house where you lived with Mommy and me." He hoped that was as good an idea in practice as it seemed to be in theory.

"Uh-huh," she said, not terribly enthusiastically. After a few seconds, she asked, "Daddy, do you know where my flip-flops are? The purple ones Mommy got me when we stayed at Grandma and Grandpa's beach house? Grandma couldn't find them."

He'd known Annabelle was going through Rachel's things - he'd even seen her doing it. But still, it felt wrong, and for a second, he was glad that she hadn't been able to find something. "I haven't seen them, honey, but we'll look in your room." Maybe it was good to have a purpose for this, her first visit to the house since Francine's death.

They parked in the garage, and he watched her carefully as they entered the house. If she got upset, he wanted to react quickly. She walked slowly, looking around cautiously, but she didn't appear upset. She toured the living room, then went into the kitchen and sat at the table. "Mommy always gave me a glass of milk and a cookie when I got home."

Milk, yes, but usually some fruit instead of a cookie. Did Rachel think he didn't know that? Of course, Seth and Annabelle didn't know those little nuances of daily life, so she was probably getting used to making up things to get what she wanted. "We'll have milk, but I haven't been to the store, so we won't have a snack."

"Grandma makes special cookies just for me," she informed him.

"That's nice," he said, setting her glass on the table and sitting across from her. "You're a very lucky little girl to have a grandma and a grandpa who love you so much."

"You love me, too, don't you?" She sounded not completely sure of the answer.

"Yes, I do. Very, very much."

"More than Grandma and Grandpa?"

He had to smile at the attempted manipulation. "Rachel, we talked about this before. Love doesn't work like that. It's special enough all by itself that we don't have to have contests." He knew she needed an example she could relate to. "You love both Grandma and Grandpa, don't you?" She nodded. "What if I told you that you had to pick only one of them to love? You wouldn't be able to do that, would you?"

Her face wrinkled up while she thought about that, and he started to worry. What if she didn't answer like he was expecting? How could he fix the situation? Finally, she shook her head. "Nuh-uh. First, I thought maybe Grandma, because she's really mostly nice to me, and she bakes me cookies and everything, and sometimes Grandpa kind of scares me."

Seth more than kind of scared Scott from time to time, so that seemed reasonable. "But you changed your mind. Why?"

"Because he's so sad that Mommy died. He takes me places and he tells me about Mommy when she was little - even littler than me, sometimes." She continued drinking her milk while Scott sat there stunned.

Of course, he'd known that Seth was sad about Francine's death. They all were. But he hadn't really thought about Seth being Francine's father, like he was Rachel's. What must it be like, to lose such a

beacon of light and life?

His newfound understanding helped make a little more sense of the situation with Rachel, too. Scott had assumed that Seth was doing everything on Annabelle's behalf, wanting her to have something positive to focus on. But maybe not. Maybe this was a case of two fathers, both needing the same little girl.

"May I be excused now, Daddy?"

"Yes, you may," he answered. They'd always been careful to be polite back to Rachel, to help reinforce her lessons on manners.

When she started for her bedroom, he followed, ready in case the partially stripped room was a shock. She studied it for a few seconds before going inside, then went straight to her bed and sat on the edge. "Mommy bought my ballerina lamp when I was still inside her tummy."

Not sure if she expected a response, Scott said, "That's right. It's very pretty, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh," she said, staring at it hungrily.

"Would you like to take it to Grandma and Grandpa's? I'll bet they'd let you have it next to your bed there, too."

"No!" She jumped up, ran into her bathroom, and turned on the faucet full blast. He heard her saying something, so he went closer and saw her glaring at the water, yelling, "Poopy, poopy, poopy!"

He hurried up behind her and shut the water off, then picked her up. "It is pretty poopy, isn't it? I'll bet you miss Mommy a lot." The tears spilled out of her eyes and she nodded and buried her head in his chest for a serious cry. While she cried, he carried her to the living room and sat down, still holding her close. She gradually calmed, and he felt her body beginning to relax, maybe into sleep, so he was careful not to move.

But before long, her eyes opened and she looked at him uncertainly. "Could I go play in Mommy's closet?" When he didn't answer right away, she implored, "Please? Mommy used to let me, and I'll be real careful."

He didn't know if he should agree, but he did. "Just for a little while. You wanted pizza for dinner, remember?"

She nodded very seriously and ran off. For once, he didn't follow, sensing that she needed some time alone. He did, too, for that matter. Having her here in the house was wonderful, but it was painful, too. It brought back so many memories and reminded him of so many dreams that would never come true now.

Like when Rachel was just a baby and he was barely beginning to get to know her and Francine. He would come over at lunch time with deli sandwiches and his camera, and he'd take picture after picture of Rachel. She was the first baby he'd known since Emily, and he hadn't really been old enough to appreciate Emily when she was that age. Whenever he could manage it, he'd get Francine in the picture, too - by "accident," since she was adamant that she didn't want her picture taken. He'd loved the expression on her face whenever she looked at the miracle that was her daughter and had been determined to capture it on film.

How long after that had he first realized that he was dreaming about having a child with Francine? It couldn't have been more than a month, although he'd been careful long after that to make sure she never guessed. She was a new widow and he attributed her fragility to grief. He wanted to wait until she was ready before springing a new relationship on her.

That dream had lasted all through the months of waiting, through the months of dating, and through the years of living together. And it had died in the instant that she died.

Bill practiced controlling his smirk as he sat near the head of the conference table with Seth and Scott. Finally, his promotion was being announced!

Seth started in his usual folksy manner by thanking everyone for their recent kindness to his family - not that any of the project team had actually done anything except go to the funeral and the get-together afterward. Still, Bill supposed the guy had to lay on the soft soap whenever he could.

After that, he expressed support for Scott and all his efforts on behalf of A-W over the years, going on and on enough to embarrass the guy royally and to make Jake and Rollie exchange questioning glances. Scott eventually tried to stop the flow of accolades, and Bill put in, "It's all true, so you might as well admit it." He got some big-time stares then, but hey, he was only telling the truth. He didn't have to like the guy to know he'd done good stuff.

Seth gave him a look that seemed to say he didn't buy that Bill really thought those things and segued into a bit about how A-W had grown over the years. The point of that was, of course, that Scott's job was too big for one person any longer, etc., etc.

Giving credit where credit was due, Seth's explanation of why Bill was the right person for the new job was impressive. He talked about his history with the company, using the growth of the company to tie in with how Bill had developed skill-wise.

And everybody listened, too. Rollie, a real wise-ass slacker if there ever was one, looked pretty skeptical to begin with, but Seth's arguments got him nodding before long.

Scott took over the meeting then, and explained in detail how his responsibilities would be divided up. He also announced that he was going to be leaving work at three o'clock for the next several weeks or so - to spend time with Rachel of all things. Seth looked pleased as anything about it, which made Bill wonder what had changed in the last week. He guessed he'd better head down to Lake Oswego for his regular visit with Rachel tomorrow morning.

After the meeting, Scott talked to him for a while about schedule junk - one of the thankless jobs he was now responsible for - and he practiced by going around and getting schedule updates from everyone and updating the chart. The damn program didn't work intuitively at all, so he had to keep looking things up and that pissed him off.

He was definitely crashing off his earlier high when the phone rang early in the afternoon. It was Tanya, who'd been completely freaked out by having Francine die right in front of her. She'd refused to see him after that, saying it would just be too weird.

