

“Patty!” he bellowed, his voice gravelly with panic. “Randy! Missy!”

An enormous swell rolled in, lifting the boat above him, then hid it from his view as it plummeted down the other side. Their cries for help stopped abruptly and ominous silence descended. The roiling surf itself made no sound. The wave washed over him and crashed silently onshore behind him, and he could see to the gray horizon again.

The boat was gone.

Terror gripped him and he thrashed in the water to do a three-sixty degree check of the surface. His family had disappeared.

“Nooooooooo!”

But they were gone.

With every ounce of strength he had, he strained against sudden and total paralysis, desperate to dive beneath the surface search for them. To no avail. He couldn't move.

They were what he loved most, the reason he lived, and he had let them slip away. He was alone with his agony in the lifeless gray void.

Publisher's Note:

This is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For Tommy. My Southern man.

Southern Man

Prologue

*Verona, Georgia
Spring 1983*

“This meeting of The Conspiracy is hereby called to order,” said Ruth Adamski with a twinkle in her eye.

That got the attention of the seven people chatting around a table in an alcove at the Howe Street Cafe, their privacy assured by a concertina partition that separated them from the main dining room.

At fifty-six, Ruth was a handsome woman who fancied that she bore a physical resemblance to the indomitable Bella Abzug. She fostered the resemblance with her demeanor and wardrobe, complete with wide-brimmed hats and reading glasses halfway down her nose.

Five of her guests were women and the two males might as well have been. They were members of progressive organizations in Verona. After meeting with them individually over several weeks, Ruth had invited them to dinner to brainstorm. The subject: creating a networking group for the nascent progressive community in Yancey County.

“You should have received badges printed with your names and organizations, but let’s introduce ourselves verbally and tell a little about our work.”

While a representative from the AntiRacist Initiative of Yancey County handed out her business cards, a pudgy, middle-aged woman with improbably black hair reported the start up of a small weekly newspaper for the area’s progressive community named, unimaginatively, *The Verona Progressive*.

Across from them, an educational psychologist working to end school-sanctioned religious activity distributed brochures. A local business-woman organizing to ban the city-sponsored Christmas Festival gave out

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contact information for city council members.

At the far end of the table sat a sandy-haired woman in her mid-thirties whose stern expression detracted from her pretty face.

“My organization is a non-profit at Verona State focusing on women’s issues.” She opened a small attaché case on her lap, withdrew a stack of papers and handed it to the person next to her. “Here’s some material on our areas of concentration. Everybody take one.”

Her shrewd gaze darted about the table, ascertaining the interest level of her fellow attendees.

“You can see we have an extensive program. First, women in the workplace, which includes glass-ceiling and equal-pay issues and sexual harassment. Second, reproductive rights. Third, Smart-Shes, a feminist organization for young girls, an alternative to traditional groups like the Girl Scouts and Campfire Girls.

“Without neglecting other areas, we are currently putting the most emphasis on sexual harassment in the workplace. This is because it’s an enormous and ongoing problem in Verona.”

“Does anyone imagine it wouldn’t be?” Ruth said. “This town is awash in testosterone. White Christian men rule here, as they have ruled the West for nearly two thousand years. They’re the authors of everything that’s wrong with western civilization.”

“Well, they’re in for a shock,” the woman replied. “Both public perception and the laws are changing with respect to women’s issues, especially sexual harassment. My group is pushing to have equality offices created in several major companies in this town. We plan to put a spotlight on the problem in corporate Verona, embarrass a few perps and use lawsuits to hit the companies where it hurts most—in their profit margins.”

At that moment the partition opened and a waiter carrying a large tray full of dinner plates stepped into the room.

“Let’s pause and enjoy our meal,” Ruth said. “We can continue our discussion over dessert.”

Chapter One

The information printed on the fanfolded paper was offensive and Troy Stevenson, Vice President of Marketing and Sales at Shearwater-Ingram Company, was highly offended. It also held a riddle that added discom-bobulation to offendedness.

He jogged the edges, attempting to neaten the stack, and started to flip through the pages again when he heard muffled footsteps on the carpet. He glanced up and saw Max Ingram, Director of Human Resources, strolling through the door.

“Chow time,” Max said, tapping his wristwatch. “Let’s go eat.”

“I’m busy.”

“Well, take a break. I want us to stop by HR on the way so you can meet the new EFO director.”

“UFO director?” Troy said with mock perplexity. “Oh, you mean the sexual harassment lady.”

Max smiled wryly. “Better not let her hear you call her a lady. She’ll sue your butt.”

Troy didn’t return the smile and a faint line appeared between his eyebrows.

“What?” Max said.

“Last quarter’s preliminary sales report.” Troy tapped the printout with a forefinger. “Down three and a half percent.”

Max shrugged. “So? Nothing goes up forever.”

He drummed a rhythm on the edge of Troy’s desk and sang, “What goes up, must come down—”

“Cut it out. David Clayton Thomas you ain’t.”

Both men had lived on Georgia’s coastal plain long enough to have picked up the liquid drawl indigenous to the area, but it was an overlay and their native vocabularies and accents frequently punched through—

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Max's the rapid mumble of Birmingham, Alabama, Troy's the hill-country dialect of eastern Tennessee.

The bantering eased off and a hint of concern crept into Troy's tone. "This is the first time sales have gone down since I took over marketing. I've got to figure out why."

"For cryin' out loud, you can leave it for half an hour."

Troy ignored him. His long fingers worked the keys of his adding machine. He tore off the tape and compared it to the tiny figures on the printout.

"It'll be another ten, fifteen minutes before I get to a stopping place. If that's too long, go on ahead and I'll catch up with you. Otherwise, sit down and shut up."

Max knew from long experience, going back to the early days of their friendship in college, that Troy had a stubborn streak and challenging it was futile. Without further discussion, he dropped into a wingback chair in front of the desk.

Bored and annoyed, he glanced around the slate green walls. There was nothing here to relieve his boredom, nothing he had not seen a hundred times before—framed action shots of Troy as an All-American halfback for the Alabama Crimson Tide, his university degrees in modest document frames, portraits of his wife and kids....

Max shifted in the chair and picked microscopic lint off his suit. Propping his ankle on his knee, he jiggled his foot, glanced at his watch and yawned theatrically.

It was going to be a long ten minutes.

Shearwater-Ingram's administrative offices were housed in a two-story red brick building in Mirabel Office Park located east of Verona between Interstate 75 and old Highway 41.

Vaguely post-modern in design, boxy and substantial, it featured large windows and a swath of glass down the center of the facade. It was fronted with an asphalt parking lot and big, dense foundation plantings. Young live oaks dotted the property and sunlight streaked through them to filligree the grounds and edifice with lacy shadows.

Inside, the reception area suggested masculinity in color and style—warm gray walls, furniture of dark wood and stainless steel, gleaming vinyl tiles on the floor in a geometric pattern—the overall effect toned down with upholstered seating and clusters of plants.

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But in the individual offices, the decor was determined by the occupants.

Human Resources, located at the back of the first floor, reflected the tastes of its two female employees, Dugan Haynes and Polly Vinson. The harshness of steel desks and file cabinets was softened with yellow walls, cubicle partitions of beige fabric, lots of houseplants and personal items from small stereos to family snapshots.

As lunchtime approached, Dugan stood at the back of the room and waited for two employee ID badges to emerge from the laminator. She was in her mid-thirties, a statuesque woman with chin-length brown hair. Amiable and well-liked at Shearwater, she was ideally suited for HR work.

The badges dropped to the table and she picked them up to inspect them. People always hated how they appeared in security badge photos. Looking at these two, it was understandable.

The subject of the first was a hazel-eyed blond woman with short hair that fluffed about her head in spiral ropes. Her coral colored lips were slightly pursed, almost pouty. She was in her mid-twenties but looked twelve in the photo. This was Brooke Emerson who was starting work today in the Library and Record Storage Department.

Dugan looked at the second one and suppressed a chuckle at the image of a fortyish, brunette woman with a poufed pageboy hairstyle. Her blue eyes were very wide, almost glaring, above wine-colored lips pulled into a smile but slightly compressed. The overall impression, though unintentional, was of a woman about to fly into a rage. The subject of the photo was Arlene Roper, hired to head up the new Equality and Fairness Office.

Dugan punched slots in the badges, slipped lapel clips into the slots and headed for the department's small reception area where the two new hires were waiting.

"Here you are, ladies. I've put clips on them, but if you'd rather have a lanyard, check with Polly after lunch." She pointed toward the vacant receptionist's desk.

"Where do people go for lunch out here in the boonies?" Brooke asked.

"There are a couple of fast food places not too far away but pretty much everyone eats in the cafeteria. It's catered. We don't have a kitchen, so they bring in breakfast and lunch every day. The food's cheap and pretty good."

"I was planning on eating here today," Arlene said, "and I invited a guest. She should be here by now."

"Go get her. We'll save y'all a place."

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Arlene headed for the reception area while Dugan and Brooke strolled down the back corridor. Along the way, Dugan pointed out the elevator, water fountain and restrooms.

Brooke seemed more interested in her badge.

“This picture of me sucks. Can I have it made over?”

“You’d have to pay for it. Only the first one’s free.”

Turning a corner, they reached the cafeteria, warm gray and stainless steel, like the rest of the ground floor, brightened with colorful, abstract murals painted on the walls. The aroma of food and the ambient hum of conversation filled the air.

“So you’re doing a brand new department here?” Brooke asked Arlene as they squeezed dressing from plastic packets onto their garden salads.

Dugan had ushered them to a long table—the Gossip Table, someone had called it—where a group of women sat and carried on confusing multiple conversations as they dined.

“Yes, it’s the Equality and Fairness Office,” Arlene said, “for dealing with issues of discrimination in the workplace. I’ve worked in the field for a while, but I’ve never run a department or built one from scratch.”

“Wow. Sure sounds more exciting than pulling and delivering files.”

“Oh, yes. I’m really looking forward to the challenge.” Arlene waved a hand toward a woman seated next to her. “This is Jessica Grant from the Women’s Assistance Group. She’s going to help me organize the department and write the policies.”

Jessica’s sandy hair was pulled back from her face and caught by a barrette at the nape of her neck. She was dressed in a severe black suit that matched her severe demeanor. The hardness in her voice completed the ensemble.

“We’re consultants on women’s issues,” she said curtly.

“Women’s Assistance Group,” Dugan said. “I don’t think I’m familiar with that.”

“It’s a nonprofit organization started by some women at the university a number of years ago. I was a student then and volunteered to help but the problem is just as bad today. Men don’t like their control and their position atop the hierarchy threatened and it manifests as unequal pay, the promotional glass ceiling, sexual harassment, and so on.”

“Is all that stuff really a problem here?” Brooke asked.

“Yes,” Jessica told her, “because it’s a problem everywhere.”

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Brooke's eyes darted around the cafeteria. "It looks like there's more women in this crowd than men."

"Yes, but men hold the positions of power," Jessica explained with an exaggerated show of patience. "That's the nature of patriarchy."

At that moment, Brooke saw two men—executives, members in good standing of the patriarchy, for sure—walk in from the corridor and head for the serving line. Halfway there, one of them, a nice-looking fellow with brown hair, wearing a light tan suit, tugged at the other one's sleeve and vaguely pointed toward the rows of tables. They changed course and came into the dining room.

He was Max Ingram, Director of Human Resources. Brooke recognized him because he had stopped by HR last week when she had come to apply for a job. Although he was a touch on the hefty side, he still possessed boyish good looks, his full face set with blue eyes that exuded frivolity—the face of a man who never outgrew junior-high level pranksterhood.

But it was the other one who attracted her attention. Taller, slimmer, broad-shouldered, he sported a gray suit that showcased a knockout physique. His longish, angular face was so handsome she found herself staring, unable to pull her gaze away. A mane of thick, almost black hair, conservatively styled, brushed his collar in back and swept the tops of his ears—*My gosh, I never realized ears could be sexy!*—and framed thick, beautifully arched brows above dark eyes that snapped with magnetic male energy.

An odd excitement jolted her when he stopped nearby.

Max looked around the table and said, "Hello, ladies." He got several *hi's* and *hello, sir's* in return.

"Troy, this is Arlene Roper, the new EFO director. Arlene, Troy Stevenson, vice president, marketing.

"Mrs. Roper." Troy's smile was both perfunctory and stunning.

"How do you do." Wearing an all-business smile,, Arlene stood and offered her hand.

A red insulated lunch bag printed with the word *Alabama* dangled from Troy's right hand and he transferred it to his left to complete the handshake. Brooke watched, awed. His stance, his grace of movement, the tilt of his shoulders all combined to make an alluring display out of the simple act of shaking hands.

"Troy's a Neanderthal," Max told Arlene. "He's opposed to your department."

Arlene's brows went up. "Oh?"

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“Yeah. He’s a serial sexual harasser and he hates to see it coming to an end.”

Troy gave his companion an oblique glance but said nothing. He didn’t have to. Snorting and tsk-tsking went around the table like a stadium wave. Somebody sitting near Brooke murmured, “Oh, brother!” and the dark-haired pixie across the table—*Claudia, from billing, is it?*—rolled her eyes.

Max looked around the table with comic surprise and broke into a grin. “Okay, so I’m kidding. But he is a throwback—a traditionalist who thinks women should be wives and secretaries.”

“Really.” Arlene looked at Troy. “Is there anything to what Max says?”

This time, Troy smiled in genuine amusement and it was a sight to behold. “Mrs. Roper, after you’ve been here a while, you’ll find out there is seldom ever anything to *anything* Max says.”

Arlene glanced from one to the other and evidently decided to let that one go. “So do you have any problems with women being paid what they’re worth?”

“Paid what they’re worth?” His brows rose and levity touched with irony flashed across his face. “No, ma’am, I got no problem with that. I just think any new positions created right now ought to go to the departments that actually produce for the company—mine, for example, or Research and Development.”

Brooke listened, fascinated. He didn’t speak with the true grits-n-gravy drawl she’d heard so much since arriving in Verona; there was some other dialect she couldn’t place influencing his pronunciation, which was delivered in a distinctive mid-range baritone. But sensuality laced his timbre and accent, rendering them perfect matches for his image.

“He’s a filthy capitalist, too,” Max said. “All he cares about is making money.”

Dugan from HR caught Max’s eye. “And it’s a good thing for this company and all its employees—including you—that he does.”

Troy acknowledged Dugan’s comment with an almost imperceptible nod and slight smile before turning back to Arlene. “If your department’s issues are genuine, they should be written into the regular policies manual and let HR handle them like any other personnel issue. I don’t think it’s necessary to create a separate department for them.”

“The issues are genuine, all right, and rampant,” Jessica said, her tone hard, her diction clipped.

Everyone stared at her, taken aback by the hostility in her voice and the

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challenging look she aimed at Troy.

Arlene said, "Gentlemen, this is Jessica Grant from WAG, the Women's Assistance Group. She's going to help me write the EFO policies manual."

"Howdy-do, Ms. Grant from wag," Max said, grinning.

Troy acknowledged the introduction with a wordless incline of his head, his face neutral. Somehow, this nod was quite different from the one he had given Dugan.

Jessica looked at both of them with visible disapproval.

If Troy noticed her challenge, he didn't show it. He turned back to Arlene and continued as if there had been no interruption. "But it's Max's department and it was his decision to make."

"Well," Arlene said. "At least you're candid about it. And I respect that."

Brooke noticed several women exchanging glances and firming their lips to suppress laughter. She had to do the same thing. Roper *was* a bit... officious...and probably had no idea she was coming across that way.

The conversation wound down and Max took in the faces arrayed before him. "So long, ladies. Y'all enjoy your lunch."

See ya's and *bye's* echoed around the table as the men walked away.

Jessica Grant's eyes followed them and a look of disgust came to her face. "That man, Stevenson, is exactly why departments like Arlene's are necessary. Insufferable chauvinist."

"What?" Dugan said, frowning, and the other women looked askance at the WAG director.

"If he's not a serial sexual harasser, it's only because he hasn't had the opportunity. I've been in this business a long time and I know the type. I can spot 'em a mile away."

Brooke riveted her eyes on her plate. *Oh, my. Sexual harassment by that hunk? Where do I sign up?*

Somebody down the table gave a derisive snort and said, "Not him."

"Absolutely right," Claudia the pixie chimed in. "It's a lot more likely that one of us would waylay him in an empty corridor and put lipstick all over his face."

"Indeed. Just look at that," said an older woman in an appreciative tone.

Everyone followed her gaze to Troy sauntering toward the serving line.