Today, she changed her tune. She had some free time this weekend and wondered if he'd like to get together. Would he ever, but he wasn't about to admit to having no plans for tonight. Instead, he made a date with her for noon tomorrow - to heck with seeing Rachel - and said he hoped she didn't have any plans for the rest of the weekend. She said, "We'll see if you can give me a reason to cancel them."

He had no doubt whatsoever.

Carolyn lay in bed while Scott slept. At least he was here in body, if not completely in mind. She understood his exhilaration the last two nights, and she was happy for him. And watching him talk about

Rachel was an education in itself, telling her more about the Scott deep inside than she'd known before.

But a nasty part of her didn't care about any of that. It wanted her to be the focus of his existence. It wanted him to devote as much analysis to what she thought and felt as he did to what Rachel thought and felt.

And a scared part of her realized that a lifelong relationship with Scott meant having babies and raising a family. She wasn't at all sure she could handle that.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Scott decided that Saturday mornings were one time when not having a kid around was a definite plus. He and Carolyn could stay in bed as long as they wanted with no danger of awkward questions being asked later.

Their idyll was interrupted by the doorbell, and the alarm in her eyes showed that she was thinking the same thing he was - Bill, here to prove himself right and to gloat about it. "I'll shut the bedroom door," she said, slipping into her robe and hurrying to the door.

But if it was Bill, he'd feel free to walk right into Carolyn's bedroom, so Scott hurried to dress. Facing Bill would be easier if he had his clothes on.

The door opened before he'd done more than slip into his jeans. He ducked behind a dresser before he heard Carolyn's voice. "It was just a delivery." He peeked out and saw her standing there, blushing and looking a little emotional. "Since we're up, I might as well make breakfast. You can shower first." She left before he decided whether to ask why her eyes were full of tears.

He smelled bacon frying by the time he was through with his shower. Once dressed, he headed toward the kitchen to help, but was distracted by the bouquet of balloons floating above her TV set. Who was sending her balloons and why? The card answered both questions. "Happy birthday, babe. May your wishes come true. Love, Tony"

"It's your birthday?" he asked.

"Uh-huh." She was whisking eggs in a bowl, seeming to devote more attention to the task than necessary.

"You should have told me." That sounded accusing, so he added, "We could have done something special."

She shrugged. "That's okay. I don't usually celebrate or anything - Tony's just into that kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?"

"Oh, you know. Gifts and flowers and stuff."

But they'd been divorced for four years! Why would he still send her gifts for her birthday - not to mention calling her "babe" and signing the card "Love?"

He didn't like the way those questions made him feel - like she was his private property and he didn't want Tony to have anything to do with her. Was that why he'd been so uncomfortable with Francine still having a relationship with Bill? Had he thought she belonged to him and should banish all reminders of her previous life with George?

"Breakfast'll be ready in a couple of minutes. You could make some toast, if you wanted," she said, sliding the toaster and a loaf of bread across the counter between kitchen and dining area.

He did that, and when the first slices were done, he discovered she'd given him a plate, a knife, and the butter, too. He put two more slices down, then buttered and cut the toast in two, the whole time wondering what he could do that would impress her more than sending a bunch of damn balloons. He couldn't even take her out to dinner for fear someone would see them!

While they were eating, he asked, "Have you been to the coast?"

She shook her head. "I haven't gone anywhere really - well, Phillip dragged me to this jazz club down near Salem once, but it was after dark, so I didn't see anything."

"I didn't know you'd gone out with him." When she froze, he said, "Not that it's any of my business." Oh, God, was he going to be the jealous type with her?

"I didn't 'go out' with him," she said precisely. "I have gone to dinner and other places with him, as a friend and nothing more. He felt sorry for me, not knowing anybody here."

Phillip's interest wasn't restricted to feeling sorry for Carolyn, but Scott decided there was nothing to gain and plenty to lose by making an issue of it. He'd pretend that last exchange hadn't happened. "Let's go to the coast today for your birthday. We'll have a special dinner and walk on the beach, and there are some really nice waterfront hotels out there."

"Would anyone out there be likely to recognize you?"

He shook his head. "Whenever I went out with Francine and Rachel, we stayed at Seth and Annabelle's place up near Cannon Beach. I was thinking we'd go somewhere further south."

"I guess I could leave Princess alone overnight," she said tentatively. "I'd need to call my parents, though - they'll call later, it being my birthday. But isn't it too late to get reservations?"

He shook his head. "I doubt it. There are plenty of places and one is bound to have a cancellation, if nothing else. I'll just call around until I find one. And since I also need to go home and pack, you'll have plenty of time to call your folks." He also had to call Seth and Annabelle to let them know he'd be out of town overnight, but he didn't mention that. This mixed loyalties thing with Carolyn and Rachel was awkward. "So, shall we do it?" he asked with a smile.

She smiled back at him. "Yes, let's."

Carolyn called Tony as soon as Scott left, even before her shower. She wasn't sure how long he'd be gone, and talking to Tony was the one thing she wouldn't feel comfortable doing in front of Scott.

"Thanks for the balloons," she said when he answered.

His voice changed to the warm tones that always made her feel cherished. "Hi, babe! I'm glad they got there - I would have sent flowers, but I know you don't have plants because of Princess."

"Balloons'll last longer, and they're very festive. How are you? I wasn't sure if you'd be home this weekend."

"I am, for a change, and you know me - I'm fine. Are you having a happy birthday so far?"

"Definitely." They talked a while longer, but she never got up the nerve to tell him about Scott. He'd be pleased for her, but he'd want to know that she was sure it would work this time, and she really couldn't say that yet. She'd wait until she felt more confident.

Her shower and packing didn't take long, and would have been even quicker if she'd known what to take. Scott had said they'd go out for a special dinner - did that mean a dress, or nice slacks, or what? She'd have known what to wear if Tony said that, but when she'd been with Scott before, they'd worn jeans almost every day. She ended up taking a mint green knit dress that she could dress up with gold jewelry and her favorite cream linen-texture slacks, as well as the jeans she was wearing. Almost at the last minute, she remembered to take beach shoes, and a plastic bag to keep the rest of her clothes clean and sand-free.

She was on the phone with her parents when the doorbell rang. She'd told them simply that she was going to the coast with a friend and was fairly sure they assumed her friend was another woman. They'd gotten used to her not dating and only occasionally reminded her that "not all men would treat her like Tony had". They still didn't believe the truth - that she'd been the one who wanted the divorce.

She said a quick goodbye and met Scott at the door. "I'm ready, if you are."

"Anything I can carry?" he asked with a smile, seeming to look around for something other than her small suitcase and purse. When she grabbed both of them, called goodbye to Princess, and closed the door behind her, he said, "I guess Francine always took more because she had to pack for Rachel, too."

She hoped that Francine and Rachel wouldn't be going along on this trip, but didn't say anything about it. She'd sound petty and jealous, and she didn't want that. Instead, she concentrated on relaxing and getting ready to enjoy the weekend.

They took his car, a comfortable mix between sensible and sporty, and she settled into the luxury of being driven somewhere. Surprisingly, it was one of the things she'd most missed after splitting up with Tony. He hadn't been around all the time, of course, but when they'd gone on trips, like to visit her family in New York State, he'd done the driving.

She was impressed by how long it took to get out of the Portland metropolitan area, especially considering that they'd started in the western suburbs and were heading west. She'd known Portland was larger than Providence, but hadn't been particularly aware of it before this.

Conversation came in fits and starts and stayed very much on the surface. They no longer knew each other as they once had, and despite her promise the other day to go to Chicago with him, it wasn't clear they'd ever overcome the gremlins from the past.

She reminded herself that the future would take care of itself. The important thing was that they had this opportunity to be together again, and that if they did nothing but come to terms with each other as fellow human beings again, they'd be successful. Besides, it was her birthday and spending a romantic weekend with the man she loved was a dynamite way to celebrate.

Their hotel was only a couple of years old, and it was lovely. The expansive lobby had exposed beams of light-colored wood and a whole wall of glass that looked out at the beach. And the beach was a real beach, with lots of sand and waves lapping at the shore, rather than the Newport-style shoreline she was used to with little or no sand and crashing waves.

After checking in early, they changed into beach shoes and put on windbreakers for a walk on the beach. The day was lovely, sunny and warm, but the wind was noticeable. Just as she started to get cold, Scott pointed to a nearby building. "That's a brew-pub. Let's get some lunch."

They ate burgers that were so messy they ate bent over the plastic baskets that served as plates and drank a pitcher of a rich dark beer she first thought was bitter, but later decided was just perfect. Conversation flowed more freely, and she sat there, her knees bumping his under their small table, marveling that this wasn't a dream. She and Scott were a continent away from where they'd met, but they were together, at least for now.

They talked about wandering through some gift shops after lunch, something that didn't particularly appeal to her, but she didn't want to admit it. If she did, he'd want to know what she wanted to do, and she'd have to tell him she was insatiable where he was concerned. She'd spent four years without him, and now she couldn't get enough of him. It didn't need to be sex - snuggling together or simply holding hands was fine, too.

She yawned from the fresh air and the beer, and he smiled. "Let's go put on our regular shoes first." And when they got to their room, he knelt at her feet and untied each shoe. She tried objecting, but he said, "It's your birthday. Let me." He picked up first one foot and then the other, slipping her shoes off and her socks, too. "They're sandy and wet."

Next, her jeans came off, since they were wet and sandy from the knees down. Her windbreaker was next, and pretty soon he got down to items he couldn't claim had sand on them. So he pulled her down onto his lap and kissed her thoroughly - and then, there really was sand all over everything.

She got into the spirit of things and helped discard his wet, sandy clothing, and as they were enjoying that, they noticed the gritty particles of sand now stuck to their bodies. She could just imagine how unpleasant some of those grains would be later, lodged in very sensitive places.

Scott apparently came to the same conclusion. "We'll have to shower." Conveniently, the shower was built for two, so they had plenty of room to maneuver - and the hotel seemed to have a limitless supply of hot water, too.

After that, there was no question of going to any gift shops. They crawled under the thick silk-like sheets and burrowed together for a nap. When they woke up, he said, "I'd better check and make sure we got rid of all that sand." They had, but it took a very long time to make sure.

They had dinner in the hotel dining room, and Carolyn wore her dress. The place was plenty casual and laid-back for her slacks or even her jeans - if they hadn't spent the afternoon wadded up on the floor - but she suddenly realized Scott hadn't seen her in a dress before. A business suit, yes, but a dress was different.

Walking into the restaurant with his arm casually around her waist, she was reminded of walking into a hundred restaurants like this with Tony. She felt like she belonged, like she was loved.

The trouble started when they were looking at the wine list. She made an offhand comment about Tony being especially fond of one of the imported wines listed. Scott didn't say anything then, and she didn't think anything of it when he ordered an Oregon wine instead, but she should have.

He was quiet after they ordered, then suddenly wanted to know, "Why does he call you 'babe'?"

"He's always called me that. It's just a habit."

"Is it a habit to send you presents - and sign them 'Love, Tony'?"

She sighed. "Yes. We're still very close - I told you that, didn't I?"

"But you're divorced! He's not supposed to love you or call you special names." He frowned then, like

he'd heard how idiotic and jealous he sounded. With an abrupt gesture, he dismissed the subject. "Never mind. It isn't your fault what he does."

She didn't reply out loud, but she couldn't keep from answering him in her mind. And since he barely spoke during the whole meal, she had plenty of time to simmer - and to tell herself to cool it - and to admit that she couldn't.

When they got back to their room, she said, "It's time for us to finish our discussion."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Scott groaned to himself. He should have kept his mouth shut. Was there anything he could say to salvage the situation? "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything about Tony."

That wasn't it, apparently, since Carolyn lit right into him. "You're damn right you shouldn't have - but not for any of the stupid reasons you're likely to come up with! I can't believe the amount of nerve you have - Tony's the sweetest, kindest person in the entire universe, and if he wants to send me balloons and say he loves me, there's not a thing wrong with it!"

"No, I know that. I just felt kind of jealous, I guess." He hoped she realized how hard it was to admit that.

"Jealous? Of him? You arrogant fool! Tell me - what exactly are you jealous of? Are you jealous that I never loved him the way I loved you? Or that I walked out of a ten-year relationship with him for nothing more than dreams of a relationship with you?" Her eyes narrowing like she hated him, she demanded, "Or are you jealous that he knows what it's like to truly love someone? Because the more I learn about you, the more I realize that you care about possessing people - not loving them!"

He backed away from her, not knowing how to respond. Anger - especially out in the open, like this - wasn't something he could handle. Francine had always retreated into her hurt, then pretended it didn't exist until he coaxed it out of her. And his parents, even before Emily died and all life went out of their house - had retreated into pills or booze, and as far as he knew, they still hadn't admitted that the anger even existed.

His silence didn't calm her. She went on, "I'm breaking the rules, aren't I? You like to pretend that we have a relationship, that we're going to spend the rest of our lives together. Well, I have news for you - all we've got right now is sex, and that's nowhere near good enough to make me forget everything we're missing. I know it's tough for you to deal with losing Francine and Rachel all at once - but unless you get your damn act together and start dealing with our problems, you'll lose me, too!"

He knew she was telling the truth. She was angry, and people often said things when they were angry that they didn't mean, but not Carolyn. Not now.

And he couldn't lose her. Not when he'd just found her again. Not when he needed her so desperately. He had to do something. "I love you - " She snorted in disgust. "You've got to help me - "

Help him do what? God, was he as hopeless as she claimed? He had to find a way to get through to her - quickly, before everything was ruined.

The phone rang, breaking the strained silence and making him jump. "Hello?"

"Scott, is that you? This is Seth."

Just what he needed. He sank onto the bed and said, "Yes, sir."

"Listen, I'm sorry to bother you while you're away for the weekend, but Annabelle fell today and broke several bones."

"Oh, no! Is she all right?"

"Well, she broke both bones in her lower right leg, plus her right hand and arm, but they're clean breaks. She's in surgery right now having pins put in. But what I'm calling about is Rachel. Linda came here to the hospital to pick her up a couple of hours ago, but she's going away for the day tomorrow and won't be able to keep her."

"Would you like me to come back and take her?"

Seth sighed. "I hate to ask, but if you could, I'd appreciate it. She's really too young to spend much time here."

Carolyn was moving around the room now, separating their clothes and gathering up hers. "Certainly. I'll leave right away, and I'll check with Linda on the way to see if she wants me to pick up Rachel tonight."

"Thank you, Scott. I'll talk to you again tomorrow, when I know more about Annabelle's situation."

"That'll be good. Say hello to her from me. Good night, sir." He hung up and turned to Carolyn, intending to say something conciliatory.

"I'll be ready to leave in a couple of minutes," she said, rapidly stuffing things into her suitcase.