"Goodness gracious sakes alive...."

"Mmm, mmm, mmm...."

"Poetry in motion...."

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Striving for nonchalance, Brooke observed, “He’s a Bama fan.”

“Oh, he’s more than a fan,” Dugan replied. “He’s an alumnus and that’s an understatement. In the early Seventies, he was the Crimson Tide’s star halfback. Max says he was an incredible runner. Broke all kinds of records. Still holds a couple.”

Claudia nodded, watching Troy with a dreamy look in her eyes. “All-American body, movie star face.”

Dugan smiled archly at her moonstruck table mates and said, “Bible Belt mentality, fairy tale marriage.”

Soft groans rose around table and somebody muttered, “Dugan, you spoilsport,” just as Troy and Max disappeared behind a partition adjacent to the serving line.

“Just injecting a little reality into the conversation.”

Jessica harrumphed. “Reality is that he’s just another privileged Southern white man, all about money and power.”

That produced another frown from Dugan, who looked at Arlene and said, “What is it with your friend?”

The EFO director, caught between her mentor and her new co-workers, was unable to formulate an immediate response, but Dugan didn’t wait for one. She leaned forward to see around Arlene and gave Jessica a pointed look.

“Privilege? He comes from a family of West Virginia coal miners. He grew up in a single wide trailer home in Tennessee. Football paid for his education, which got him his career. He could have made a lot more money staying at Commander Industries in Atlanta, but he wanted to raise his kids in a small town like he grew up in. Despite the decrease in his earning potential, he says he’s blessed.”

Brooke listened intently to the short biography, but she was also intrigued by the subtle interplay between the two women. It was plain that Jessica found the conversation annoying and did not like being challenged. It was equally plain that Dugan was determined to challenge her.

“Troy respects women probably more than any man in this company. I worked in his department two and a half years before I transferred to HR—before and after his promotion—and his behavior toward me was never anything but cordial and respectful.”

She looked at Arlene and said, “Your friend’s barking up the wrong tree.”



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“Now you’ve done it,” Troy said as he and Max worked their way down the serving line.

“What are you talking about?” Max loaded his tray with Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, macaroni and cheese and a slice of coconut cake—choices that partially explained why he approached his mid-thirties ten pounds overweight.

“Letting some radical feminist who isn’t even employed here write policy for this company.”

“Oh, you mean Grant.”

“Yeah. Grant.” Troy chose sweet tea and a dinner roll to supplement whatever was in the lunch bag on his tray. “Apt name, huh? Hidden by the flaxen hair and womanly face there’s a hard-drinking, scorched-earth general on the lookout for an opportunity to whop somebody.”

They paid for their food and emerged from the serving line. Troy set his tray on a nearby counter, took a plate from the bag and lifted the lid to see what his wife, Patty, had made him for lunch.

Since early in their marriage, she had painlessly controlled his caloric intake with his favorite home-cooked Southern foods adapted for optimum nutrition and weight maintenance.

He stood an inch over six feet tall and weighed a hundred and eighty pounds—nineteen pounds lighter than he weighed as a halfback for the Crimson Tide. His lean physique could be attributed partly to workouts in the company gym twice a week, but most of the credit went to Patty’s meals, like this one—chunks of tender pork roast with baby carrots and pearl onions in a savory sauce along with a side serving of French green beans and mushroom slices. Satisfactory, as usual. He put the plate in a microwave oven and turned the dial. When his meal was ready, he carried it to the table Max had chosen and took a seat.

“So, have you ever heard of Grant before today? Did you know the director of your UFO office was gonna consult her?”

Max winced. “Don’t call it that.”

“It fits. What you’re doing is plumb spacey.”

“What is your problem? You bring in consultants from outside the company all the time to talk to your people.”

“That’s different.”

Max looked mildly affronted. “How?”

“Because none of them are radical leftists and they don’t write company policy, in any case. Did you know Grant’s going to help—what’s her name, Roper?—write the policies?”

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“No.”

“Well, then, presumably you’re going to put a stop to it.”

“I have the final say about what goes in the policies manual.”

“The board has the final say,” Troy intoned.

“I have the final say on what makes it to the board, now cool it. This is all your doin’ anyway.”

“Mine?”

“Yeah. You’re the one wanting to sell Shearwater widgets to the feds.”

Troy gave his friend a skeptical look. “Oh. The feds are making you do it.”

“Well, yeah, you know how they make you jump through hoops before they do bidness with you.”

“Forget the hoop analogy and think swimming pool.” Troy paused to take a swallow of tea. “When it comes to federal compliance, you go to the shallow end and step in only as far as you have to, preferably no more than ankle-deep. But what you’ve done, buddy-ro, is go directly to the deep end and dive in head first.”

Max sighed, exasperated, stopping his butter-smeared dinner roll halfway to his mouth. “You do your job and let me do mine, okay? Do you know anything about what’s been happening with employment issues in Congress and state legislatures, and especially the courts, the past decade or so?”

“A little.”

“Well, I know a lot about it ’cause it’s my job to. There have been three landmark court cases recently about one issue—sexual harassment—that are downright scary. Nothing bad even has to happen to a female employee, like threatening her with the loss of her job or benefits or something. All she has to do is complain of a hostile environment—” Max made air-quotation marks with his fingers “—and she has a case that the courts will hear. And this applies whether you do business with the feds or not.”

Troy shrugged. “But creating a whole department to deal with it? I’m telling you, you’re asking for trouble. You’re laying the groundwork and building the structure for accommodating the trouble. Maybe even encouraging it.”

“You’re startin’ to sound *way* too much like my daddy,” Max said with a touch of sullenness. “I know what I’m doing. The company has to be protected. You’d just sit around doing nothing and leave it vulnerable. Come to my office. I’ll show you what I’m talking about.”

“Ah-ight,” Troy said. “After my people and I fix the three and a half percent.”

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Conversation grew intermittent as they applied themselves to the task at hand. When his plate was cleared, Troy checked the lunch bag to see if a small dessert was tucked in there somewhere, but there was nothing. Patty must be planning a high-calorie dessert for supper if she was depriving him at lunch.

His attention was caught by a piece of paper protected in a plastic sandwich bag and he took it out. It was a small, cream-colored envelope, cool to the touch from having been in a compact refrigerator in his office all morning. Inside was one of his wife's notecards, a pine bough and her first name printed in gold on the front. The cards were blank, for writing personal messages.

This one had no written message, though. When he opened it, a smaller folded paper about the size of a business check fell out and barely missed his plate. He unfolded it, looked at it a few moments, cut his eyes away and stifled a smile.

"What is it?" Max said, bristling with curiosity.

"It's a gift certificate."

"She's kinda jumping the gun on your birthday a little bit, isn't she? Anniversary, too."

The Stevensons' tenth wedding anniversary was coming up at the end of June, and Troy's thirty-third birthday in early July.

"She wouldn't give me a gift certificate for either one of those." He put the certificate and card back into the envelope and slid it into his inside breast pocket. "It's a no-occasion gift certificate."

Troy sat at his desk a few minutes, almost but not quite ready to jump back into the sales problem. He looked at the still life arranged in front of him—his silver Condor pen lying atop the computer printout and Post It Notes covered with cryptic scribbling sticking out of the edges here and there.

The sales drop had occurred unexpectedly and he would not be able to rest until he knew why, and how to overcome it. But he could accommodate the occasional momentary distraction, especially one as pleasant as this.

He glanced at three framed portraits on the corner of his desk. Two of them were the latest school pictures of his children. Melissa was nine and starting to grow into her big teeth, and Randy was two years younger and snaggle-toothed when the photo was made. Both of them were dark

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haired, dark eyed and olive skinned, as their parents were. Missy, high-spirited and a talker like Troy, was a mama's girl. Randy, a daddy's boy since toddlerhood, was the apple of Troy's eye.

His gaze traveled to the portrait of his wife beside them.

Patty would turn twenty-nine in September. Long brown hair that curved at the ends framed her face, a sweet face with big brown eyes and shapely pink lips. Her rounded chin was centered with the hint of a dimple.

Her makeup was a more subtle and natural update of the mod look—black eye-liner and mascara and pearlescent lipstick—she had worn when they first met and she captured his heart with a single look. Since then, she had developed an overlay of sophistication that was reflected in everything from her wardrobe to the decor of their home and enabled her to be a gracious hostess, community volunteer and capable executive wife. But in many ways, she was still the sweet little Southern Baptist girl he had married.

She remained a bit reserved, but only strangers or casual acquaintances interpreted her restraint as indifference or conceit. Her calm served to counterbalance Troy's vitality and spirit. Conversely, living with him had influenced her to openness and spontaneous shows of emotion, particularly affection, to family and friends, and they came to know her as pretty, genial and happy in her role as homemaker.

But only Troy saw her as she was behind the reserve; only he knew the depth of her devotion to their children and her near idolatrous love for him.

And their friends would be shocked out of their gourds if they had any idea about her prurient streak that surfaced from time to time.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the envelope to give the contents another look.

The gift certificate was homemade and Patty had done a terrific job with the calligraphy and the intricate border. It entitled the bearer to a session of hot, wild sex at the time and location of his choice: (a) in the master bedroom at home on a week night, (b) on a big, cushiony sofa at the lake cabin over the weekend or (c) in a rent-by-the-hour room at the No-Tell Motel on Highway 41—on his lunch break.

He looked at her portrait again, smiled and said under his breath, "Oh, baby."

With a soft laugh, he marshaled his thoughts and brought his attention back to the challenging work on his desk.

Chapter Two

“Here’s where we start,” David Foster said to Brooke as they began their tour of the Library and Record Storage Department.

David was a fresh-faced, personable fellow, a student at Verona State working part time at Shearwater-Ingram. He had arrived about ten minutes before, roughly the same time Brooke reached the library after lunch, chatted with her in the reception area and introduced her to Karen, the department secretary, before starting the tour that would begin her training.

“After you, ma’am.” He opened a door at the back of the reception area next to a pass-through window and motioned Brooke through. They stepped into a big room filled with rows of file cabinets and banks of heavy-duty metal shelving crammed full of storage boxes.

As they made a circuit around the room, David told her, “This department was created six years ago because most of the offices here are too small for more than a couple of file cabinets. Archived and overflow documents for all departments are stored here until they get warehoused.”

He explained the color-coded dots on the file cabinets and gave Brooke a diagram in a clear sheet protector. “You can use that until you learn what’s where...or until they move everything around again, whichever comes first.”

The tour didn’t take long and soon they approached the pass-through where it had begun.

“This is where the process starts,” David said, tapping a small counter at the bottom of the opening. Two shallow plastic trays, red and gray, sat on the counter, along with a small, domed counter bell. “Nobody is supposed to pull or refile documents except department employees. Right now, that’s me, you and Karen. People drop off their requests or call down here and we’ll fill one out for them. Regular requests go in the gray tray,

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urgent ones or time-sensitive ones go in the red tray. You need to check them every half-hour or so. If it's really urgent, people can tap the bell to notify you."

David glanced at the trays. There was a paper in the red one and he took it out and skimmed it.

"Oh, great, look at this. He wants every quarterly sales report since Commander bought this place. That's sixty reports."

"Is that a problem?" Brooke asked, noticing his mild exasperation.

"No. But he wants them *now*, and now is a problem, because I've got a mountain of returns to check in. They've been piling up for days, ever since Lorraine quit."

He pointed to a table pushed against a side wall stacked with files and papers.

"And let me tell you," he added, "when somebody wants a document or file that hasn't been checked in and refiled, it's no fun pokin' through the mountain to find it."

"Who wants the sales reports?"

"Stevenson. In his office, A-S-A-P."

"Stevenson...." The name set off a momentary quivering in her stomach. *The good looking hunk from lunch?*

"V-P, marketing. Upstairs."

All-American body, movie star face....

"What's involved in getting the reports? Is that something I can do?"

"You don't mind? You're supposed to be training and I was going to show you how to do returns."

"But this would be good training, too, wouldn't it?"

"Sure would." David flashed her a smile. "Hey, thanks a lot, Brooke. You're gonna do all right around here. C'mon, I'll get you started."

He retrieved a hanging file cart and showed her the lateral file cabinet where the reports were stored.

"Just hang 'em like this. They're in chronological order. Keep 'em that way. Stevenson's a stickler for things like that."

"All right. Where do I take them?"

"Up the elevator and all the way around to the opposite corner, next to the board room."

Anticipation intensified the quivering in her middle. "That doesn't sound too hard to find."

"It's not. Probably ought to warn you, though. His office is guarded by a Doberman Pinscher."

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Brooke's eyes widened.

David saw the look and laughed. "That's what everybody calls his secretary, Dinah Langley."

"Oh!" Brooke said, laughing, too. "I thought you were talking about a dog!"

"No. But Dinah's loyalty to him would put a dog's to shame. She's actually a very nice lady. These reports will have to be signed out and she's usually the one who does that."

The elevator door opened and Brooke rolled the cart into the hallway upstairs. It was quiet up here, not a soul in sight.

In the center of the upper floor a twenty by thirty foot opening offered a view of the first floor reception area. A wide walkway with substantial safety rails surrounded it. Above it, a bank of skylights the same size provided natural light to both floors. It was diffused now by enormous muslin shades that would stay closed for the coming hot Georgia summer.

Brooke walked on around the corridor toward the opposite corner.

The placard beside the door was like those throughout the building, brushed stainless steel with black lettering. It read,

Marketing

Troy Stevenson, Vice President

Dinah Langley, Administrative Assistant

The door stood open and Brooke pushed the cart into the office. This was the right place, but the secretary's desk was unoccupied. She stopped just short of entering herself, wondering whether the Doberman Pinscher might surprise her from another direction, but the room was empty.

It was a pretty fancy office for a secretary—muted beige walls, traditional furniture, a row of windows looking south toward the canopy of live oaks—but her attention focused on another doorway directly across the room. Through it she glimpsed richness of color—slate green walls and burnished wood. She knocked on the door facing. "Hello?"

"Come in." It was Stevenson's voice. She recognized it from lunch.

Brooke rolled the cart to the second doorway and looked in. It was a power office—a corner office with windows on two sides. She had the impression of a man's room; plain draperies in gray-green linen-like fab-

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ric over metal miniblinds—no silk or damask or plastic for this guy—dark, rich furniture that was substantial but not ostentatious, interesting things hanging on the walls....

It was an impression because she saw it only for a second or two before her attention riveted on something else—the room’s sole occupant seated behind the desk, writing on a legal pad.

Brooke rolled the cart into the office and said, “These are the sales reports you requested. Do you need me to put them somewhere?”

“Just leave them by the door. Thanks.”

Brooke pushed the cart sideways out of the traffic path and hesitated.

Troy looked up. “Is there something else?”

The fluttering started in her stomach again. She held up the document release form and said, “David told me there would be a secretary up here to sign for these.”

“She’s out on errands. I’ll sign it.” He motioned her toward him with two fingers.

Brooke was suddenly intimidated. He seemed stern, impatient, and after seeing him looking so attractive and smiling so engagingly at lunch, she was taken aback by the change. She walked to the desk and handed him the release form in silence.

He actually skimmed it—the stickler was making sure what he was signing—before putting it on the desk to scribble his signature.

He might be behaving differently, but he was still a treat to look at. Melt-in-your-mouth eye-candy. She couldn’t see much of his face when he looked down, but there were plenty of other things to look at. That thick, dark hair loosely swept back from his forehead and slightly tousled, as if he had recently run his fingers through it. Or his broad chest and shoulders beneath a white oxford shirt dressed up with a striped maroon tie.

Since lunchtime, he had removed his coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves almost to the elbows, revealing lean, muscular forearms with a moderate covering of straight black hairs. A stainless steel watch with conservative styling hugged his left wrist and a big, gold wedding band encircled his ring finger.

“Thank you....” He looked at the badge clipped to her collar. “I don’t think I’ve met you.”

She shook her head. “It’s my first day. I’m Brooke.”

“Welcome aboard.” He gave her face a passing glance as he handed her the form, but that look, as swift and impersonal as it was, sent a piercing thrill through her stomach.

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She took the paper and walked out of his office weak-kneed.

At midafternoon, Max dropped by the office again and this time his grumpy mood matched Troy's.

"Hope you don't have any plans for tomorrow."

"Well, I do. Staff meeting," Troy murmured. "My people have to help me figure out why this fall-off happened so we can fix it."

"You'll have to do it some other time. Honchos from Commander are coming in tomorrow. They're anxious to scope out the warehouse site."

"First I've heard of it."

"Yeah. Nice of 'em to give us all this advance notice, huh. Oh, and Daddy's coming, too."

"I thought he was in the Caribbean somewhere."

"So did I." Max looked at Troy with theatrical condescension and said, "They're going to have *brunch* at *Leo's* in *Buckhead...*" and, giving up the pose, continued, "fly down and get here about one, eyeball the land, then head over to Callaway Gardens for a coupla days of golf."

"Must be nice," Troy said under his breath.

Commander Industries in Atlanta, manufacturer of electrical and electronic components, was the parent company of Shearwater-Ingram. Since its inception in the late 1940s, the little company in Verona had manufactured industrial control panels for large machinery, primarily looms used in the South's textile industry. Little change had been made after Commander purchased and renamed it in 1968, but under Troy's leadership, Shearwater was beginning to vary and increase its product line. That made the fall-off in sales a serious concern.

The pique on Troy's face clearly conveyed that he did not want to postpone the staff meeting. Still, he knew as well as Max that nobody at either company said no to Hamilton Ingram.

There would be no staff meeting tomorrow.

It was late afternoon, a half-hour beyond the end of the work day, and golden light seeped through the blinds at the windows flanking the hutch behind Troy's desk. It bathed the executive suite in a mellow glow.

Dinah Langley pulled off her glasses and tucked her short red hair behind her ears. She took keys and sunglasses out of her purse and stepped into Troy's office.

"I'm headed home," she told him, keys tinkling as she hitched her purse strap across her shoulder. "Do you need anything before I go?"

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“Nah. You have a good evening.” He was deeply engrossed in work, seeking clues about the current sales drop in the quarterly reports of years past.

Dinah studied him briefly and her admiration and loyalty gave way slightly to friendship and affection—and concern.

He glanced up, saw her looking at him, and raised his brows in a wordless question.

She pointed to the report with her sunglasses. “You don’t need to stay up here half the night worrying about that.”

A touch of mirth flitted into his eyes but before he could speak, she said, “And don’t say ‘Yes, Mother.’”

He chuckled and gave her a lazy smile. “Okay, boss.”

“I mean it, now, sir. Go home to your family. You can worry about sales when the final report comes out.”

“I’m going here in a few minutes. I’m almost done with this.”

“Good. See you tomorrow.” She stepped smartly back to her office and across it, and through the door to the corridor.

Chapter T hree

Patty Stevenson stood at the cook top in the kitchen and lifted lids on pots to stir the contents. Clouds of aromatic steam floated upward and disappeared into the range hood.

Following custom she established in the early days of her marriage, she had dressed attractively for Troy's arrival home, choosing short brown culottes and a matching ribbed knit pullover that hugged her torso and emphasized her curves, although they were hidden now by a tan calico apron that covered her from neck to knees.

At twenty minutes after six, she turned all the burners to their lowest setting and removed the apron. She took a large tumbler from a cabinet and went to the refrigerator to fill it with ice cubes and sweet tea.

Before the glass was full, she heard her husband's vehicle enter the garage. The engine went silent.

Moments later, he stepped through the back door. His tie was loosened and his shirt and suit lacked the crispness they'd had when he left the house eleven hours and forty minutes before. Stubble shadowed his face and he looked tired and preoccupied.

With the glass of tea in her hand, she met him a few steps inside the back door, and stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "Hey."

"Hey." He put an arm around her and pulled her to him for a moment before returning her kiss, the way he did sometimes when he'd had a less than good day at work. He handed her his briefcase and took off his coat to trade it for the glass of tea.

"Thanks, babe." He drained a quarter of it where he stood and headed for the family room.

"Do you want this?" she said, following him.

"Not right now. Put it on my desk."

Patty detoured to his desk at the back of the room, put the briefcase on

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the corner and folded the coat across the chair. She circled around the couch and sat down next to him.

“How was your day?”

He set the glass aside and laid his head against the backrest. “Not good, but not bad enough to call it a bad day.”

“One of those so-so days.”

“Mmhmm.” He closed his eyes as she stroked and patted his cheek. In the hush of early evening, they heard the faint sound of doors opening down the hallway.

His eyes half opened and cut to Patty. “It’s mighty quiet in here. What’s going on?”

“They’ve been restricted to their rooms with no TV since about four.”

“What’d they do?”

“He muted the ringers on the phones again, she missed a call from her little girlfriend, she screamed and yelled at him and and tore pages out of his comic book. I sent them to their rooms and told them they could come out at suppertime, or whenever you got home if they were good.”

He smiled lazily as he listened and sat upright. “I want them. Let them out.”

Patty went to the foyer and looked down the hall. “Daddy’s home. Y’all can come out.”

The silence was shattered by shouting, squealing and laughter accompanied by stomping feet. In seconds, they rounded the corner from the foyer, yelling “Daddy!” and racing each other to him, their quarrel forgotten.

Melissa scrambled onto the couch and stood on her knees to hug Troy and Randy launched himself into his father’s lap. Laughing, Troy put an arm around each of them and looked up at Patty. “Our young’uns have jackhammer feet.”

Patty took her seat. “They didn’t get them from the Ayers side of the family, halfback.”

“Daddy. Daddy,” Melissa said, patting his shoulder.

“Hey, what’s up?” he said, turning to give her a kiss. “How was school?”

“I made uh A on my spelling test!”

“All that studying paid off, didn’t it?” He smiled and tapped her temple with a forefinger. “Smart and pretty, just like your mama. I’m proud of you, Punkin.”

Melissa twisted this way and that and bounced on her knees, glowing under her father’s affection and approval.

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Wriggling with pent up energy exacerbated by his recent incarceration, Randy tugged at Troy's tie until his father turned to him. "What about you, Sport?"

"My team won dodge ball."

Troy winked at Patty. "We got Olympic dodge ball material here," and to Randy, "Were you throwin'?"

"Yeah!" Randy grinned proudly. "Keyonne got mad and pushed me like this." He flattened his hands against Troy's chest and pushed, drew back, pushed again and again, until the pushes became more like blows.

"Whoa, son!" Troy said, taking Randy's hands. "I think I get the picture. You settle down, now."

"No, not just settle down," Patty said. "He needs to *get* down. So does Missy."

The children ignored her and continued wallowing on their father.

"Randy, Missy. Your daddy's worked hard all day and he's tired. Why don't y'all sit beside him and watch TV till supper's ready?"

"It's all right," Troy said. "Let 'em romp on me if they want to. They'll get too big to do it way too soon."

Patty didn't argue. She had seen this too many times—her husband's weariness after a long, not-good day at work and his revival from playful contact with his children, even when it was a bit rough and tumble.

"Y'all work up a good appetite, now," Patty told them. "Supper will be ready in ten minutes."

Troy sat at his desk at the back of the family room and went over the sales report again. Since supper he had filled several pages of a legal pad with notes.

The children had gone to bed and quiet had returned to the house. Troy's favorite smooth jazz station in Jacksonville played in the background. Patty was curled up on the couch with needlework.

She had been a home seamstress since grade school. She sewed many of her clothes and Melissa's and with the remnants, and sometimes with fabric purchased just for this purpose, she made baby clothes, accessories and cafts to sell at the Star Bright Shoppe in downtown Verona.

Proceeds from her sewing were deposited into her savings account, which existed solely for buying gifts for her husband. Troy's money paid for everything in the Stevenson household, and Patty had no qualms buying gifts for family and friends with it. But she would not give her hus-

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band gifts from herself purchased with his own money.

Except for Christmas, the events of Troy's gift season, as Patty called it—Father's Day, wedding anniversary and birthday—occurred within a two-week span in late June and early July. She always gave him separate gifts for each occasion. Because this year's anniversary represented a milestone in their marriage, their tenth year together, his gift would be extra special -- a square-faced gold signet ring with a slanted groove down the side set with jewels, the birthstones of their children.

It was a father's ring that would become a family ring with the addition of Troy's birthstone and hers. She had stopped by Quinley's Jewelry to order it yesterday, just before picking up the children at school. The current batch of baby clothes would make her savings account balance more than sufficient to buy it.

She finished hemming a baby gown, knotted and bit the thread, put her sewing aside and went to Troy. "You need help with anything?"

"No. There's something here I'm not seeing." He flipped through his notes. "It'll come to me."

"Is there a problem at work?"

"Yeah. But nothing for you to worry about." He looked at his watch. "It's going on ten. You go on to bed. I'll go over this again and then lock up."

"All right."

She left him to his work and headed for the master bedroom.

The Stevensons lived in Oak Terrace, an early Sixties development still considered upscale in Verona twenty years later. They were pleased with the neighborhood. If there were a few eccentrics—like Mrs. Gray, the snoopy gossip across the street, or the Haroldsons, retirees who pushed their two boxers around the block in baby strollers—at least they were harmless eccentrics.

The young couple had purchased their home, a sprawling rambler of red brick, in the spring of 1978, a year and a half after moving from Atlanta. Its lawn of thick St. Augustine grass complemented by native pachysandra was shaded by two of the massive live oak trees that canopied the neighborhood and provided names for both the street, Live Oak Avenue, and the -subdivision. The house had been the model home of the development and very trendy in its day.

There were many aspects of their home that pleased Troy and Patty, but one of their favorites was the modified Jack-and-Jill master bathrooms. Entered through doors flanking the wide bureau in the bedroom,

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they were mirror images in layout, each with its shower, toilet, vanity and cabinetry, although the decor and paraphernalia of each bespoke the different sexes and tastes of the occupants.

The bathrooms opened onto a common area centered with an oversized oval bathtub made of small ceramic tiles. A white baker's rack, stacked with towels and set with bowls of decorative soap and feathery asparagus ferns, stood along one wall. Terrycloth spa robes hung from a metal hat rack and a low hamper topped with a cushioned seat awaited clothing removed for bathing.

Patty poured bubble bath into the tub and turned the shiny chrome handles. While it filled, she tuned a portable radio sitting on the towel rack to Troy's jazz station and adjusted the volume. Both the pleasant scent rising from the tub and the music filling the air were at the perfect level of subtlety to encourage a harried executive to relax and recharge.

She piled her hair on top of her head and fastened it with a barrette. Without haste, she undressed, stepped into the tub and carefully eased down into the hot water. She had been there several minutes, enjoying the music and waiting, when she heard her husband enter the bedroom.

"Tro," she called.

"What?" He came through his bathroom into the tub room.

"Get in." She tilted her head to give him an inviting smile.

He stood just inside the door and looked down at her. Only her head and shoulders showed above the froth. "You shameless hussy."

"It'll make you feel good."

He shook his head. "Real men don't take bubble baths."

But one side of his mouth quirked up as he unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it from his trousers. The half-smile changed to a mock leer and in moments he was naked, his clothes tossed carelessly onto the hamper. He stepped into the tub, grimaced at the temperature of the water and sat down gingerly, pulling air through his teeth.

"Turn around and I'll rub your shoulders," she said.

"I won't argue with that. This water's *hot*."

"It only takes a minute to get used to it, wuss." She squeezed water from a bath sponge across his neck and shoulders, kneaded them gently and listened to his not entirely put-on moans and groans. His left shoulder had begun to give him trouble intermittently. It had been dislocated three times during his football career, once each in junior high, high school and college.

"Goodness! What's going on at work? Your muscles feel like cables!"

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“Well, there’s talk of building a new distribution complex, which means expansion, new employees, and the change will stress everybody out for a while. Sales are down a little. Max is still trying to socialize the company. But we’ll weather it. Mmm. Scratch, too.”

“Well, you try to relax and don’t let it get to you.” Patty lightly scraped her fingernails across his back.

“I haven’t had a chance to work out much lately. It wouldn’t be so bad if I had. Over to the right. Down a little. Little more—oh yeah, right there. Mmm. Anyway, I’m relaxed now. This feels so good I might go to sleep in the water.”

“Told you it would.” Patty leaned back against the slanted wall of the tub, pulled him against her and crossed her arms around his neck. Troy grasped her feet and stroked her insteps with his thumbs. They lay there in silence, eyes closed, as the last of the day’s tension from fussing children, radical feminists and plummeting sales dissipated seemingly into the water.

After a while, he rolled over toward her, making their diminishing blanket of bubbles rock and slosh. She studied his face—the dark eyes, the exquisitely shaped lips, now slightly parted, the fine coating of sweat. Her steadfast love for him began to stir into ardor.

You beautiful, sloe-eyed man! It’s a miracle that you love me and belong to me!

He studied her face, too, and murmured, “You’re so sweet and you look so cute covered with bubbles and your hair done up like that. I wish I could stay with you all night—we could have so much fun together—but I have to go.”

She blinked. “Go? Why?”

“I promised my wife I’d be home by ten-thirty. If I’m not, she’ll pitch a hissy-fit.”

“The bitch,” Patty muttered, her brows buckling. “You are completely henpecked.”

She flipped the water, sending a small splash toward him. He jerked his head to the side but not quickly enough. With drops rolling down his face, he flashed her a menacing grin.

“Oh, you bad girl, you have done it now.” He gave each word exaggerated enunciation. “You better watch it ’cause you never know when I’m gonna get you for that.”

She put the tip of her forefinger in her mouth for a moment and said, “You won’t, though.”

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“Prob’ly not. But I ought to. Think how pissed you’d be if I’d done that to you.”

“Yes, but you know I would mind, and I know you don’t.”

As she looked at him, the desire building inside her fountained upward to show in her face and glow in her eyes. She didn’t try to conceal it, but took his face in her hands and pulled him closer to kiss him.

She kept it going a long time. He stirred but made no move away from her, no attempt to break the seal of their lips. At last, she did, and tilted her head back enough to see his face, to lose herself in the sweetness of his expression and in the beginning of passion and desire her kiss had put in his eyes.

He blinked and inhaled, as if breaking out of a mild trance, and slid forward to follow up with a kiss of his own. He murmured against her mouth, “Darlin’ darlin’ baby...I’m gettin’ in the shower.”

Troy believed tubs were for relaxing in and showers were for getting clean. He stepped out of the tub and walked through the doorway into his bathroom, Patty’s appreciative gaze following his every step. Naked or clothed, he was magnificent, exquisitely proportioned, like Michelangelo’s *David*, like da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, except for the slight extra length to his legs, which enhanced rather than detracted from his perfection.

She smiled and shook her head at the trail of drips and puddly footprints he thoughtlessly left on the floor. Some things just didn’t occur to men.

She laughed softly when he stepped into his glass-enclosed shower, turned the handles on the wall and gave a little yelp as cold water hit him.

But it was no laughing matter when she thought about the tension in his muscles. He had mentioned several problems at work but Patty knew only one was really bothering him—the drop in sales.

He was always aware of the responsibilities his job put on his shoulders, aware that all the employees of Shearwater-Ingram depended on him and his department for their livelihood. He worked hard to live up to his responsibilities. He averaged over fifty hours a week at the office but actually worked more, counting what he brought home at night and the time he frequently put in on Saturdays.

At home, his money, earned by his labor alone, paid for it all—not only the floor but the water puddled on it, the roof over their heads and everything under it.

Except for the help he received from Providence, Troy singlehandedly

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sustained the lives of four human beings and contributed to the upkeep and wellbeing of numerous others. And he did it willingly, lovingly and with good humor.

Thus, he was entitled to demonstrate a little male thoughtlessness about something as harmless as water dripped onto an impervious ceramic tile floor.

Patty finished bathing and flipped the drain lever. She wrapped herself in her terry robe, stepped onto a towel spread on the floor and shoved it around with her foot, soaking up the puddles. She turned off the lights and music. Everything else could wait.

In her bathroom, she got ready for bed. Passing over her usual night-wear, tailored tricot pajamas, she shimmied into a short, slinky white negligee, because Troy was needful tonight and she was wantful. And because it was the last thing a bitchy, hissy-pitching wife would wear.

She put a dab of Parthenope into the hollow at the base of her throat, removed the barrette and let her brown locks fall uncombed to her shoulders.

In the cool, dim bedroom, she checked to see that Troy had shut the door to the hallway. The children knew not to come into their parents bedroom when the door was closed unless it was an emergency, and to knock first in any case.

Troy emerged from his bathroom, dried off but slightly damp and naked but for the towel around his waist because naked was how he slept. He kept a pair of pajama bottoms under the mattress for quick access on the nights when storms or bad dreams brought the little ones scurrying to sleep with Mama and Daddy.

Patty stepped up to him and gave him a petulant look. "You said you'd be home by ten-thirty. Where were you? Who is she?"