He was anxious to get on the road, so he started packing, too. They'd have about two hours in the car on the way back. They could talk then.

Carolyn didn't know if she'd make it all the way back to Beaverton. She was still so angry, and hurt so much inside. It probably wouldn't hurt any more if she opened the car door and jumped out.

And Scott just sat there, like the clueless jerk he was, intent on driving the stupid car, not caring that her heart was being ripped to shreds again. He hadn't even bothered to tell her what Seth's phone call had been about!

Finally, she decided to ask. She at least deserved to know what was so all-fired important. "Did someone get hurt or something?"

"What? Oh, yeah. Annabelle broke a hand, an arm, and a leg. That reminds me, I'd better call Linda before we get into the mountains."

He picked up his cell phone and punched in a number, then listened. "Hi, Chuck. This is Scott Richards. Is Linda around?" In a few seconds, he continued, "Hi, Linda. Seth called and I'm on my way back to town. I should be there by ten - ten-thirty at the latest. Since you're going out of town in the morning, would it be better for me to get Rachel tonight?" He listened some more and said, "I'll call if I'm going to be any later than that, then. And thanks."

He put the phone down, and Carolyn thought he might continue their conversation, but apparently he thought he'd told her everything she needed to know. Well, fine.

The trip took forever, and every mile reminded her of exactly where she fell on Scott's priority list - way

below important things like the little girl he was playing tug-of-war with and probably somewhere on the same level as satisfying his other bodily needs. Lucky for him, he'd just gorged himself at an all-you-can-whatever buffet for the last several days.

When he dropped her off at her apartment, there wasn't any garbage about him offering to carry her suitcase. Good thing, since she probably would have brained him with it. He said he'd call her later, but she couldn't be bothered to respond.

Getting Rachel settled into her old bed was no easy trick. Luckily, Scott found some sheets and towels in the linen closet, but she was way too keyed up to fall sleep for a long time. It turned out she'd been there when Annabelle fell - from a ladder in the entryway, as far as he could tell - and she was both horrified by the memory and excited by it.

"I 'membered what you taught me, Daddy," she said proudly. "I called 911 and I said my grandma fell and got hurt, and the lady talked to me until I heard sirens, and then she said to open the door so they could come get Grandma."

"That was real good, honey. Where was Grandpa?"

"At work." She made a face. "He works almost as much as you do. That's what I told the man when he asked, and I showed him how Grandma has a button on the phone to call Grandpa. And he called Grandpa, and then Grandpa told me I could go in th'ambulance with Grandma." Her eyes big and reverent, she said, "They went so fast."

"I'll bet they did. Were you scared? I would have been."

"A little," she admitted. Then, changing the subject completely, she asked, "Do I get to come live with you now?"

He'd been wondering about that, but didn't dare let Rachel know it was even a possibility. "I don't think so, sweetie. Grandma won't be in the hospital long, and when she goes home, she'll probably need you to run errands for her."

As he'd hoped, the prospect of doing something big-girl like running errands helped make staying at Seth and Annabelle's more acceptable. He recited her favorite story from memory, since that book was in Lake Oswego and eventually she slept.

He did, too, only to wake up at three-thirty, remembering that he'd promised to call Carolyn. He lay awake until dawn, thinking how thoroughly he'd messed things up and wishing it was enough later that he could call and apologize.

But then, suddenly, it was mid-morning and Rachel was all over him, demanding that he get up so they could have breakfast. He wondered whether Seth and Annabelle had let her do this to them or whether she'd decided on her own that long-time rules were made to be broken.

She wanted waffles, and surprisingly they sounded good to him, too. He checked the freezer, only to discover that they were out of the toaster kind, and he didn't know how to make them from scratch. He hadn't needed to - not when Francine was such a good cook. "We're out of waffles, sweetie. We'll have cereal, instead."

"No! I want waffles!" Her mouth puckered into a pout and she glared at him.

"Rachel," he said warningly. "Maybe you do want waffles, but you know you can't always have what you

want. We're all out of waffles, and that's that."

"If you loved me, you'd take me to Denny's," she grumbled.

He'd had too little sleep to let her pull this kind of stunt. "I love you very much, Rachel, but you're behaving like a spoiled brat this morning. I think you'd better go stand in the corner until you're ready to tell me you're sorry."

Her mouth set into a straight line and she didn't move. Her eyes reproached him, just like Carolyn's had last night. Not letting that soften his resolve, he took her gently but firmly by the arm and led her to the corner. When he left her there, she looked over her shoulder accusingly at him, and he said, "Face the corner, Rachel. You know the rules." She turned around with a sigh and what sounded like a whimper.

He wasn't going to feel sorry for her. She was being naughty, testing all the limits she was usually so good at abiding by. He gritted his teeth and turned his attention to starting a pot of coffee, then eating a bowl of cereal. Darn it, waffles would have tasted good.

"Can I come out now, Daddy?" she asked, sounding much more pitiful than five minutes in the corner could possibly cause.

"Are you ready to tell me you're sorry?"

"Yes, Daddy. I'm sorry." She was crying.

Great. He was taking his anger and frustration out on four-year-olds now! He hurried over and hugged her. "Rachel, sweetie, Daddy's sorry, too. I'm in a bad mood this morning, and I was mean to you because of it. Will you forgive me?"

In one of her lightning mood swings, she giggled. "Maybe you should have to stand in the corner."

"Not likely, kiddo. You were daring me to get mad and you know it." Now was the time to make sure she understood the lesson. "The thing is, Rachel, we all have rules we have to live by. Even when everything gets all turned upside down like now, we have to obey them. You're usually such a well-behaved little girl, and I got upset this morning because I knew you were being bratty on purpose. I miss your Mommy, too, and so do Grandma and Grandpa. Don't make it harder for us."

"I'm sorry, Daddy." She was solemn now, and he couldn't tell if she understood or if she was simply trying to please him.

"Are you ready for a bowl of cereal now?"

"I guess."

He got it ready, and while she was eating, he said, "We'll go shopping today so we can have waffles another morning."

"Do I still gotta go back to Grandma and Grandpa's?"

"I'm pretty sure you will, honey. I'm going to call in a few minutes and see if we can go see Grandma in the hospital today."

"She got hurt real bad when she fell. Do you suppose she's better yet?"

"Probably some, but not completely. She broke several bones, and they take a long time to heal." After doing the dishes, he tried Seth at home and on his cell phone, but neither answered. He guessed at which

hospital Annabelle would have been taken to and called there. She was registered and they gave him the number for her room. Seth answered and said they could come to visit for a short while.

They went right away, and Scott was shocked at how little Annabelle resembled her normal, cheerful, and well-put-together self. Her leg and arm were immobilized and she was obviously quite uncomfortable. She was glad to see Rachel, though, and was careful to tell her what a good job she'd done calling for help.

It wasn't a good time to discuss Annabelle's injuries and prognosis in detail, so Seth told him, "Come by my office when you get in tomorrow. We have some things to discuss."

Scott's heart raced guiltily, but at the same time he knew Seth probably wanted to make arrangements for Rachel to stay with him for the time being. Seth would have no way of knowing that Carolyn had been in that hotel room last night.

Oh, no! He'd forgotten to call Carolyn again this morning!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Carolyn wished she hadn't talked to her parents and Tony yesterday. They always cheered her up, and goodness knew, she needed cheering up today.