He shook his head, grinning. "You're not a very convincing harridan, sweetheart. You just don't have it in you."

Their little game had been fun, but his smile faded and the look on his face said he was ready to get back to reality. A sultry flame leaped to life in his eyes as they went down her body and moved back up to her face. With a forefinger, he pushed aside the thin strap of her negligee, trailed his lips along her shoulder and nuzzled her neck.

Patty shivered and broke out in goose pimples.

She gave the towel a tug and it fell to the floor.

Troy put his arms around her, pulled her to him and kissed her. He

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took a soft, uneven breath and murmured, “She’s you. You’re all the women I want—my sweet wife, my children’s mother, my helper, naughty girl, best friend.... and I love every one of y’all to death.”

Troy walked into the kitchen the next morning at six-fifteen and looked at the kingly spread Patty had laid out for him. The aroma had his stomach growling when he was halfway down the hall and now the sight of it waiting on the table made his mouth water.

The family routinely ate supper before seven to accommodate the children’s bedtime, and Troy was always ravenous by morning. Breakfast was the largest meal of his day, the most protein and calorie laden, the most filling. Patty’s breakfast, next to his, was a fraction of the size.

“Mmm, this looks good, sweetheart,” he said, looking up from the table to his wife. Wearing a beige satin house coat, her feet shoved into matching flat mules, she was still a bit drowsy, but his arrival seemed to wake her up.

“Wow,” she said softly, her eyes widening. “You look incredible.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Hold that thought till I get home tonight. So, it turns out you like this suit, after all?”

“Yeah. And the guy in it.”

In honor of the visiting dignitaries from Commander, he had dressed in his custom tailored Urbano Stefani suit in charcoal gray with a pearl shirt and navy tie. The price of the suit—three times what he usually paid—had stunned Patty when he bought it. He was sure she disapproved of his spending so much though she had never said so.

However she might feel inside, it was extremely rare for her to criticize anything Troy did.

He pulled back one side of her housecoat to see that she still wore the barely-there white nightie. He smiled and pointed and said, “And I like that dress.”

“Oh, you.” She stretched up to kiss his cheek. “Let’s say grace and eat.”

They took their places, paused for a moment to offer up a silent prayer of thanksgiving and began the meal. Conversation was sporadic—fragments of plans for the day, reminders to themselves and each other, snippets of news.

Troy had put the sales problem out of his mind when he finished going over the report last night. He was determined to keep it out until he arrived at the office, and he was doing a pretty good job of it, thanks to

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the chit-chat with his wife.

When his plate was cleared, he went to his desk to retrieve his briefcase and stopped by the kitchen again. Watching Patty prepare the children's school lunches as their breakfast cooked, he felt a surge of love and pride in his chest. What a wonderful mother his teen bride had turned out to be.

Sensing his presence and his observation, she glanced up, saw the tenderness on his face and smiled at him. She brought his lunchbag to him and said, "No dessert today, but we'll have cobbler and ice cream tonight."

"Speaking of dessert.... Last night...that wasn't a cash-in on my gift certificate, was it?"

She gave him a saucy smile. "Not if you don't want it to be."

"Good. Because I want option C—lunchbreak quickie at a sleazy motel." He gave her a wicked grin that brought a sparkle to his dark eyes.

"I wondered if you'd found it."

"Oh, yes. Made my day."

"It doesn't say so anywhere on it," Patty said, "but that's a magic gift certificate."

Troy's brows rose. "Magic?"

"Yeah. It never expires. You can use it over and over again, and choose whatever option you want. So don't ever throw it away."

Chapter Four

“Shame to lose Bear Bryant,” said Robert Hughes. “He was one of a kind.”

It was early afternoon on Wednesday and the Scoreboard Tavern was nearly empty. Hughes and the six other men gathered around a table didn’t need a crowd to enjoy themselves, but his observation momentarily dimmed their good mood.

They had stopped for a drink after looking over the seven-acre tract ideally located for a warehouse and distribution center for both Commander and Shearwater-Ingram products.

Jeff Craddock, who worked security at Shearwater, had been drafted to drive the van and photograph the outing for the company archives. He and the company pilot, a younger fellow who held himself somewhat aloof from the suits, had ordered colas. So had Troy, to Max’s scorn. Everyone else ordered scotch.

Hughes and another board member from Commander, James Ferragamo, and the pilot sat at the far end of the table. At the other end, to Troy’s right, Hamilton Ingram sat like a hard-nosed judge looking over his courtroom.

He was taller than Troy, and lean, his face almost gaunt under silvery hair. There was little of him in his son but the blue eyes. Most of Max’s appearance had come from his mother, Mary Catherine, a Tutwiler distantly related to the famous Alabama family.

The conversation had begun with a discussion of the pros and cons of a warehouse complex on the tract of land they had just inspected but when the drinks came, perhaps inevitably in a sports bar in the South, talk turned to football.

The legendary Bryant had died four months earlier, just weeks after retiring from coaching.

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“Was he as great as his reputation, Stevenson?” said Ferragamo.

“Yeah, he was.” Troy nodded, his face a touch pensive. “He had a lot of impact on his players and coaches. Only my mama and daddy had more influence on me. He taught his people teamwork and he understood motivation better than anyone I’ve ever known.”

“Did y’all keep in touch after you graduated?”

“A few times. We sent him birth announcements of our children and he called. Now and then we’d swap howdies in person when I went to a game.”

“Did you go to Tuscaloosa for the funeral?” Hughes asked.

“No. It looked like it could turn into a media circus and I was...grieving.”

There was a moment of silence before the talk worked around to Troy’s prowess on the gridiron and that was when Max joined in.

“If you ever get a chance to see any old sports reels of the Troyster here, be sure you watch. He was phenomenal. He could juke a defensive back outta his shoes, and he did, a lot. And he had them long legs that added up to a great, long stride, which made him a fantastic runner right there, but that was only part of it. The rest was speed—awesome speed. I mean, he could run so fast, if he ever got in front of his pursuers, that was all she wrote. He was gone and there was no catchin’ him.”

Troy was half-smiling, looking at his friend and listening with detached enjoyment, as if Max were talking about someone else.

“That would get tens of thousands of people in the stands all worked up and chanting his name, and it was somethin’ to hear—Tro-*wee*, Tro-*wee*, Tro-*wee*! And you know what? In all that fancy maneuverin’, I never saw him fumble the ball.”

“Wow, that’s pretty amazing,” Ferragamo said.

“Yep,” Max agreed, “but there was a good reason for it. Remember in *Alien*, that thing with the long fingers clamped to Harry Dean Stanton’s face?”

“John Hurt,” said Jeff. He wallowed a piece of ice in his mouth and looked at Max.

“Huh?”

Jeff crunched the ice between his molars and spoke around the bits. “The one with the alien on his face was John Hurt. Harry Dean Stanton played some sort of maintenance guy.”

Max rolled his eyes. “What ever. Anyway, that was the way Troy’s hand looked when he clamped it around a football. There was no way anybody was gonna strip it from him.”

Southern Man

Troy grinned. He'd be sure to tell Patty that one.

"Do you ever miss it?" Ferragamo asked. "Wish you'd played pro ball?"

Troy shook his head. "Nah. I played football in college to get an education. I started playing in the youth leagues when I was eight and I played my last game January first, 1973 when I was twenty-one. I figured thirteen years of getting tackled, knocked down, slammed around, kicked, kneed, elbowed, and stomped on was enough."

"Seventy-three...." Hughes frowned in concentration. "That would've been the...Cotton Bowl?"

"Yeah." Troy nodded "Billed as the Battle of the Wishbones. Texas came from behind to beat us twenty-one to seventeen. Four...freakin'...points." A rueful smile flitted across his face.

The football talk evolved into Georgia's prospects for the fall and Troy left the table to visit the men's room. When he stepped out, Hamilton Ingram headed him off.

"Let's sit and talk a few minutes," he said, indicating a nearby booth. "Let me tell you about some developments."

"All right." They sat opposite each other and Troy's eyes narrowed as he tried to read the old man's expression.

"You knew this trip was just a formality, didn't you?" Ingram asked.

"No, sir, I didn't."

"The decision was made to buy this tract a month ago. In part, the land acquisition and the construction of the buildings have been made possible by the increase in Shearwater's revenues since you took over marketing and sales. By our preliminary calculations, a warehouse complex in this location is going to save us twelve percent in shipping costs over a five year period. For that contribution to the company, I thought you merited a raise and a bonus."

"Well, thank you," Troy said, his face neutral. Suspicion grew strong in him because the old man's good news clashed with his sour demeanor. "So what's the bad news?"

"I won't beat around the bush," Ingram said. "I'm between a rock and a hard place, here. I now find I've advocated for a raise and a bonus for a marketing vice president who has let sales fall three and a half percent in a single quarter."

There it was.

"I'm taking care of it," Troy said.

"Do you know the reason for the drop?"

"Not yet, but I have my people looking for it right now. I would be there

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looking for it with them, if I hadn't...come here today."

Troy knew he was skirting the edge of dangerously thin ice, but he was too furious to care.

"It's not so much the fall in sales that concerns me. I'm more concerned about your lack of a proactive plan for such an eventuality. Everyone I've talked to since the report came out yesterday—from your CEO all the way down to my son, and that's quite a distance—tells me it took you by surprise. As if you never expected sales to fall, so you've never formulated a response. Now sales are down and you're scrambling."

When he had played football in both high school and college, Troy had learned to take horrific humiliation and verbal abuse and seconds later, go out on the field and give an optimal performance as if nothing fazed him. The experience had stood him in good stead at Commander and now at Shearwater. Hamilton Ingram did not get red-faced, scream curses, stomp around and throw clipboards, but his brittle, understated expressions of disapproval had the same effect.

Troy kept his emotions and demeanor under tight control but he could not let these slights to his management go unchallenged. "Respectfully, sir, when I scrambled on the football field, a good percent of the time the result was a first down and sometimes a touchdown."

Ham's lips did not smile, but his eyes did. "I've always been impressed with you. You show respect, but you don't cower. You're competitive, but not ruthless. I would just remind you of one thing. Business is not a football game."

Troy kept a steady gaze on Ingram but made no reply.

"There's something else you need to know. The financing for the land acquisition and construction of the buildings is a done deal. Shearwater sales projections figured significantly in calculating the loan repayment. If sales remain depressed, or do not rise at the rate expected, it's not going to be pretty."

Ingram effectively ended the conversation then, cutting off any response Troy might be formulating, although he wasn't planning one. He was done with this discussion, too.

How dare Ingram do this? How dare he put such a burden on this little company, and on Troy, without a consultation? Without so much as a heads up?

Back at the table, Troy was too furious and disturbed to follow the conversation around him until something—he wasn't sure what—dented his preoccupation.

Southern Man

His eyes went to the faces around him. Craddock and the Atlanta visitors were glancing about the room looking uncomfortable. Max had an elbow on the table. He was studying the tumbler of scotch he held in front of his face. His expression was cocky but Troy saw glints of pain and humiliation in his eyes.

What had he missed while caught in his own turbulence?

He looked at the older Ingram, who was gazing at his son with utter scorn.

“So for four years you’ve been head of personnel down here and you haven’t done a damn thing but change the name to Human Resources. Now you’ve made this, this discrimination department, which is like an engraved invitation for some unscrupulous woman to sue the company for all its worth. Maxwell, son, where is your sense? Were you born stupid or does it come from the way your mother raised you?”

No one else at the table knew as well as Troy what Hamilton Ingram’s rejection and criticism did to his son, or the depth of Max’s hurt and humiliation behind his cocky mask.

Enabled by alcohol, Max chuckled. His laughter grew harder until his face flushed and his hair fell across his forehead. “Good one, Daddy. I can’t hardly wait to call Mama and tell her. She’ll appreciate that as much as I do.”

Nobody spoke and Max’s laughter faded. He returned his father’s look of contempt and said, “Mama’s only done two stupid things her whole life—marry you and give birth to me.” Max drained his glass and looked at the silent, embarrassed faces around the table. “S’cuse me,” he said hoarsely. He got up and walked to the far end of the bar.

Troy watched him go and turned his disbelieving stare back to Ingram. “I don’t agree with what he’s doing, either—at least, I don’t agree with the way he’s doing it. But he didn’t create the EFO to jeopardize the company. He did it to protect it.”

“You’ve talked to him about it?”

“Yes, I have.” Something warned Troy not to say what he was about to say, but he ignored it. “He’s not stupid and he doesn’t deserve what just happened.”

Hamilton’s eyes narrowed. “He doesn’t deserve the loyalty you give him, either.”

Pointless. Pointless to even try to converse with this man.

“Excuse me.” Troy got to his feet and walked to the end of the bar where Max sat hunched on a tall stool. With both hands, he squeezed

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Max's shoulders at the base of his neck and shook him slightly, following up with a slap on the back.

Max turned his head as Troy took the adjacent stool and they looked at one another for a moment. The bartender appeared nearby and Max said, "Have a drink with me, Troyster."

Torn by inner turmoil and his friend's pain, Troy said, "I reckon one won't hurt." He looked at the bartender.

"Scotch on the rocks. Make it a double."

The Odyssey Falcon lifted off the tarmac at Yancey Regional Airport as the company van rolled out of the parking lot.

At the wheel, Jeff had a perpetual grin on his face listening to Troy and Max behind him, trying to converse. They were both high as kites and neither could start a sentence without dissolving into mindless laughter before it ended.

"Hey, driver!" Troy doubled over with an explosive snicker. He took out his breast pocket wallet, extracted several bills of varying denominations and handed them across to the front seat. "Go to the drive through at the liquor store and get me a pint of scot-cha-cha-cha."

"Which one?" Jeff asked.

"Glenfid—Glenfidget."

"Do you mean Glenfiddich? Or Glenlivet?"

Troy looked at him suspiciously. "Glen...Glen...Johnnie Wawker."

"Which store?"

"Th' first one."

When the van pulled into the parking lot at Shearwater, Troy was clutching a pint bottle. The men got out and headed for the building.

Troy said to Max, "C'mon to my office for a nightcap."

Max grabbed hold of a small sapling and slowly tilted his head back, squinting toward the sky. "It's day."

Nonplussed, Troy followed Max's gaze upward. "Oh. Never mind."

"Well."

Chapter Five

Someone had come in the back door. Patty, in the laundry room folding clothes, stopped the dryer to listen. It was too early to be Troy, not yet five, and she hadn't heard the Audi enter the garage. But it had to be him, because it was way too quiet to be the children, even if they were up to something.

"Tro," she called. There was no answer. She had the intercom radio in the kitchen turned up a little too loudly so it would carry to the laundry room. He probably hadn't heard her. She headed for the kitchen but froze in the doorway and watched him for several moments. Her throat constricted.

If wardrobe was the only thing to consider, he was still every inch the executive, from the soles of his shiny black oxfords to his navy silk tie. His Urbano Stefani suit looked as good now as it had at breakfast this morning, but the tie was loosened and the gray shirt unbuttoned at the throat, giving the fashionable executive ensemble the nuance of after-work relaxation—which was a lot more positive than saying after-work intoxication.

With a fat cigar between his fingers, he awkwardly took a tumbler from a cabinet and filled it with ice cubes from the freezer. There was a small bottle of liquor on the counter next to the refrigerator and he set the tumbler beside it.

He rummaged in a cabinet drawer, withdrew a large box of utility matches and lit the cigar. He only smoked the filthy things when he was drinking, which occurred only two or three times a year and never in his home. Until today.

The smell mingled with the lingering aroma of the peach cobbler Patty had baked earlier and gave her a touch of nausea.

As he reached for the tumbler and bottle, the wedding band he wore with such pride caught the light from the family room windows and glint-

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ed through the haze of smoke. Patty's insides lurched painfully.

She detoured to the intercom's kitchen station, turned off the radio and went to him. "Troy, what are you doing?"

He glanced toward her. "Hey, babe."

"What are you doing?"

"Fixin' a drink."

She looked at his face, the red eyes, the slightly addled expression, and the ache inside her grew. He was careful when he opened the bottle and poured the liquor into the tumbler, but he spilled some on the counter, anyway. His coordination was not optimum right now, and the cigar between his fingers was a hindrance but she was not about to help him.

"How many have you already had?"

His brows lowered and he shrugged a shoulder. "I don' know. Whereza ashtray?"

Patty opened a drawer, pulled out a heavy glass ashtray she kept for guests and held it out to him. He put the cigar in it, carefully set it on the counter, and turned to look at her, bleary eyed. He smiled.