Scott hadn't called, either last night or today so far. Her brain insisted that was okay, that he would only have said things to infuriate her more. But she wanted him to understand! She also needed him to explain his behavior in a way she could accept.

But it wasn't going to happen, and she might as well start getting used to it. He felt something for her, she knew. He wasn't the kind of guy who'd get involved with her otherwise - and certainly not twice.

But he didn't trust her, and she wasn't important enough to outrank either Francine or Rachel in his priorities. And that combination was fatal.

Scott was exhausted by the time Rachel got to sleep on Sunday night. She didn't have her normal attention span and was incredibly clingy and demanding. And the grocery store! Now, that was almost enough to convince him to get a vasectomy first thing Monday morning. Being a father wasn't as much fun as he remembered.

Well, of course it wouldn't be, he reminded himself. He hadn't been a single father before, and Rachel had been an unusually bright and cooperative child. She was traumatized now, and every time she reached out for reassurance that her life was going to be okay again, he had to squash her hopes.

He collapsed on the bed and called Carolyn. When she answered, he said, "I called to apologize. I was wrong last night, and then I fell asleep before I got a chance to call and tell you that."

"Okay. Apology accepted. How's Annabelle?" Her voice didn't sound full of forgiveness.

He didn't know what more to say about yesterday, so he gladly answered her question. "I don't know for sure. We went to see her and she looked pretty miserable, but Rachel was there so we couldn't say much. Seth and I are going to talk in the morning."

"Rachel's staying with you for now?" Was he crazy to think she sounded sorry about that?

"Yeah, and she's keeping me running. This whole thing about where she lives is very hard on her."

"I imagine it would be."

This was like talking with a stranger - a stranger who seemed to hate him. He couldn't stand it any longer. "Look, Carolyn, could you help me out here? I love you, and I can't take this. I screwed up yesterday and I'm sorry. What can I do to fix our relationship?"

He heard her sigh on the other end of the phone. "I don't know, Scott. Maybe we can sit down sometime and talk things out. I really think it'll need to be after Rachel goes back to the Worthingtons', though. Your life isn't your own right now."

He couldn't deny that. "Just don't give up on us before then," he pleaded.

She didn't answer for a long time. When she did, her voice was strangled with emotion. "I'll try not to. I want it to work." After a "Good night" so soft he wasn't sure she'd spoken again, she hung up.

The half-mile between her apartment and this house felt like the distance to the moon and back.

Scott made waffles for breakfast. It wasn't hard and it guaranteed a smiling and cooperative Rachel, and he needed that. Still, she took forever getting ready to go to Linda's, objecting to every one of the outfits he'd picked up at Seth and Annabelle's yesterday. The outfit she finally agreed to wear was wildly mismatched, but at least there was both a top and a bottom.

He went right to Seth's office, not even stopping by his own first. He looked as tired as Scott felt. "Thanks for coming."

"How's Annabelle? I thought she seemed in good spirits yesterday."

Seth sighed. "Yes, I think so, too. She's going to be pretty laid up for a while, though, and won't even be able to use crutches. The doctors say it'll be several months before she's back to normal."

"Wow. I had no idea."

"I didn't, either," he said. "I broke my collarbone once, but at least I could get around, so it wasn't so bad. With this - " He shook his head. "I'm getting a lift-chair installed on the stairs tomorrow, but that won't solve everything." He sighed again and fidgeted with his pen. "It's made us realize that we can't properly take care of Rachel. Even before, it was a strain on both of us, but now..."

Scott held a tight rein on himself, not wanting to jump ahead of Seth. "Are you saying you want me to keep Rachel while Annabelle recuperates?"

Seth shook his head. "Not exactly. If you're still willing, we'd like you to become her guardian."

"Permanently?" The message seemed clear, but he had to make sure.

"Yes, permanently." He pressed his lips together briefly before continuing. "I'm afraid we were precipitous earlier in taking her away from you. Francine's death was such a blow - " He broke off, emotion struggling to break free, but he battled it back. "And I let myself think the marriage issue overrode everything you'd meant to Francine, to Rachel, and to us. But we're too set in our ways to have our lives turned topsy-turvy on a daily basis by a small child - even one as precious as Rachel."

Scott smiled ruefully. "That's a good description of life with Rachel."

Seth's smile came and went in an instant. "If you're agreeable, I'll have our attorney change the

paperwork we were getting ready to submit to the court petitioning for guardianship. You'll need to be interviewed and have some testing done, but I can't imagine there'd be any difficulty about it." He gave Scott a questioning look and asked, "You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

Carolyn's voice echoed in his head. Waiting until Rachel went back to the Worthingtons' before they talked things out wouldn't work now, and he couldn't guess whether she'd even consider raising Rachel. But he couldn't say no to Rachel, could he?

Scott swallowed hard and tried to remain calm. "No, I haven't changed my mind, but I'm afraid I'll need a little time to make this kind of decision. I hope you understand."

Seth's forehead furrowed. "Not really. From what you said last week, I thought you'd jump at this offer. But if you need some time, you can have it." A bit hesitantly, he asked, "Do you have any idea how long you'll need? And will Rachel be able to remain with you in the meantime?"

"Yes, certainly, she can stay. And I don't think it'll be more than a couple of days before I can let you know for sure."

Seth nodded, closing the deal. "Fine, then. I'll be looking forward to your answer."

So would Scott. He just hoped it would be the answer he wanted it to be.

Carolyn's stomach was churning so much she didn't even bother making dinner. It would be impossible to eat.

She shouldn't be so nervous about this. Yes, Scott had asked her to stop by the house tonight after Rachel went to bed, but he couldn't be planning to talk their relationship out, not with Rachel right in the other room. It didn't make any sense. They'd need privacy, and they'd have it soon enough, when she went back to the Worthingtons' to live.

She'd heard a few details about Annabelle's fall from Phillip today. He knew everything that went on at A-W - well, everything except the affair she and Scott had been having. He knew she didn't like gossip, though, so he usually just told her things if she asked.

Annabelle had been changing light bulbs in the ornate chandelier in their marbled entryway. She'd been on a tall stepladder and had fallen when she overbalanced trying to reach the furthest burnt-out bulb. Seth had been at work and Rachel had saved the day by calling 911. Poor Rachel! This last couple of weeks had been awfully rough.

She wished that Scott hadn't been in such a hurry this morning when he stopped by. They couldn't have gotten into a detailed discussion about their problems, but she might have been able to tell something about his attitude. Did he really understand her feelings, or was he just trying to placate her?

Well, placating wasn't going to work. She needed him to understand what a lifeline Tony had been for her, and she needed to understand why Scott had been so quick to abandon her. Honesty, not emotion and not sexual attraction, was the key.

If he didn't value her enough to be honest with her, then he was the wrong man for her.

Bill checked his watch. Yes, this would be a good time for a visit. Carolyn would be through with dinner and ready for a long night alone - just ripe for an entertaining visit from him.

She opened the door and immediately started to close it again. "Go away, Bill."

He slipped inside in the nick of time. "Oh, come on, sweet cheeks. You're bored, you know you are."

She sighed and took a seat in her recliner. "I'm not in the mood for any of your games, Bill. Besides, I thought you had a busy social life - how come you've got all this time to bother me?"

"You heard lover boy - I've got to put in lots of hours at the salt mine. I'm scaling back my weeknight commitments."

"Commitments?" she laughed. "I didn't know you knew what that word meant."