"Sweetheart, you look so purty in that li'l outfit." He walked toward her. When his arms went around her, it was all she could do to keep from crying.

"Why?" she wailed softly against his chest.

"Why what?"

With all the willpower she could muster, she composed herself and stepped back. "Why don't you go in the bedroom and lie down? You look tired. You rest up while I fix you some supper."

"I'm not tired, not sleepy, not hungry. I'm gonna watch television." He took the tumbler and ashtray and carefully worked his way around the counter into the family room where he took his customary seat at the end of the leather couch. Patty's heart lurched when she heard the children burst into the family room through the patio doors. Halfway across the room, they spotted him and streaked toward him, yelling and laughing.

She went back to the laundry room and buried her face in a folded towel to muffle her sobs. She had hoped to get him to the bedroom before they came in, so they wouldn't see him like this. No chance now. They were in there romping on him as if this were like any other evening.

She dried her eyes and tried to calm herself, tried to think what to do. She became aware of movement in the periphery of her vision and turned to see Melissa standing in the doorway. Her daughter had a troubled, scared look on her face. No, it wasn't like like any other evening, after all.

Southern Man

“Mama,” Melissa said, barely audibly. “Somethin’s the matter with Daddy.”

Alarm shot through Patty. Melissa had never see her father intoxicated before. Was that what she was talking about, or had something happened to him? Had he lost consciousness, fallen?

“Wait here, baby.” Patty tiptoed around her and into the kitchen until she could see past the back of the couch. Troy had slid down enough to prop his feet on the coffee table. As she watched, he reached across the tumbler and ashtray on the end table to pick up the TV remote control. He hadn’t fallen, he wasn’t unconscious or convulsive, so it was his intoxication alone that troubled his daughter.

Patty fled back into the laundry room pursued by emotions in strong conflict. She hated that he was drunk—hated it—but she was deeply grateful no other malady had befallen him.

It took every ounce of emotional strength she had to bring herself under control. She hugged Melissa and stroked her shoulders.

“I’m sorry you had to see your daddy like that.”

“I don’t like it,” Melissa murmured.

“I understand because I don’t like it, either.”

“I want Daddy the way he’s supposed to be.”

“He will be. This is just temporary.”

“But I don’t like him like this!” Melissa wailed.

Alarm went through Patty a second time. “Honey, did he say something to you? Did he do something?”

“No,” Melissa said, her voice soft and high pitched. “He didn’t say nothing to me. He didn’t pay no attention to me at all. He talked to Randy but it was like I wat’n even there!” She closed her eyes to squeeze out big tears that streaked down her cheeks.

“Poor baby.” Patty shushed her daughter and hugged her again, casting about for something to distract her. She considered giving Melissa a stack of her clean laundry to take to her room, but that thought was quickly crowded out by another.

In a few more seconds, the thought became a half-baked plan. Even as the plan formed in Patty’s mind, serious doubts formed with it, but Melissa’s *I don’t like him like this!* overcame her misgivings.

“Missy, listen to me. Go to your room. Get out your little overnight bag and pack some clothes for school tomorrow. Bring your school books and your sleep bunny and some toys and things to play with tonight. Did you finish your homework before you went outside to play?”

“Yeah.”

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“Good girl. Now when you get packed, go get in the station wagon and wait for me. It may take a while before I get out there. The car’s in the driveway so go out the front door. And be real quiet. Have you got all that?”

Snuffling, Melissa looked at her mother curiously for a second and nodded. “Where’re we going?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t thought that far ahead yet. We’ll work that out after we leave, okay? I hate leaving your daddy here alone but it looks like I’ll have to.”

That thought brought on more stinging tears, but she bit her lip and pushed it away. Right now, the children took priority.

Watching Melissa walk away, she brought her tears under control. She took one of the wicker laundry baskets to the kitchen, set it on the counter and went to the refrigerator. The lunch she had made for Troy to take to work tomorrow was in there. She shifted the contents of a couple of shelves so he would spot the microwavable plate easily. As she closed the door, her eyes were drawn to the bottle of scotch on the counter nearby and she felt a touch of nausea.

At her built-in desk she took pen and paper and wrote a note.

Troy, your supper is in the fridge. Heat it for three minutes in the microwave on high. I’ll call you after church and make sure you are all right. I love you. Patty

She put the note in the most obvious place, on the counter next to the refrigerator, and picked up the pint of scotch with thumb and forefinger, as if it were contaminated. With a shudder, she took it to the sink, poured the remaining liquid down the drain and dropped the bottle into the trash can.

Carrying the laundry basket as if doing routine chores, she went back through the family room to the hallway, glancing obliquely toward her husband and son on the way.

Troy was lounging on the couch, as before, pressing a button on the remote control. Twenty channels were available on local cable television, and he was in the process of watching them all—for two to three seconds at a time. Randy was seated on the couch close to his father, his forearm resting on Troy’s thigh, his eyes aimed toward the big-screen television, evidently waiting for something interesting to pop up as the channels flicked by.

If he had problems like his sister did with Troy’s condition or behavior, there was little evidence of it except for his somewhat somber expression.

Southern Man



Patty lifted her small suitcase into the back of the station wagon and shoved the matching traincase in behind it. She leaned down to look at her daughter in the back seat.

“Missy, you feeling better, hon?”

Melissa turned around to look at her and said, “Yeah,” without enthusiasm.

“Okay. It won’t be much longer now.”

Getting Missy out to the car and putting luggage in the back without notice was the easy part. Getting Randy out of the house without arousing his resistance or Troy’s suspicions would be much harder.

Patty left the tailgate open and headed for the house. Her loafers clacked on the sidewalk and she paused at the steps attached to the side of the porch. Resting a hand on the wrought iron rail, she looked toward the street. Troy’s gray Audi was out there, parked crookedly beside the curb. At least he hadn’t tried to turn into the driveway, or worse, park in the garage.

She bounded up the three steps, her hair rippling against her shoulders. The sun was beginning to drop and in the slanting light she caught her reflection in the living room’s picture window. It brought her up short. She looked like a crazy woman, clueless and frightened.

She ran a hand over her face as if to rub away the contortions. Feeling ruffled for some reason, she smoothed imaginary wrinkles from her navy pullover and matching slacks.

It was bad enough for the children to see their father in the condition he was in. They did not need to see their cool, chic mother looking like a wild woman.

When she felt more in control—and when she looked it—she opened the door and went inside, stepping lightly across the chipped marble floor in the foyer to the family room.

Troy had evidently found something he wanted to watch on a sports channel, a foreign athletic competition of some sort, rugby or cricket or whatever, because he had put the remote control on the end table. It lay next to the tumbler of liquor and ice cubes sweating on the tabletop.

Father and son were watching television with rapt attention hardly warranted by the programming and they barely glanced at her when she walked farther into the room, stopped near them and said, “Randy, come here a minute, please.”

CONNIE CHASTAIN

Randy scooted forward ever so slowly, looking at his father for confirmation that obeying his mother was necessary.

“You better go, Shport. She sounds like she means bidness.” Troy clicked his tongue and gave Randy a wink.

Hesitantly, Randy slid off the couch and walked to his mother. His jeans and striped T-shirt, which he had worn to school and played in outside, were still remarkably clean—good; he wouldn’t have to change for Bible study—and he looked so precious despite his obvious annoyance.

“Let’s go to your room for a minute,” Patty said.

Although he made no verbal protest, Randy’s shoulders slumped and he dragged his feet. Patty knew what he was thinking. Most of the time, when he forgot to put up his toys or left clothes lying around, she straightened his room for him but sometimes she would find him and make him do the chores, to inoculate him against turning into a slob someday, when he reached manhood. He probably thought that was what he was in for now.

But when they got to his room, there was nothing out of place. Instead of making him tidy up, Patty put his book satchel on the bed along with a small backpack from his closet.

“Make sure all your books and school things are in your satchel.”

He complied without comment while she took a few items of clothing from his drawers and put them in the backpack, which she then handed to him.

“Pick out a few toys to go in here,” she said. “Maybe some of your little trucks, some games, things like that.”

“Why?”

“So you’ll have something to play with after we leave.”

He took the backpack with clear uneasiness. “Where we goin’?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Randy’s brows knit together and he looked at her in confusion. “When?”

“Right now.”

His confusion turned to suspicion. “Daddy didn’t say nothing about us going anywhere.”

“I know.” She sat on his bed and motioned him to her. She combed his bangs with her fingers and looked at his face. Randy had big, dark irises like Troy’s. When he narrowed his eyes, as he was doing now, the whites all but disappeared, giving his eyes a strange, almost other-worldly look that would have been disconcerting but for the sweet face that surrounded them.

Southern Man

“Your daddy’s not coming with us.”

“Why not?”

“Because he doesn’t feel well. Listen, now. We’ve got your clothes and your schoolbooks ready to go, but no toys. We’re leaving right this minute and if you don’t take some toys, you won’t have anything to play with.”

He did as he was told, picking without thought a few random toys off the shelves but he clearly wasn’t okay with it.

Patty knew he was troubled. His father, whom Randy loved without reservation, looked and smelled and behaved and even talked strangely today, which was probably troubling enough all by itself. Randy had only seen his father like this once or twice, and only for a minute or two.

She also knew that children could pick up on tension between their parents, even when it was hidden, and she wasn’t doing a very good job of hiding it, so he was surely aware of that. It was bound to be troubling for him simply because tension between his parents was rare.

Now he was faced with this unexpected departure to places unknown, without his father, and it might be the point at which he balked. She needed to get him away before that happened.

“Here, you want me to take that?” Patty said when he zipped up the backpack. He carried the book bag and she looped the straps of the backpack across her forearm. Hand in hand, they walked down the hall and through the foyer.

She was again assailed by deep misgivings about what she was doing. She was torn painfully between her profound love for Troy, embedded with a wide seam of loyalty, and the conviction that she had to get the children away. It was the only way she could think of to protect their relationship with their father. Nevertheless, the sense that she was betraying her husband was strong and it filled her with anxiety.

Chapter Six

Patty opened the front door quietly, stepped through with Randy, and closed it just as quietly behind them. They were near the steps and had almost made good their getaway when she heard the door open, not quietly. She stopped and looked back to see Troy walk through the doorway.

She marveled that he could look so normal—so *good*—when he was so drunk.

He still possessed enough coordination to carry two things in one hand. He held the cigar between the first two fingers of his left hand and he was clamping the tumbler of liquor between the other two and his thumb.

He stood just outside the door and tilted his head, slowly and carefully, to look around Patty toward the station wagon where Melissa waited in the back seat. He straightened, looked at Patty, then glanced at Randy. His eyes lingered for a second on the backpack and he blinked in slow motion, bringing his gaze back to her.

“Where’re you and the young’uns goin’?” he asked pleasantly. He switched the tumbler to his right hand, but made no move to raise it to his lips.

“We’re going to the Burger King,” Patty said. “Then to midweek Bible study. Then—I’m not sure. I’m going to see if they can spend the night with friends, but if that doesn’t work out, we’ll probably go to a motel. I was going to call and tell you as soon as I got to a phone.”

“Motel? Y’all live here.” He tapped the concrete porch with a foot. The maneuver seemed to worsen his uncertain balance and he walked to the side of the porch where he steadied himself with a thigh against the railing.

“And we’ll be back,” Patty said. “The children just don’t need to be here right now.”

He squinted and pursed his lips as he considered that for a moment.

Southern Man

“Why do they not need to be in their own home?”

“Because I don’t want their image of you...tarnished...by exposure to...to the way you are now.”

“Tarnished....”

“Yes. When you’re intoxicated you’re...different. You can’t even walk and talk the way they’re used to. I don’t want them to see that. I don’t want their love and respect for you diminished one iota.”

Grim-faced, Troy turned to set the tumbler on the window sill, dropped the twenty-dollar cigar into it and turned back to face her. “If that’s the problem, I should ought to be the one goin’.”

“You shouldn’t have come home to begin with! You should have stayed at your office tonight! It’s bad enough that I’ve had to see you this way before, but how could you do this in front of your children?”

He scowled and looked away.

Patty forged ahead. “Always before, when you came home like this, it was after their bedtime. But this time, in the middle of the week, before five, right in front of them. Why?”

He looked at their surroundings—the turf he was so proud of, Patty’s flowerbeds out by the curb, the neighbor’s houses. His eyes came to her and with a hint of sulkiness, he said, “I wasn’t payin’ any attention to the time.”

“Well, now you’re here and you can’t leave because you can’t drive. So we’re leaving. We’ll be back when you are...yourself.”

“I drove home,” he reminded her.

She didn’t try to hide her distress. “Yes, driving drunk! Ah, Tro, you could have killed yourself and then what would we do? You used to never do anything like this! What’s happening to you?”

Again, he didn’t answer.

Shaking her head, she looked at Randy, feeling guilty suddenly that he had heard her tirade. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Troy’s voice echoed, *You’re not a very convincing harridan, sweetheart. You just don’t have it in you.*

She calmed herself and her voice softened, normalized. “Give me your book satchel. I’ll take it and your backpack to the car. You say bye to your daddy and come on.”

She stepped down to the sidewalk and strode to the driveway. She put Randy’s things in the vehicle, shut the tailgate and walked back toward the porch. She stopped at the bottom of the steps and looked up at her son and her husband.

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Behind them, the sun was inching lower and soon they would be silhouettes against the late afternoon glare, but for now she could see their faces. Randy hadn't moved an inch from the place where she had left him.

"Come on, let's go."

Randy looked up at his father.

"Shport. Maybe you better go with your mama. She's tryin' to save you from esposure to me."

Randy's lips stiffened and curved downward. "I wanna stay here."

Patty said, "No, you need to come with me, now, sweetheart."

"No!" Randy stepped toward his father and latched onto Troy's coat with both hands.

"Didn't you hear me, son? Go with your mother." Troy's voice was raspy and he paused to clear his throat. "It's just for tonight."

"But I wanna stay with you!"

"Your mother thinks I'm not fit for you to stay with."

Try as he might to control them, tears welled up in Randy's eyes and rolled down his cheeks. He looked up at his father, encroaching desperation on his little face, and pleaded, "I don't wanna leave you!"

"Well, you have to. Now, let go of me." Troy took a step back. Randy stepped forward to keep up with him.

"Let *go*, I said!" Troy drew back his hand to swat Randy's fists and break their grip on his coat, but at the instant his hand came forward, Randy leaned against him and pressed his forehead to his father's side. Troy's hand stuck his face, hard.

Randy's fingers spread apart as air rushed into his lungs and he looked at his father in total shock, eyes wide and mouth gaping. He took a step back, slipped off the edge of the porch and before either of his parents could react, he tumbled down the steps.

Patty cried out as he fell and went down on her knees beside him. He lay on his back on the sidewalk, his head toward the driveway, one foot resting awkwardly on the bottom step. She put her hand on his teary cheek. His face had been so earnest as he cried and pleaded with his father; now it was slack and his body was limp.

"Randy!" There was no response. "Randy, wake up, it's Mama! Can you hear me?" Still nothing. Tears filled her eyes and she blinked hard to clear her vision.

Troy had stumbled down the steps, clinging to the rail to keep from falling, and now sat on his heels on the other side of their son. His breath coming in gasps, he looked at Randy from head to toe with sheer horror on his face.

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“Randy!” His voice was faint as he took his son’s small, limp hand.

“Let me have him!” Patty hissed. She gathered Randy into her arms and struggled to her feet. Troy lifted his arm to hold onto Randy’s hand until Patty turned toward the driveway and moved his son out of his reach.

Seeing her parent’s reaction to Randy’s fall, Melissa scrambled out of the car and half ran to them, her face troubled. “Mama, is Randy okay?”

“Missy, open the front door.” Patty nodded toward the Le Sabre. “I’m going to put him in the seat and then I want you to get in and hold him till we get to the emergency room. Can you do that?”

Melissa bobbed her head. She was already upset about her father. Now there was this sudden mishap with Randy, who was her sweet littabo again, no longer the brat who muted the telephones and made her miss calls. It was no mystery why her eyes were round with fear, her face overlaid with anxiety .

She scurried back to the vehicle and opened the door. Patty put Randy in the front seat feet first. Melissa climbed in and maneuvered until she had him half in her lap. When she circled her arms around his shoulders, Patty closed the door.

She raced around the vehicle and got in behind the wheel. Her purse lay in the middle of the front seat under Randy’s feet and she fumbled with it, locating her keys. When the engine started, she wiped her eyes before putting the vehicle in reverse.

Stop crying and calm down. You can’t drive if you can’t see, and your son’s life may depend on how fast you get him to the hospital. Now, get a grip.

She backed out of the driveway. Just before her house went out of sight, she saw Troy standing on the sidewalk, one hand grasping the step railing as he watched the vehicle roll away and carry his family from him. Even at this distance, she could see his distress. Her heart, knowing the anguish and terror that filled his, cried out for him.

Randy woke up only seconds after the station wagon backed onto Live Oak Street. Melissa’s arms still cradled his shoulders but his feet had slipped off the seat when Patty fumbled with her purse. He had been unconscious for less than a minute.

Patty watched him as much as driving allowed. He looked up at his sister and then at the windshield where lights and shadows zoomed by.

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“Randy, look at Mama,” Patty said, and he did. She almost cried with relief. “How do you feel, sweetheart?”

“I feel sick.” His eyes went back to the movement though the windshield and his breathing grew shallow.

“Don’t look out the window, it’ll make you motion sick. We’ll be at the hospital soon and the doctors will help you feel better.” She glanced at Melissa. “Take that litter bag off the door and have it ready in case he needs to throw up.”

But he shut out the nausea by closing his eyes and turning toward his sister, pressing his face against her shoulder.

Melissa patted him and said, in imitation mother-speak, “*Poor littabo. It’ll be all right.*”

They arrived at the emergency room of Verona General Hospital in ten minutes. Patty carried Randy inside.

He sat on the steps in front of his house, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. He was immersed in terror. He could see nothing but the image of his son’s still, ashen face.

Intense yearning to be with his wife and children, where he belonged, burned in his heart and he was desperate to know what was happening with Randy. If he could get inside, get to the phone and call a taxi, he could follow them to the emergency room.

He grasped the wrought iron rail, pulled himself upright and turned around. Low in the sky, the sun was a molten pink-orange blob that blinded him. He tried to walk up the steps but he kept stumbling over the top step. After several tries, he gave up and lay across the porch floor on his side.

His craving for his family gnawed at his insides. His fear for his son washed over him in waves. A reservoir of tears he could not shed was accumulating in his chest so painfully he felt as if it would split him apart.

After a while, he lost consciousness.

Chapter Seven

For almost four hours, Randy underwent physical and neurological examinations with results that greatly heartened his mother. His blood pressure and pulse were repeatedly checked and were normal every time. His test results in vision, responsiveness to light, reflexes and balance were also perfectly normal.

Just before ten o'clock, the ER doctor asked to speak to Patty in the waiting room. Randy was sitting up in bed playing with a plastic cup and a flexible straw—he could make toys of anything if he had to—and Patty told him, “I’ll be right outside talking to the doctor and Missy will be here with you. Okay?”

“Okay, Mama,” he said so brightly it was almost as if the whole experience had turned into a game for him.

There weren’t many people in the waiting room. One end was unoccupied and the doctor and Patty went there. He sat down across from her and put a metallic patient chart on the table next to him.

Patty liked the young resident. Earlier, he had given her a kindly lecture about the importance of calling an ambulance and not moving trauma victims to avoid further injury to them. But he had been so nonjudgmental, Patty felt informed and instructed for the future, not chastised about the present.

The doctor looked at her now with the same gentle concern.

“Mrs. Stevenson, may I ask you some questions about Randy’s accident?”

“Yes, of course.”

“How is it that he happened to fall down the steps? What was he doing at the time?”

Patty looked at him and summoned all the calmness and dignity she could command. “It was my fault. I was trying to get the children out of

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the house and take them somewhere for the night. My husband—”

It went against everything in her to be disloyal to Troy. Only devotion to the wellbeing of her children could force her to do what she was about to do.

“My husband came home intoxicated after work. I didn’t want the children to see him that way, so I was taking them away for the night. I was trying to get them out of the house without him knowing because I knew it would hurt him and make him mad.”

Her gaze wandered off.

“I had doubts about that almost the instant I started it. It was extremely disrespectful to him and I had a feeling something bad was going to happen because of it. I should have thought of some other way to handle it...”

She frowned and blinked, then looked at the doctor. “I’m sorry, I got sidetracked. Anyway, Troy came out on the porch when Randy and I were walking to the car.”

Her emotions became harder to control as her account progressed and while she managed get through the telling without breaking down, her voice was quavering and her eyes stinging as she concluded.

“The side of his foot came down hard on the top step and he lost his balance. His ankle twisted and his knee bent and he just...fell. It takes time to explain, but it happened so quick.”

She gazed at the doctor and a pleading look came into her eyes. “I know how it all sounds, but he’s not like that. Troy has never hit Randy or Melissa in their lives, ever—no whippings, no spankings, no paddlings—because he’s appalled by the idea of inflicting pain on them. He disciplines them other ways—takes privileges away, gives them extra chores or makes them stay in their room. When he recovers and remembers what he did to Randy, it’s going to kill him.” Patty’s breath caught.

“So he’s never struck the children. Has he ever hit you?”

“Oh, goodness, no.”

“Not even when he’s intoxicated?”

“Never. He’s not a violent man.”

“Then what does he do when he’s drunk? Is he verbally abusive? Does he do crazy things like run around the house naked in front of the kids? What’s he like when he’s intoxicated that made you want to get the children away from him?”

Patty tried moistened her lips but her mouth was dry.

“You’d have to know what he’s like when he’s not drinking to see the

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difference. He was the greatest running back ever to play football for the University of Alabama, but if it gets bad enough, he can't even walk; he...stumbles.

"His speech gets slurred. His ability to converse is impaired—he seems to not hear sometimes when someone is talking to him, even if he's looking right at them. Or it takes him a moment to reply.

"His judgment gets impaired. He does things like...well, once when he came home like this, I made coffee for us. The sugar bowl was empty and I asked him to fill it, and he put cornmeal in it. Either he couldn't tell the difference between sugar and cornmeal, or he else couldn't read the canisters."

"And you don't want your children to see him in that condition."

"No, I don't. I know it doesn't sound all that bad compared to some men when they've been drinking. I know there are men who wreck the car and curse their children—an acquaintance of mine's husband set their house on fire one time. Troy's not that way, but I still don't want the children to see him intoxicated. They adore him and I don't want anything to jeopardize that."

The doctor inclined his head and said, "I think I see the situation pretty well." He paused to clear his throat and continued more softly. "You feel about him...the way the children do."

Although his ultimate destination was medical, the doctor was stepping into territory of a personal nature, and Patty could see he wasn't entirely comfortable with it.

"Yes," she said. "I adore him, too, and it tears me apart to see him like that."

The doctor peeled a page off his prescription pad and scribbled a reminder to himself on the back. "When this is over, I can give you some referrals where he can go for help. If he will. You can call me for more information about it." He took a business card case out of his shirt pocket and handed her a card.

"Thank you."

The doctor pocketed the pad and case, took a breath and changed course. "Now, back to Randy. Let me go over some things with you. He was in a stressful situation, being pulled between his desire to stay with his father, and your insistence that he go with you. He grabbed onto his father's coat, but his father, too, said he should go. And after that, for the first time in his life, his father struck him. You said Randy had a look of shock on his face, and he held his breath."

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“Yes, total shock. He took a step back from his father and stared at him in utter disbelief, and that’s when his foot slipped off the edge of the porch.”

“Did he cry out when he fell?”

“No.”

“He fell sideways, you said. Did he cartwheel down the steps—stiff, like he was trying to break his fall? Or did he crumple?”

“He crumpled—his knees bent and he just toppled down the steps like a rag doll. He landed on his arm and shoulder and then sort of rolled onto his back and his head hit the sidewalk.”

The doctor’s face remained neutral and Patty was grateful. He said, “What you’ve told me is important and I’ll explain why in a minute. But to give it some perspective, I need to tell you about Randy’s condition.”

He took the chart off the table, opened it, and skimmed the contents.

“As I told you earlier, the results of all the tests we’ve done tonight on your son fall within normal range. He doesn’t have the usual concussive symptoms. His pupils dilate and contract normally. His vision is normal. His reflexes are normal. He hasn’t complained of a headache. He’s mentally alert, he remembers his name and address—heck, you heard him rattle off the names the constellations in the northern hemisphere. He doesn’t even have a knot on his head. He has only one complaint that might indicate a concussion—his claim that he doesn’t remember what happened just before he lost consciousness.”

“Isn’t that common in a head injury?”

“It happens sometimes. But what I wanted to tell you is that there could be another reason why he lost consciousness, instead of hitting his head.”

“What reason?”

“He could have fainted.” The doctor laid the chart aside and began to count off on his fingers. “One, he was in a stressful situation. Two, he was emotionally shocked when his father struck him. And three, he held his breath. That could trigger a fainting spell. Has he ever fainted before?”

“No, not to my knowledge. I’m sure they’d have told me if it ever happened at school.”

“Well, from what you describe, I think he could have fainted just as, or just before, his foot slipped off the porch and that’s why he crumpled instead of cartwheeling. If he’d been conscious during the fall, he likely would have stiffened. It sounds like he didn’t hit his head very hard, he just sort of rolled back on it after his arm and shoulder took the brunt of the fall. Also, the blow from his father wasn’t hard enough to cause a head injury.”

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“Oh, thank God.”

“There’s just one thing,” the doctor said. “If Randy lost consciousness from fainting rather than from hitting his head on the sidewalk, we need to find another explanation for his loss of memory. Frankly, I don’t attribute it to a concussion, because I don’t think he has a concussion. If he really can’t remember, there’s some other reason for it.”

“Like what?”

“Like he doesn’t want to remember. If he got hurt doing something he wasn’t supposed to do he might not remember it. Or, if he thinks as much of his father as you say, he may not want to remember that his father hit him. Or he may want to protect his father from getting in trouble for hitting him.”

Patty covered her mouth with her fingers. “Oh, my.”

“Now, despite the fact that we can’t conclusively identify any concussive symptoms, he did lose consciousness, so we’re going to err on the side of caution. And since his head did make contact with the sidewalk, we’re going to call it a mild concussion and treat it accordingly. I’m going to admit him for observation for at least twenty-four hours. We’re going to repeat the tests he’s had tonight once, possibly twice, tomorrow.”

“All right.” Patty inhaled deeply, grateful that at least part of the situation seemed to be coming under control.

“I’m also going to assume he fainted and have that checked, too. Well over ninety percent of fainting in children is not serious, but there’s always the possibility of a cardiac or brain disorder, so I’m going to order some tests to rule that out.”

“Brain disorder....” Patty said softly, newly frightened.

“Mrs. Stevenson, I’m confident Randy’s brain and heart are healthy. He experienced some very common causes of fainting in children just before he lost consciousness. Frankly, I don’t expect to find anything wrong with him. As I said, we are erring on the side of caution because he did hit his head, however mildly, and he did lose consciousness. And because he’s so young. But right now, all indications are that Randy’s a healthy boy.”

Patty blinked back tears of relief as another worry rose to the surface.

“Doctor....”

“Yes?”

“Is my husband going to get in trouble for this? Accidents like this have to get reported to child protection agencies of some sort, don’t they?”

The doctor shrugged slightly. “When there’s something to report. But

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your son has no injuries consistent with reporting requirements. The statutes say that a willful act has to result in injury that causes significant impairment to the child's physical, mental or emotional health. Randy has no such impairment. As for the 'willful act,' you've given a reasonable explanation of what happened. So there really isn't anything to report."

For some reason, that didn't reassure Patty. It must have showed on her face because the doctor said, "Mrs. Stevenson, I've seen many cases of child abuse. I know what it looks like. You may be having a family crisis right now, but your son is not abused. Your husband is not an abuser.

"I'm compelled by law and conscience to report child abuse when I see it, and I do, you may rest assured. Ask anybody here, they'll tell you.

"If I had the slightest suspicion there was abuse going on here, I would report it in a heartbeat. But there isn't. Child Protective Services Department is already stretched way too thin. I'm not going to report an incident to them that I know would be a waste of their time and resources."

Her voice quavering with relief and gratitude, Patty said, "Thank you, Doctor."

Since eight o'clock, Patty had followed up every unanswered call to her home with another call to Max's apartment to ask him to go to Oak Terrace, check on Troy and stay with him while he was incapacitated. There was no answer there, either.

She called home once more after the talk with the doctor and got the answering machine again. Why didn't he answer? Even in his condition, he would surely know she'd be trying to call.

Then she remembered. The ringers could be muted. Randy could have muted them again despite her orders to the contrary.

Troy probably didn't know she was calling. On the chance that he would check the answering machine, anyway, she left another message.

"Troy, please call me. Randy's okay, I want to tell you about it. Call the main hospital number—" she squinted at the number on the telephone dial, faded almost to illegibility, spoke it into the handset. "Ask for the ER waiting room. They'll come get me. Troy, please call. *Please.*"

In her neat brick house on Live Oak Street, Betty Gray went to the front window for the last time before heading to bed. Her snuffling, sneezing

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Pekingese, Gidget, followed at her heels. She lifted a slat of the mini blinds and looked out. It was after ten and here and there, lights glowed from windows and porches of her neighborhood. The sodium vapor street lamp on the corner bathed the area around Betty's house with an eerie glow.

Her neighbor across the street, Mr. Stevenson, had passed out on his front porch earlier in the evening. Several times she wondered whether she should call someone to come see about him but distaste at the idea of getting involved kept her silent.

He wasn't sick or injured, she was pretty sure. He was just drunk. She knew that much from having witnessed the tiff between him and his wife earlier in the evening, when he had come out on the porch with a tumbler of liquor in his hand.

During the argument—Betty had seen it all and caught a phrase here and there while she rolled up her garden hose—Stevenson had swatted his son and sent him tumbling down the steps. His little wife had taken the children and skedaddled, and after that, he had passed out on the porch.

The incident would make the juiciest bit of gossip to hit her circle in ages—provided it turned out that Mr. Stevenson was okay. He was probably just sleeping by now, if he was still there. Betty surmised that from past experience with the males in her own life. But there was always a chance something worse could have happened.

There was nothing Betty loved more than gossiping with and about her neighbors. She and her husband had retired here seven years ago. He remembered the place from his time in the military stationed at nearby Martin Air Force Base, and had always wanted to come back. He loved the small town atmosphere but he only got to enjoy it for two years before passing away of a heart attack in 1978.

Betty had thought about returning to Philadelphia, her hometown, but she never really liked Philly, and she did like it here. Despite her view that Southerners were mostly hicks and rednecks, there was something to be said for Southern hospitality, not to mention Southern food.

Oak Terrace was a nice neighborhood and her immediate neighbors were all friendly enough. The families on each side of her were more suitable as gossip material—one a family with rambunctious teenagers who slipped around and smoked cigarettes, the other a middle aged couple who argued constantly, and loudly, about the remodeling of their home.

The Stevensons were a different story. The children were reasonably

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well behaved, the couple kept their home and yard in beautiful shape, the mother routinely took the children to church, sometimes accompanied by their father. But Mr. Stevenson worked such long hours, Betty didn't see much of him except on weekends. Then, he was always busy mowing the yard or cleaning gutters or doing stuff under the hoods of the cars. He was a corporate executive, presumably making good money, and Betty wondered why he didn't hire all that done.

Since they had moved here four years ago, not long after Morty had died, Mr. Stevenson had helped out several times when problems arose for Betty—jumping off her car's drained battery, bringing a tall ladder from his garage to change the bulbs in the dusk-to-dawn light in back of her house, helping her install smoke detectors inside....

But the main thing about the Stevensons was that, to a neighborhood gossip, they were so unremarkable they were boring. Nothing extraordinary or exciting ever happened with them.

Until now.

She hoped Mr. Stevenson was okay because she was dying to call her friends in the morning and tell them what had happened. She would feel too guilty to do so if anything bad was wrong with him and she had done nothing to help, particularly in view of his occasional neighborly assistance to her.

Now she looked through the window for the last time before retiring. A faint mist had rolled in, giving the neighborhood a surreal quality. Across the street, Mr. Stevenson was still lying on the porch. The well-trimmed shrubbery partially obscured him but by the dim light she could see his feet, encased in shiny black shoes, near the steps. He had been there since about sunset.

Betty dropped the slat, turned off the porch light and said, "Let's go, Gidget."

That was the dog's signal and it took off out of the room and down the hall. By the time Betty reached her bedroom, Gidget was curled up in the dog bed next to the nightstand.

It was deep night when Troy wakened to squint his bleary eyes at the halo around the orange street light on the corner. A steady rain was falling at a mild slant, reaching under the porch roof to wet the area where he lay. It had been raining a long time because his clothes and hair were soaked and shallow puddles had formed here and there on the concrete

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floor. Although it was nearly summer, he felt cold.