She was warming up to him! Of course, she was still subzero, but this was a definite improvement. "Sure, I know what it means. I'm just saving myself for the right woman." Someone who wouldn't bore him to tears within a couple of weeks, to start with. Carolyn might qualify.

She smiled and shook her head at that one. "Let's cut to the chase, shall we? You're here for a reason. Tell me what it is and leave me alone."

He had to admire the way he didn't intimidate her. "Okay. It's our deal."

"Our deal? You mean the way you blackmailed Scott into getting you a promotion."

"I like the way 'deal' sounds better. After all, you two get plenty in return. But anyway, the thing is that we need to modify the terms a bit."

"No way! You got what you want, now you keep your mouth shut."

"But the situation has changed. My silence is worth more now." He wondered if she knew yet. She didn't keep up on the gossip at A-W - probably thought she was too good to bother with it.

She gave a long-suffering sigh. "And why is that? Because you decided it was?"

She didn't know. Oh, this was going to be good. He shook his head. "Well, yes, I decided it was worth more, but I have a very good reason for that decision. When we made our original deal, we didn't know Scott was going to end up as Rachel's guardian."

"But - " It hit her then. He'd thought he might have to give her CHAPTER-and-verse on everything he'd heard about Scott's meeting with Seth this morning, but he didn't. She must have known something was up. "Oh..."

"I'm sure you can see how this changes things." He actually wasn't sure if she was capable of following his argument, but he'd try. "I mean, I'm Rachel's uncle, after all, and here some nobody's going to raise my niece. A nobody who never bothered to make an honest woman out of my sister-in-law and who's already busy trying to obliterate George's memory. It's plain wrong, but Seth's got enough money to make it stick, and that makes me sick."

She was blinking, a bit like he'd landed a head shot that had her half knocked-out. "What does this have to do with our deal?"

Good, she was functioning mentally. It was much more satisfying to negotiate with someone who knew what was happening. "What it means, sweet cheeks, is that the price for my silence just got higher." He smiled at her. "But the good news is that we don't have to disturb lover boy with these petty little details. This is just between the two of us."

"What is just between the two of us?" she demanded with plenty of asperity. He loved those sudden switches between hot and cold.

"Why, my price, of course. See, I know you'll be having a whole lot more free time now that Scott's got Rachel to worry about. So what I figure is that we'll have a nice friendly little fling. Nothing serious, nothing to challenge your great passion with lover boy - although you may not be so hot on him once you know how I can make you feel."

"You can't be serious!" she squeaked, blushing so intensely it *had* to cover her whole body.

"Of course I am," he assured her. "Either we have an affair - a discreet one, I assure you - or I go to Seth in the morning."

How long was she going to squirm on that hook before she admitted she had no choice? He'd enjoy every second of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Carolyn didn't let the outrage sink in. She just started to laugh, and she kept on laughing until Bill's smug expression faltered. "Try again, oh clueless one."

He definitely didn't know how to react now. He liked to see his victims squirm, and she'd been a lovely little victim up to now. "I'm serious."

"I know you are, but you're sadly mistaken if you think I'd lift my little finger to keep you from telling Seth."

He looked like a guy on an icy hill, trying to stay upright. "But you'll lose your job, and so will Scott, and he'll lose Rachel..."

She shrugged. "So? I'm going to quit anyway now that Scott's committed himself to raising Rachel without the courtesy of telling me. I'm not willing to sentence myself to a life of coming in at the bottom of his priority list - " She stopped herself abruptly. Bill didn't deserve to hear any of the nasty words that were floating around in her head. "And if Scott loses his job and Rachel, that's just too bad for him, isn't it?"

He was starting to buy into her anger. "You're that mad, are you? I guess I should be glad you're not mad at me."

"Who says I'm not?" she demanded. "You've been an obnoxious jerk ever since my interview, and I absolutely detest the way you forced Scott to give you that promotion. Why couldn't you be a man and work for it, like everyone else? You're capable enough - in between your taunts and snide remarks; I've seen that. You acted like that list of behaviors Scott gave you was some mumbo-jumbo he just made up - but do you know what it really was?"

She waited until he shook his head before continuing, "It's exactly what he's done all these years to get to where he is today. I've done the same, and I don't doubt that's how Seth got where he is, either. The point is a job's a job. If you look like you can barely handle your current one - or that you aren't willing to bother with it - you're never going to get a chance to do anything more challenging."

"But Seth always hated me, since way back when George was alive."

"I seriously doubt that," she replied. "What I bet happened is that you came in like you owned the place,

figuring your brother was in charge and would back you. But you aren't your brother and just because he was one of the founders doesn't give you any special rights."

But she was getting off the track, so she said, "Anyway, I'm disgusted with you, and I'm sick of you pushing people around. I think I might just tell Seth what you've been up to when I give my notice tomorrow."

"You don't want to do that," he said, recovering his swagger. "You'd have to tell him about you and Scott."

She shook her head, smiling. He still didn't get it. "So what's he going to do? Fire me when I already quit?"

"But - " His eyes suddenly narrowed and he asked, "You really don't care, do you?"

She sobered. "No, Bill, I care too much, and I've cared too much for way too long now. Scott did me dirt four years ago, but I was an idiot and didn't let that cure me of how I felt. And I came out here - not to renew our affair like you said, but because I couldn't stay away, even though I knew he was devoted to Francine. He was such a jerk that he didn't even talk to me until after she died, and then he immediately assumed I was going to take care of him and comfort him."

It would be dangerous to admit more, so she shook her head again. "I'm through with that, and I'm through with him, and I'm angry enough to think it's okay if he suffers for how he treated me." With another smile, she told him, "It was wrong for you to blackmail your way into a promotion, and it was wrong for Scott to cave in like he did. I'll be glad to make you lose your job by telling Seth the truth."

"He wouldn't fire me for that!" he blustered. "I'm doing a good job."

"Come on, Bill. You expect me to believe Seth would fire Scott for having an affair with me four years ago, and then not fire you for getting a promotion through blackmail?" She shrugged. "Who knows, anyway? He might not fire either of you - but then again, he and Scott are the ones with the good relationship and trust built up. My guess is that you'd be out in a matter of hours."

He didn't dispute her words, and for once, he wasn't his usual confident self. Finally, he said, "Look, Carolyn, isn't it enough for you to just walk out on the guy? Do you have to wreck his life, and mine, too?"

Now they were getting somewhere. She made sure her expression was sufficiently serious and said, "Well, maybe not. But if somebody's going to spill the beans about what happened four years ago, it's only fair that it be me. I'm the one who knows what really happened, then and now, and I deserve the satisfaction." She gave him an appraising look. "But then again, if I leave, you won't necessarily have any reason to tell Seth anything. You've got the promotion you wanted, and like Scott said, the only way you'll ever get his job is to earn it. He won't want to stay at A-W forever, you know - not with Seth and Annabelle breathing down his neck all the time about how he's raising Rachel."

"You're right," he said. "So you'll keep quiet about me?"

She thought about it for a minute. "I'd like to. I'm not a confrontational kind of person, and I'd like Seth to remember me pleasantly. But, you know, it bugs me that you've still got that card and those pictures. Scott should have been smart enough to rip them up years ago, and if I had the chance, that's exactly what I'd do."

"I'll do that for you," he offered.

"Not that I don't trust you," she said, "But I'd like to do it myself - right in front of Scott."

He looked at her face and laughed. "Geez, Carolyn, I'm sure glad I'm not on your shit list as bad as he is! Come on over to my place, I'll get them out."