He got to his feet and grabbed for the railing as the porch began to spin and sway. He stood for a long time until he thought he could walk the short distance to the front door without falling. He let go of the rail and took careful steps across the concrete. A horrendous headache was starting up behind his forehead and nausea undulated through his midsection.

Inside, warm lamp light glowed from the family room accompanied by the sound of the television. They created an air of normalcy that couldn't penetrate his stupor. He shuffled down the hallway to the bedrooms and went to the last door on the left.

A step inside the master bedroom, he felt the wall for the light switch, but tapping it was a mistake. The light blinded him and sent a sharp pain stabbing through his eyes. He squeezed them shut and hit the switch again.

In darkness, he removed his wet clothes, no easy task as they clung to each other and to him, but at last he was naked and his Stefani suit and other apparel lay in an expensive pile of ruin on the floor near the foot of the bed.

By feel, he pulled the bed covers back and, shivering, slipped under them. Despite his headache and nausea, the bed felt wonderful. The percale sheets and the big feather pillows of just the proper firmness enveloped him in comfort and pulled him toward sleep.

Chapter Eight

Randy Stevenson was absent. That was the first thing Shelby Kincaid noticed when he arrived at school Thursday morning. Randy was one of his two favorite playmates. He had never missed school before and Shelby wondered why he was absent today.

The teacher entered the room and called on the first graders to take their seats. Shelby glanced around for his other favorite playmate, John Mark Jordan. He was seated at the next row of tables.

“Where’s Randy?” Shelby whispered.

John Mark’s shoulders rose and fell. “Don’t know. Let’s find out at recess.”

“Okay.”

If adults thought of Shelby as cute because of his blond hair, peachy skin and blue-gray eyes, they were likely to consider John Mark pretty because of his cherubic face framed with collar-length brown hair and set with big, honey brown eyes. They were both just a few weeks from turning seven.

The two boys and Randy knew each other from church, lived fairly close to one another and had been playmates since kindergarten. School would be out soon. Since the arrival of spring, they had been looking forward to a whole summer of play together.

The Stevensons had missed prayer meeting last night, too, but Shelby and John Mark hadn’t thought much about that at the time. They occasionally missed church, even on Sundays, when Randy’s mama took her children to visit relatives in Thomasville.

But now that he had missed school, too, the boys wondered what was going on with him.

At recess, before heading for the playground, Shelby and John Mark went to their teacher and asked her about Randy.

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“I don’t know why he’s not here,” she said. “The only thing the principal’s office told me was that he wouldn’t be here today, but someone called in so his absence is excused.”

The three boys had many playmates but they chose each other most often. Shelby and John Mark felt slightly at sea without Randy because they liked to play an innovative version of team dodge ball that had evolved on the playground at Cloverdale Elementary School. Randy was the best thrower and Shelby and John Mark always made sure they were on his team.

Today, Denny Cobb was the ball thrower but he wasn’t as good as Randy. Despite the fevered gesturing and shouted instructions of his teammates, Denny missed as many as he hit, while the other team’s thrower, Keyonne Jackson, was taking out Shelby’s teammates with almost every toss of the ball. It just wasn’t as much fun without Randy.

Trotting back into the classroom after recess, John Mark told Shelby, “I’m gonna ask my daddy to call Randy’s mama and daddy tonight.”

“I will, too,” Shelby said.

“Maybe he’ll be back tomorrow.”

Randy had been admitted to the hospital around midnight. His small room in the pediatric wing had two visitor chairs that reclined for sleeping. They were not at all comfortable. Patty and Melissa had awakened several times in the night. Now they were sleepy and fatigued and Patty was emotionally wrung out.

For all three, supper had been snacks from vending machines and they were hungry by the time the food service staff brought Randy’s breakfast at eight. After sending Melissa to the cafeteria for muffins and orange juice for the two of them, Patty called the principal’s office at Cloverdale Elementary School and told a functionary that her children would be absent today and tomorrow.

By nine, they were finished eating. Melissa was absorbed with coloring and Randy was rolling little trucks across the hills and valleys of his bed-sheet. Patty watched him for a few minutes and silently offered up a short prayer of gratitude that he was undamaged.

Despite her relief about Randy’s condition, she was filled with anxiety for Troy. Today, she had called home every half hour since she wakened around six-thirty, but there was still no answer.

When he came to himself, Troy would be worried sick about Randy.

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After he dealt with that, what would he feel about his wife's disrespect for him and her attempt to sneak his children out of his house?

Patty was angry at herself and ashamed for mishandling the situation yesterday. A remnant of her earlier foreboding still hovered at the back of her consciousness. But as much as she longed to talk to Troy about that, to see forbearance in his eyes and to hear him pardon her, she was far more anxious to let him know that Randy suffered no serious injury.

By midmorning, Randy was tired of his toys, tired of staying in bed, tired of the medical personnel who came and interrupted his boredom. He watched TV for a while and Patty took the opportunity to freshen up in the small bathroom and change clothes. When she emerged, he was lying down but still awake and still bored.

She sat on the side of the bed and looked at his face. A large bruise had developed around his left eye and as she studied it her brow wrinkled slightly. It must have looked worse than it felt because Randy had not complained about pain or tenderness from it and the medical personnel had virtually ignored it.

"Randy, honey. Do you feel like talking for a minute?"

"Yeah. What about?"

"Do you remember why you had to come to the hospital?"

He gazed at her solemnly. "I fell down."

"You remember falling?"

"Sort of. Some of it."

She inclined her head once. "Do you remember where you fell?"

"On the steps."

"That's right." She swallowed, then continued more softly. "Do you remember why you fell?"

Randy compressed his lips and batted his eyes. "Daddy."

"What did your daddy do?"

"He hit me." He said it so softly Patty could barely make out the words. Eyes stinging, she put her arms around him and pulled him close in a mother hug. His arms encircled her neck and she heard him sniff softly.

The best she could tell, the doctor's conjecture was correct. Randy remembered everything up until the moment he fell. He remembered the start of his fall, but not the end. That could indicate that he fainted in the middle of it.

"I want to talk to you about that in a minute, okay?" Patty said. "But first, tell Mama why you told the doctor you couldn't remember what happened before you fell."

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He laid his forehead against her shoulder. "I didn't want him to know I was bein' bad."

Patty shook her head, mystified. "What are you talking about? You weren't being bad."

"I must've been bein' bad or Daddy wouldn't of hit me!"

"No, no. You weren't being bad. You were upset, but that was our fault, your father's and mine, not yours. Mainly mine," she added softly.

He tilted his head back to look at her and frowned. "But I didn't mind y'all and I was backtalkin'."

Patty stroked his hair and thought about that for a moment. "Well, it is important that children be respectful and obey their parents, that's true," she conceded. "But I was doing something I shouldn't have done and I was trying to make you go along with it. That was wrong of me. So I'll tell you what. Since we both did things we shouldn't have done, let's forgive each other. Okay?"

His arms tightened around her for a moment. "Okay."

She kissed his forehead. "Now, listen to me, this is important. Always tell the truth to a doctor. Don't tell him you can't remember something if you can. Answer all his questions the best you can. If you keep information from him, he could make a mistake in your treatment and that could be very bad for you. Promise me, all right?"

"Okay, I promise."

"Good." She held him away from her, so she could look into his eyes. "I want you to understand something else that's very important. Your daddy wasn't himself yesterday. If he had been, he would *never* have hit you."

"I know. Because of what he was drinkin'."

"Yes, that's right. Sweetheart, do you know what impaired means?"

"Is it when you can't act normal?"

"That's close enough. Yesterday, I saw what your father meant to do. He was going to pop your hands to try to make you let go of him. But you put your face against him, between your hands, at the last moment. Do you remember that?"

"Uh-huh. I was cryin'."

"Yes, you were, and he was impaired and couldn't react quick enough to stop, so he accidentally hit your face instead of your hands."

"Accidently? He didn't mean to?"

"No, goodness no, he didn't mean to. Your daddy would not have lifted a finger against you—your hands or face or anywhere else—if he'd been himself." She sighed and glanced away, then looked back at her son. "I've

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got to think of a way to make you see that.”

“I know it, Mama. ‘Cause I’ve been bad before and he never hit me.”

“Yes, that’s right and it’s because those other times, he wasn’t impaired because he wasn’t drinking.”

The sweet, trusting face looking back at her warped as the stinging in her eyes became tears. “Your father’s going to be so sad and angry at himself when he remembers what he did. He wouldn’t hurt you for anything. He loves you so much.”

“I love him, too.”

“So do you think, since it was an accident, that you can forgive him?”

“Like me and you just forgave each other?”

“Yes, like that.”

Randy nodded. “I can forgive him.”

After her talk with Randy, Patty called home again, with the same result, and then dialed another number. A familiar voice said, “Shearwater-Ingram, Troy Stevenson’s office.”

“Hi, Dinah. May I speak to Troy, please?”

“Hey, Patty. He’s not here. He didn’t come in this morning and I haven’t heard from him. I just assumed he was at home.”

“He probably is. The children and I are...away for a day or so and I haven’t been able to get him on the phone at home.”

“Oh, my,” Dinah said, her tone growing serious. “Patty, he and Max and the Old Man and some others went to the Scoreboard yesterday.”

“I know. We were still there when he got home. We didn’t leave until early last night.”

“Oh, okay.”

“The phones at home may be muted so he wouldn’t know a call’s coming in. But I thought I’d check to see if he had gone to work.”

“Not yet. If he comes in or calls, do you want him to call you?”

Patty bit her lip. The situation was too complicated to explain, and some of it couldn’t be discussed outside the family, in any case. “No, that’s okay. I’ll just talk to him later. You have a nice day.”

“You, too. Bye-bye.”

Troy was waking up and he didn’t want to. He tried hard to sink back into sleep, but something kept prodding him awake.

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He felt sick and realized within moments what his problem was. A hangover. He did a quick reconnaissance of his body and noted a pounding headache, crushing fatigue, and an abominable taste in his mouth. But it wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been and he suspected he'd slept off the worst of it.

He opened his eyes. Last night's rain had moved on because strong daylight filtered through the curtains. Or maybe he had dreamed the rain.

It was too bright to be early in the day. It appeared to be more like mid-morning. He looked at the clock on his bedside table. Almost ten-thirty.

He turned his head on the pillow and saw that Patty's side of the bed hadn't been slept in. Unease crept over him.

The house was far too quiet for this time of day. He could faintly hear the sound of the television, but not the voices of his wife and children. It came as a mild shock that his family was not present.

Of course, the children would be in school, he belatedly realized, but he sensed that Patty was not at home, either, for some reason. He was alone here.

Fragments began to come back to him. Last night.... Yesterday afternoon... Patty was taking the children away so they couldn't...so they wouldn't be...*tarnished*...by exposure to...*him*. She had driven Randy to the emergency room because he fell down the steps—

Graphic images flashed through his mind. Yesterday—*Was it yesterday?*—he had hit Randy—*No, that can't be, I've never hit Randy in his life!*—and knocked him down the front porch steps. The pictures were hazy, static and incomplete, but the specter of his son's lifeless face rose up before him and he knew it was a memory, not a dream.

What did I do to him?

Paralyzed by fear, he lay there trying to remember but all he could grasp were a few surreal scenes of horror. He had to know what had actually happened.

He pushed himself upright and reached for the telephone on the bedside table. Patty had taped emergency numbers to the side of the phone, and he looked them over. He brought the handset to his ear and dialed one of them.

"Verona General Hospital," said a female voice.

"Do you have a patient by the name of Randall or Randy Stevenson?" His voice was husky from sleep and fear and he cleared his throat. "He's seven years old."

"Ah, let's see.... Yes, he's in room 110 on the pediatric wing."

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Troy's stomach constricted into a knot of fear.

"Would you connect me to the nurse's station?"

"One moment."

Dread of what he would hear enveloped him like an ice-cold blanket and he began to tremble.

There was a click and a beep and another female voice said, "Pediatrics."

"My name is Troy Stevenson. My son Randy is a patient in room 110. Can you tell me what his condition is?"

"Hold on, please. Okay, here's his chart," the woman said to herself in an undertone. Then, "Mr. Stevenson, the only thing I can tell you over the phone is that he's here for observation for another twenty-four hours or so."

Troy went numb with relief and couldn't speak for a moment.

The woman said, "I'll connect you to his room, if you like. His mother is there and she can tell you more."

"No. That won't be necessary. Thank you."

He hung up the phone and sat motionless for several moments. His fear did not go away, but relief and gratitude overshadowed it. Ignoring his queasiness and fatigue, he got out of bed to head for his bathroom.

At the foot of the bed, he stumbled over a heap of wet clothes. So, he hadn't dreamed the rain. More bits and pieces of the previous evening tried to crowd into his mind but he ducked his head as if to deny them entry. He had remembered enough for now.

He showered, brushed his teeth and dressed in ten minutes. His stubble would have to wait. No way he was going to work today so he dressed in the first items he could put his hands on—Dockers, pullover, suede desert boots. He brought a laundry basket to the bedroom and filled it with his wet clothes to get them off the hardwood floor that was Patty's pride.

Without doubt, his twice-worn Urbano Stefani suit, the most expensive item in his wardrobe, was completely ruined. It was an extravagant waste, even unruined. How stupid he'd been to let Max talk him into buying it.

The hundred dollar silk tie was a goner, too. The socks, shirt and underwear were salvageable. The leather—shoes, belt, breast pocket wallet—might be okay with professional restoration.

He looked briefly at the garments heaped in the basket. The costliness of the ruin would dismay Patty. But how would her dismay over these inanimate objects stack up to his dismay that she would even *think* of

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smuggling his children—*his children!*—out of his home, away from him?

He knew it was petty to think of that while his son lay in the hospital, injured by his own hand.

But there it was.

At least the contents of the wallet had stayed reasonably dry and he transferred them to a casual billfold from his dresser drawer.

At ten-fifty, Troy was out in the sunshine, sliding behind the wheel of the Audi to head for the hospital, with a detour by the mall.

Chapter Nine

He stood for a moment in the hospital corridor holding three gift-wrapped packages. The two smallest were silver bracelets for his wife and daughter, the other toys for Randy.

His headache was letting up and his nausea had vanished, thanks to black coffee and a steak biscuit from a breakfast-anytime cafe at the mall. But as his physical condition improved, his emotions spiraled downward.

His hand rested lightly against the door to room 110. On the other side waited the three people most important to him in the world—the wife and daughter and son who idolized him and whom he had provided for and protected, guided and loved for ten years. Yet he felt like an intruder. He feared that yesterday, much of which he still couldn't remember, had changed everything.

He pushed open the door and stepped silently into the small room. It was quiet and dim. Randy was in bed asleep, on his side, facing the opposite wall. He was wearing hospital pajamas. There were no devices or IVs connected to him. The only machine operating was a wall-mounted television set with the audio muted.

Another sleeper, Melissa, was curled up in a chair on the other side of the bed. She clutched the fluffy white bunny she always slept with. Sweet Melissa...in the Allman Brothers tune, the one to whom the gypsy-man always returned.

On this side of the bed, in front of a small nightstand, sat a chair where Patty half-reclined on her side, her eyes closed and her head resting at an uncomfortable angle against the back. At the sight of her, a geyser of love and tenderness sprang up inside Troy, momentarily obscuring the anger toward her that had been smoldering inside him since he made the call to the hospital.

They must have lost a lot of sleep last night, or got poor quality sleep,

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if they were taking naps this early.

Troy stepped closer to the bed and set the gifts on the corner. From here he could see that there was a bruise around Randy's left eye and he winced.

Patty stirred and shifted in the chair. She blinked, raised her head to look at him and smiled drowsily. "Hey."

"Hey."

She stood up and came to him. Her arms went around his waist and he returned her embrace.

"I'm so relieved to see you," she said softly, looking up at his face. "I was so worried. I called and called but I think Randy must've muted the ringers again. It's wonderful to have the real you back."

"How're you doing?"

"A little tired."

She laid her head against his shoulder and they held each other silently for a moment. She looked up again. "You're trembling."

"So are you."

"I'm just happy to see you. Troy, you don't need to be worried about Randy. He's been hurt worse falling on the playground at school."

"They told me he has a mild concussion."

"So mild he has no symptoms of it. His shoulder and elbow hurt him a little—they broke his fall—but he can move his arm fine. He has a slightly sprained ankle and some scrapes and bruises—"

"Concussions can impair memory," he said, looking toward his son. "Does he remember what happened?"