She let herself smile. "Sounds like a plan."

She waited until she was back in her apartment with the door firmly dead-bolted before breaking into hysterical laughter.

Scott was extremely grateful that even Rachel had physical limits. After the last two chaotic weeks, she was finally worn out and happy to go to bed early - as long as she had a few of her favorite fairy tales read to her. Scott had missed reading them to her over the last year as her interests matured, so they both thoroughly enjoyed bedtime.

And then it was time to call Carolyn. They arranged that he'd leave the front door unlocked, so she didn't have to ring the bell and possibly wake Rachel. As he prowled around the house waiting for her, he wondered if he should offer her something to drink or maybe even a snack. No, he should concentrate on what he was going to say. How was he going to magically fix whatever was keeping them apart and get her to agree to marry him? Because if he became Rachel's guardian, he and Carolyn would have to get married in order to be together.

She slipped in so quietly that he didn't hear her. He looked up to see her a few feet away from the living room chair where he was sitting. He jumped up. "Hi. I didn't hear you. Have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

She shook her head and dumped something on the coffee table. "I'll just be here a few minutes. I came to return that stuff and to tell you I'm resigning tomorrow."

"Resigning? What do you mean?" That wasn't what he wanted to ask, but he couldn't manage any better.

"Quitting my job, Scott, that's what I mean."

"But why?"

She breathed out a long sigh. "For a lot of reasons. The real kicker, though, was you not even bothering to tell me you're going to raise Rachel."

"I didn't agree yet! That's why I asked you to come over tonight - to talk about it." Okay, maybe this was fixable. He sank back into his chair. "Come on, sit down and let's talk."

Her eyes were suspicious, but she sat. "You didn't agree yet?" He shook his head, thinking she'd relax and they could talk sensibly. "But why not? You're obviously the best person to raise her."

He wished he could feel pleased she felt that way. "Because I needed to talk with you first. I want to marry you, and I don't know if me having Rachel would effect your decision."

"What is it with you and marriage?" she burst out. "Did you do this to Francine - start pushing marriage before she found out if you'd be a good husband?"

That stung. It also felt like something that should be kept private. "Of course not - and I wouldn't be talking about it now, except that I have to. I want a life with you, and I don't want to lose it because I decided too quickly about Rachel."

She nodded slightly, seeming to accept his answer. "Okay, that's reasonable. But given everything you've said and what I've heard from other people about your relationship with her, you're the right person to raise her. And frankly, I think it's pretty darn unlikely that you and I will ever get past our differences enough to build that life."

"We certainly won't if you leave now. You're not going to do that, are you?" He was struggling to stay calm, to not really think what it would mean if she did leave.

She sighed. "I should. You've got way too much control over me." Softly, she added, "And I hate being jealous."

She was jealous? "Jealous of who? Rachel?"

She nodded and said even more quietly, "Francine, too - and I know that's stupid."

"Not stupid - human," he corrected her. "Like me being jealous of Tony and even Phillip. Logically, I know it doesn't make any sense. I know what we have is special - but they've had so much more time with you."

His words might have made some difference, but she was still ashamed. "I hate it that I feel that way, especially about poor Rachel. She's dealing with so much, and I know you don't feel the same way about her as you do about me..."

He needed to be honest about this finally. "I've never felt this way about anyone else, Carolyn, I swear I haven't. I tried with Francine. I tried to want her in all the same ways I want you, I tried to think she was the most wonderful creature in the entire universe, I tried to make her feel cherished. But I couldn't. I cared for her a great deal, I even loved her, but nothing that would even hold a candle to how I feel about you."

He blinked away tears and continued, "And the second you walked back into my life, it was over with her and she knew it. I pretended it wasn't true; I denied my true feelings and ignored you when all I wanted was for us to be together again, but Francine knew. I just didn't have the courage to admit it, to myself or to her, and I won't ever be able to remember what she and I had without also remembering how completely I failed her at the end."

That hollow awful feeling filled his gut again, and he couldn't pretend that Carolyn wasn't still poised on the brink of leaving. "Carolyn, please, give me a chance to make this work."

Carolyn had thought her heart was hardened against Scott. She'd been hurt so much by him - and by herself, believing in him - that she'd thought she was finally immune.

She wasn't. She looked at him and knew that he wasn't someone she could "get over." And really, now that they'd each admitted their jealousy, maybe they could deal with its effects.

But what about the trust issue? She had to understand that. "Why didn't you trust me four years ago?"

He blinked, and she saw she'd caught him off-guard. "That you weren't going back with Tony permanently, you mean?"

"Yes. I explained how he begged for another chance and how I agreed because I owed him that much."

"But if you gave him another chance, he might make it work!"

"I told you that wouldn't happen. The magic wasn't there to make it happen." Please, he had to be more understanding this time!

He opened his mouth, paused, then said, "But you'd been together a long time. I thought if he stopped taking you for granted so much, you'd remember why you fell in love with him in the first place."

"He wasn't taking me for granted. He traveled a lot, sure, but that wasn't an issue." She considered for a few seconds before trying an analogy. "It's like with you and Francine. You got together for your own reasons, but it wasn't because you were crazy in love - right?"

"I thought we could build a good family together and that's important to me. I don't know what she thought."

This seemed to be working. She'd explain her reasons now. "I liked being with Tony, and I didn't know that what I felt wasn't romantic love. I think he knew it, but family's important to him, and he wanted to get married instead of just living together." She had the guilty feeling that she was over-simplifying Tony's motives, but his motives for getting married weren't the important part of this discussion.

On to the important part. "But Scott, when I swore to you that I wasn't staying with Tony for more than a month or two at the most, why wouldn't you at least give me the benefit of the doubt? I'd never lied to you."

"I thought he'd change your mind," he said, but it was clear he knew he hadn't answered her question. Finally, he went on, "Trust is hard for me. People make promises all the time and don't keep them - lots of times they don't even intend to keep them."

"Some people, sure - but not me. I don't make promises lightly. Why would you think that about me?" Wasn't her integrity one of the things that he loved about her?

He was in what appeared to be physical distress, breathing only in gulps and his body frozen with spasms of tension. "It's not you," he managed. "I'm careful not to count on people too much. If I did and they failed me, I'd get hurt."

"Who hurt you, Scott?" There had to be a buried trauma he was reacting to, something she'd never dreamed might exist.

His eyes squeezed shut and he tightened up into a smaller shape. "I had a little sister. Emily. She was the only good thing in my life and then she died. And there wasn't anything good any more."

A big hole opened up where her stomach had been. "What about your parents?" She hoped it was okay to ask, but she couldn't leave it like that, with so many questions and no answers.

He shook his head. "They'd say stuff, like we'd take a trip or they'd come to my swim meet. But they didn't. Not ever."

"Oh, Scott," she whispered and raced to embrace him. "You thought I'd do that, too."

"I wanted to believe you," he murmured. "But just going back to Chicago without you was almost more than I could take. And then, he was there and I wasn't, and you wouldn't let me come back, and Marty was telling me how women play guys off each other all the time." He pulled her into his lap and buried his face in her hair. "I just didn't dare count on you. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I understand," she comforted him, and only gradually did she realize that she truly did understand now. They'd fallen in love too quickly to learn to trust each other first.

"Will you stay now? Please?" He sounded as scared of her leaving as she felt.

In the nick of time, she remembered Bill. "I want to, Scott, but we can't forget Bill. He came to see me earlier, all pissed off that you're going to raise Rachel and make her forget her father. He was threatening again to go to Seth - " The content of his threat wasn't important right now. "I got him to back down by saying I was leaving, and that I was going to tell Seth he blackmailed his way into his promotion."

Scott's jaw dropped open. "But - "

"I was just bluffing. I told him how mad I was at you and that I'd like nothing better than to wreck your life along with his." She smiled, remembering Bill's alarm. "No surprise, he didn't want me to do that and I even talked him into giving me back the card and pictures."

He glanced over at the coffee table. "So that's what that stuff is. It looked familiar, but with you talking about resigning..." He frowned suspiciously. "So there's nothing to worry about, is there? We've got all the stuff back and he wants to keep his job, so he'll stay quiet."

She wished she could agree. "But if I stay, he'll think I lied and he might just decide to get back at me, even though it'll cost him his job."

"Would he really do that?" he asked, brow furrowed. "If you ask me, Bill's the kind of guy who puts his own interests first."

"I know, but do we really dare take that risk?" She had to wonder if she was being overly cautious. Maybe she could explain her change of heart to Bill in a way he could accept. Not likely, and she wouldn't actually want to try. He was a slimy and cynical guy and would twist anything she said into something dirty or stupid.

After a couple of minutes, Scott took a couple of deep breaths and let them out carefully, obviously calming himself. "Tell me a couple of things, Carolyn. If we make this all work out - our relationship, the past, Bill, whatever - will you marry me?"

She nodded. "It's not going to be easy to do that, Scott. But if we do, sure. Marrying you is what I've wanted all this time."

He grinned, but something was obviously still on his mind. "What about Rachel? Would me being her guardian be a problem for you?" Before she had a chance to answer, he said, "Honestly. Because you're much more important to me than she is. Seth and Annabelle would keep her, and I know she'd be fine with them, long-term."

Honestly. The word resonated inside her, stirring up a swirl of emotions. Finally she said, "Honestly, I don't know the first thing about kids. I've got some learning to do, but what I do know is that this is something you need to do. She's already your child, and because of that, I can't not love her."

A huge weight dropped off his shoulders and he smiled. "I know what to do, then. I'll go to Seth in the morning and tell him yes - but I'll also tell him about our past. Despite the way Bill tried to make it sound, we did nothing wrong. I was foolish to keep the truth from Francine, but I did it because I didn't want her to worry."

"He may not believe you," she warned, but she knew it was the right thing to do.

He let a big breath out. "I know, but at least I would have tried. We can still go to Chicago - " With a crooked smile, he said, "If you're willing, that is."

She grinned. "You're not getting rid of me that easily this time!"

EPILOGUE

March

Scott checked himself in the mirror again. Okay, his tie was still straight, his hair still under control. It had to be time - had they forgotten to come get him? He started to the door, then remembered to look at his watch. Ten more minutes? It couldn't be! His watch must have stopped.

Seth stepped into the room moments before Scott reached the door. "Are you running out on us?" he asked with a smile. "Marriage won't be that bad, I promise."

"What time is it?" he demanded, too anxious to laugh. "I think my watch stopped."

"Ten of two," Seth replied patiently. "And I know that's right because Annabelle and I checked our watches and the living room clock just an hour ago."

"Oh." He paced the den that served as Seth's home office. How was he going to last another ten minutes?

Seth gripped Scott's arm. "Is this just nerves, or are you having doubts?"

"No doubts - and I'd be fine, if it would just be time. It's the waiting that's so hard."

With a chuckle, Seth said, "If you think this is hard, wait until Carolyn's having a baby. It takes forever, and she's in pain, and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it."

Would that ever happen? Scott wanted to think so. Carolyn certainly had taken to being Rachel's mother quickly, but they still hadn't talked much about a family of their own.

Seth seemed to realize that a distraction was in order. "Most of the guests have arrived, and when I came in here, the ushers were starting to ask people to move out to the tent."

The ushers were members of their project team, including Bill. Much to Scott's surprise, he'd asked to be included. Even more surprising, Bill had behaved so reasonably over the last several months that Scott had no problem honoring his request. Scott didn't know whether his personality change was due to his promotion or to the effect of his apparently serious girlfriend. Whichever it was, Scott was relieved that keeping Seth in the dark about Bill's blackmail scheme hadn't proven to be a mistake.

The mention of guests made him think of specific people. "Is Tony here?" Carolyn wouldn't feel right if Tony didn't make it.

"Yes, and Carolyn's whole family." Quietly, he added, "Your parents, also."

He realized that he hadn't dared to ask. They'd promised to come, and he'd tried to believe that they would, but inside, he'd been prepared to walk out there and discover them missing. Emotion filling his throat, he took Seth's other arm and said, "I want to thank you. You and Annabelle have been wonderful to me. You're the kind of parents I wished for my whole life."

"And you're the son we never had. I'm especially pleased that you trusted us with the truth about you and Carolyn. It couldn't have been easy."

He smiled tightly, not letting the quiver of emotion steal his voice. "It wasn't easy, but it was the right thing

to do. Neither of us would have felt right, otherwise."

The last time Carolyn had worn a wedding dress, she'd been much more nervous. Part of it had been the church - the Catholic Church in Newport where JFK and Jackie were married was a daunting place to start out married life. But the larger part of her nerves, she now realized, was that she'd been marrying the wrong man and deep down, she'd known it.

Today, she knew she was marrying the right man. Scott wasn't perfect, and neither was their relationship, but he made her happy in a deeply profound way that she'd never known could exist.

Rachel came twirling into the room, busy pretending to be a princess in her first long dress. She was followed closely by Annabelle, no longer limping at all. "Five minutes, dear."

"I'm ready," she replied.

"I know I've said it before, but that's a lovely dress, so perfect with your coloring. And you're radiant today, just like a bride is supposed to be."

Carolyn examined Annabelle's face, looking for the resentment she could so easily feel toward the woman who was taking Francine's place in Scott's life. She found nothing but acceptance and caring. "Annabelle, thank you again for going to all the trouble of arranging the wedding and having it in your beautiful home. I can't tell you how much that means to both of us."

Her eyes misted, but she waved away the hours of work. "Planning parties is what I do. And what better than a wedding?" Her face clouded, and Carolyn knew she was remembering Francine. After a moment, she glanced at her watch and said, "Let's go downstairs. Now, Rachel, you remember what to do, don't you?"

The little girl rolled her eyes. "Yes, Grandma. I carry the rings, and I get to stand next to Daddy and Caro because that's how we all get to be a family."

Carolyn's niece Eileen was her maid of honor. Eileen was only four years younger than Carolyn, and they were nearly as close as sisters. She came out of the bedroom where she'd dressed and joined the others as they went downstairs. As they approached the back of the tent, Carolyn heard the murmurs of the guests. She was suddenly aware that this wasn't like the ceremony she and Scott had staged five years ago this day in an empty park in Providence. This was the real thing - and she couldn't wait.

The music, the procession, and the initial words of the ceremony passed quickly. Soon it was time to kneel and say their vows. First, they repeated the traditional ones, promising to love, honor, and cherish each other. Then, after the minister blessed their rings, they placed them on each other's left ring finger and said the words they'd written so long ago, with one very important addition. They added the words "my trust," because they'd learned that without trust, the rest wasn't enough.

"You are my friend, my lover, and my soul mate. My love for you will never end. I pledge to you my heart, my soul, my trust, and my life, as long as the strands of this knot intertwine."

The End

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