"He told the doctor he doesn't but he does. You were pretty much out of it then. Do you remember what happened?"

"It's a jumble. But I know I hit him and made him fall. He remembers that?"

"Yes. He doesn't really have a concussion—I'll tell you what the doctor said about that later—so he remembers it. But it hasn't changed anything for him. He knows you didn't mean to hurt him and he loves you as much as ever. He's still his daddy's boy."

Doubt crossed Troy's face. "Can he walk?"

Patty frowned and concern deepened in her eyes. "Yes, he can walk."

"Have you seen him walk?"

"Yes. He's walked to the bathroom and back couple or three times."

Troy gave a preoccupied nod. "Did he limp?"

"Not really. He twisted his ankle a little, but they checked it, X-rayed it."

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Nothing's broken."

Troy looked down at her and said softly, "I want him to be able to run if he wants to."

"He will." Patty studied his face, disturbed by his questions.

He closed his eyes briefly beneath lowered brows, released a breath neither of them realized he had been holding and looked again at Randy's still form.

"Here," Patty said. "Let me move so you can come closer and see him better." She reluctantly left his embrace and stepped back.

Troy moved closer to the bed. He could see more of his son from here—his profile, the delicate, black-lashed eyelids, the rumpled black hair... more of the bruise. Deep, aching shame enveloped him as he looked at what he'd done to his son.

Randy's eyes open. He blinked a few times and looked at the television set. His hand swiped the mattress beside his pillow, then felt under the covers, probably searching for the tethered remote control. When he didn't find it on that side of the bed, he rolled onto his back to flip over and check the other side and that was when he saw his father.

Troy expected to see fear leap into his eyes and rejection following it. Instead, Randy lifted his arms toward his father and a joyous grin lit his face. "Daddy!"

"Hey, Sport," Troy said, smiling through the pain pricking his heart. He carefully pulled Randy upright, stood him on the bed and hugged him. "How're you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I scraped my elbow when I fell yesterday but it only barely hurts." He pushed up his pajama sleeve and showed Troy the bandage. "There's a real beaut of a scab under this band-aid."

Troy laughed despite his anxiety. "What a boy you are, hunnerd percent, tough as nails."

Randy's proud smile beamed back at him.

"How's your shoulder?"

"Oh, it only barely hurts, too." Randy's tone was dismissive.

"And your ankle?"

"Oh, it don't hardly hurt at all."

"Let's get you off of it anyway." Troy sat on the bed with his son in his lap. He lifted Randy's leg and looked at his foot.

"This ankle is only barely swollen," he said, grinning when the borrowed phrase brought on a bubbling chuckle in Randy's throat. "It has to heal right if you want to be a running back someday. You take care of it,

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do what the doctors and nurses tell you, you hear?”

“Okay.”

“Good boy.” Troy turned and reached for the largest package at the foot of the bed. “I brought you something.”

Eyes alight, Randy took the package and tore into the paper eagerly. He opened the box, found four packages within and gasped softly.

“Transmuters!” He pointed to one of them and looked at Troy in excitement. “That one’s a Geo-bot!”

“That’s right. I thought Transmuters were something new, but looks like you already know about them. You know, they change from one thing into something else. Kind of like people when they’ve been—”

“Oh, yeah, I know what they do! Thank you!”

“You’re welcome. But put them down a minute.”

Troy moved the toys, the box, the torn gift paper to the bed. For a moment, father and son looked at each other in silence. Troy worked to bring his emotions under control, so he could say what he had to say.

“Your mother says you remember what happened yesterday. You know you’re here in the hospital with all these injuries because of something ...I did to you.”

“She said you didn’t mean to hit me.”

“No, I didn’t mean to. But I did. And I am so sorry.” Troy’s voice broke on the last word.

“Mama said you would be sad, but it’s *okay*, Daddy. I *forgive* you.” Distress crumpled Randy’s face and he slung his hands. “*Please* don’t be sad! *Please!*”

Troy grasped Randy’s hands and stilled them. Overcome by his son’s clemency, he couldn’t speak for several moments. He held his breath unaware, looked at the precious face in front of him and said, “I’ll work on it.”

Randy pulled his hands free, threw his arms around his father’s neck and held him tightly. Troy stood up. He hugged Randy, stroked and patted him briefly before putting him back to bed. He ruffled Randy’s hair and said, “I’ll come back and see you after a while.”

He straightened and glanced at Patty. Tears had come to her eyes as she watched them. For some reason that made no sense at all, that caused his anger to resurface, and fed it. He picked up the other presents and handed them to her. “These are for you and Missy. Because I’m sorry.”

Patty wiped her eyes and took the packages. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“You’re welcome.”

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He walked around the bed and stooped next to the chair where Melissa was curled up. She was deeply asleep. A lock of black hair had fallen across her face, and he tucked it behind her ear with a forefinger. She moved when he kissed her temple but didn't waken.

He walked past the bed, stopping just short of the door to look at Patty. "I'll go now so the children won't get too...tarnished."

He opened the door and stepped through.

"Troy," Patty called softly after him. "I'm sorry, too!"

Her heart wrenched as the door closed behind him. His behavior was disturbing. The smart-mouthed tarnished remark was so unlike him it was stunning as well as stinging.

But that was a lesser worry at the moment. What concerned her most was his fear.

Randy was all right. He forgave his father. The rapport between the two of them had come through this trial as strong as ever, maybe stronger. But Troy was as frightened now as he had been yesterday right after the accident, when he stared in horror at his son lying unconscious on the sidewalk.

Today, Patty had felt him trembling as they embraced and it had ratcheted up her own anxiety several notches.

It was by no means the first time she'd seen her husband tremble. She had seen him shiver with cold, his teeth chattering, on winter trips to Tennessee and West Virginia, where he was no longer acclimated. Memories of his trembling from fatigue, sleep-deprivation and caffeine overload in graduate school would stay with her forever. A few times—not many—she had seen him shake with anger. She had seen his hands go weak and tremorous from his very infrequent bouts of sickness.

She had seen and felt him tremble—and trembled with him—countless times in lovemaking.

But she had never seen him tremble with fear, until now.

She tried to tell herself it was a simple physiological reaction to his drinking binge or the result of the subsequent hangover. But that didn't wash because it had never happened after other drinking episodes; and she had not only felt the affect of fear on his body, she had seen it in his eyes and heard it in his voice.

It didn't make sense. The time and circumstances for fear had passed. To see Troy so frightened filled her with distress. Not knowing why he was afraid or what to do for him made her feel inadequate.

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Where was the emotion that had given her so much strength and energy yesterday? Today she felt weak and full of self-doubt. She sensed that something was awfully wrong, that something terrible was going to happen, and it was her fault. She had badly mishandled things and she didn't know what to do to fix them.

She'd had a feeling of impending misfortune yesterday when she was getting the children out of the house, and she'd thought Randy's accident was the fulfillment of it. But now it was clear that he was okay, his injuries slight, and the feeling was still with her.

Whatever bad thing was going to happen, it hadn't happened yet.

And then, with cold terror rising inside her, she knew what the bad thing was.

I'm going to lose him! No! Please, God, no!

Troy drove aimlessly for a few minutes after leaving the hospital while he tried to sort through the disorder in his mind.

Moving from the small to the large, he first dealt with his insolence to Patty back at the hospital, including his tarnished remark. He hadn't seen her reaction, but he didn't need to see it to know what it was. She would be cut to the quick.

She had lacerated him, too, trying to sneak his children away from him. He had felt insulted by that while he was drunk, and he still felt insulted by it, somewhere among all the other emotions assailing him.

But even as he still stung, he plainly saw the difference in what they had done to hurt each other.

She had tried to get the children away to protect them and to protect their relationship with him—not to insult him. He had spat that word at her to let her know she was in disfavor with him.

He wasn't even using the word the way she had originally meant it. She had explained it so clearly even a drunk could understand. She didn't want the children's image of their father tarnished by exposure to his drunken behavior. Simple as that. Her explanation was one of the few things he remembered about yesterday with clarity, yet here he was, twisting the meaning all out shape, as if she were claiming any contact with him would tarnish them.

He loved Patty with all his heart, loved her more than anyone in the world, and he was ashamed of his juvenile one-upmanship. It was a common husband-wife game they they had striven to avoid since they were

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newlyweds—with a great deal more success than many couples they knew.

He regretted the friction that he had put between himself and his wife, but there was another problem with greater immediacy he had to deal with. He resolved to somehow make up his smart-mouthing to her, to prove to her she had never really been in disfavor with him, and put it out of his mind.

He tried to focus on the bigger issue—the terrifying re-emergence of his familial destructiveness that he had hoped and expected would remain buried forever—but discovered he was not yet ready to confront what he must. The thoughts would not come.

His aimless driving took him to state road 87 near Lake Lucy. It provided him with a distraction he welcomed and when he reached an intersection with a blacktop side road, he turned right into a woodland of pine and wiregrass mingled with hardwoods.

The road circled a forty-acre, man-made lake dating back to the mid-1930s, a drought-control project of the WPA during the Dust Bowl years. Now it was a minor recreational site in Yancey County used mostly by the locals, an enjoyable and safe place for families and kids, except for the rare instances when 'gators wandered over from the Okefenokee to take up residence in the lake.

Most of the eastern shore was a public access area and featured boat ramps, campsites and areas for hiking and picnicking. The southern and western shores were lined with privately owned vacation houses in a wide variety of ages, styles and property values. The newer the houses, the bigger and more ostentatious they were.

Troy drove half a mile down the road and turned onto a gravel driveway. The cabin at the end of it was neither new nor ostentatious. It was cute. It dated to the pre-energy crisis era of the 1960s, to the waning days of the build-it-yourself plywood vacation-house craze.

The exterior walls were sheathed with four by eight sheets of plywood originally painted avocado, gold and orange, the seams covered with brown battens. It was tiny, not much over six hundred square feet—a box with a jauntily tilted shed roof—but it seemed roomier because of the high post and beam ceiling and a wall of glass overlooking the water.

When Troy purchased the property two years ago, the cabin was in dire need of repairs and upgrading. The previous owner, a local pharmacist who had built the cabin himself, still had the plans from the old *Mechanics and Homecrafts Magazine* and was glad to give them to the new owner.

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Troy consulted an architect and had new plans drawn to upgrade the structure, to civilize it while remaining true to the spirit of the original design. The result was a new roof, insulation in the walls and ceiling, the addition of air conditioning, and a complete electrical rewire. A two-car parking shelter and small utility and storage building were added to the lot.

With only occasional help, Troy had done all the work himself except the electrical, and he would have done that, too, if county building codes had allowed it. Patty had decorated the cabin, updating the exterior color scheme to sage, creamy beige and muted peach and the interior to classic beiges and tans accented with sage and rust.

A memory came to Troy as he gazed through the windshield at the cabin. Himself, in cutoffs and a T-shirt, sitting crosslegged on the cabin floor's new underlayment. He was laying peel-and-stick vinyl tile that was supposed to look like terrazzo—*yeah, right, what a joke, ha-ha*—while Patty sat next to him and pored over paint samples like she was studying for a test.

“Do you think mustard colored throw pillows would be too much in here?” she asked him.

Troy thought throw pillows, anywhere, of any style or color, were among the most useless inventions of man, but when he'd looked at her to speak, he'd felt himself suddenly overcome by sexual craving, the way it happened sometimes, and told her, “I like mustard and I love you and I want to make love to you right now.”

As she gazed back at him and listened, her expression melted, giving way to that look of helpless desire that never failed to stir him to both tenderness and quaking ardor.

Afterward, in the tiny bedroom, he reclined against the pillows, mellowing out, eyes closed, holding her in his arms while the haze of rapture wore off them.

That was when Patty pressed her lips against the curve of his neck where his pulse still raced and murmured, “So, what about the throw pillows?”

He had banged his head against the wall a couple of times, laughing softly. “I think mustard colored throw pillows would be the *piece de resistance* of the whole dang cabin.”

“You're making fun of me now.”

“And you're making me a happy, happy man....”

In the two years since renovation, he had brought the family here numerous times, and frequently lent the cabin to friends and relatives.

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Although winter weekends were usually mild in south Georgia and the cabin could certainly be used then, owing to the conical metal fireplace in the living room and a stack of firewood outside, nobody had been out to enjoy it in three or four months. Since March, Troy had been intending to drive out, open the place up and get it ready for summer, but other things had taken his time and he had procrastinated about it.

He got out of the car and strolled the wrap-around deck, crunching underfoot brittle brown leaves leftover from winter. There were no traces of last night's rain. The day was bright and it was quiet and peaceful here.

Enormous broadleaf trees along with stands of tall pines shaded the cabin and, in combination with the mild breeze, kept it relatively cool. Looking beneath the leafy canopy, Troy squinted against the sun glinting off the blue water. He heard a faint buzz and looked across the lake to see in the distance a boat pulling a skier.

The breeze carried the scent of the woodlands laced with honeysuckle. For a moment, he was a boy again in Tennessee, playing in the woods behind the garage where his father worked, opening a honeysuckle blossom and touching the drop of sweet nectar to his tongue....

Daddy, I'm so sorry.

Finally, in this tranquil setting, the discomfiting thoughts emerged bringing with them the cold fear that had been poking and prodding him, waiting to ambush him, since Randy's tumble down the steps.

His drinking had become a problem without his realizing it. It had slipped up on him with horrible consequences and he wondered how he could have let it happen. How could he do this, given his family history and his own past?

He had to know why so he could do something about it and he was going to have to leave home to figure it out. He was going to have to separate himself from his family until he was certain he was no longer a danger to them.

The thought of being away from them caused a fierce pain to start up in his chest, pain that throbbed in time with the beat of his heart. But the unreasonable fear of his own destructiveness outweighed the ache of separation.

He could not delay. He had put Randy in the hospital. He had to deal with this problem. Now.

Chapter Ten

Along with three hundred or so other people, Patty was a member of the Forsythe Street Baptist Church. The congregation worshiped in a large, traditional brick building with white columns, a white steeple and arched windows located a few blocks from her home. It dated from the post-World War Two era like the residential neighborhoods that surrounded it.

The office of the pastor, Dale Jordan, was located in the newer church annex behind the sanctuary. It was an inviting room, although his usual description of it as “a tad cluttered” was an understatement. Bookshelves lined two walls and were filled with books and other things—leafy plants maintained by his wife, Carol, framed photographs, miscellaneous what-nots and a component stereo.

Despite the traditional sanctuary, Dale was not a traditional Southern Baptist preacher—at least, not in appearance. He declined suits and ties except for church services and a few other occasions and conducted most of his duties in business casual attire. The rest of the time, he wore jeans, tennis shoes and sport shirts.

He was thirty-five but looked younger and the casual apparel enhanced his boyishness. He was five feet, ten inches tall and slender with a hint of paunch showing above his belt. A shock of ash brown hair fell at a slant across his forehead.

He sported comfortable, well-worn jeans today as he worked on a personal project—authoring a leadership course for boys and young men—that he could only get to in spare moments. His job as pastor of one of Verona’s largest congregations kept him so busy, spare moments were rare.

The brick and metal annex had been built in 1979. The parsonage sat adjacent to it, facing the side street, Hickory Avenue. A white clapboard

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house somewhat colonial in style, it had been constructed a decade prior to the war. The interior had been gutted and updated in the 1970s and he and Carol found it a very satisfactory place to live and raise their two sons, Tommy and John Mark.

On Thursday, shortly after lunch, the church secretary buzzed Dale on the intercom. "Patty Stevenson's calling for you on line one."

"Thank you, ma'am." Dale picked up the phone and punched a button. "Patty? Dale Jordan. What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted you to know Randy's in the hospital. He fell down the front porch steps early last night. He's okay, though."

"Thank God," Dale said.

"Yes," Patty said faintly. "Very much. He hit his head on the sidewalk and was unconscious for a minute, so I brought him to Verona General. The doctor doesn't think he has a concussion but that's the diagnosis they gave him and they're keeping him here until tomorrow morning for observation. But he's fine."

Dale looked at the clock on his desk. Ten minutes after one. "I'll come see him. I can probably get there along mid-afternoon, maybe a little later."

"I appreciate that so much. I know you're real busy."

"What happened?"

"Well, it's kind of a long story for a phone call," Patty said, the pitch in her voice rising a little.

"All right. We can talk about it when I get there, if you want to."

"Thank you, Pastor."

He didn't immediately resume work on his leadership project notes after he hung up with Patty. On the surface, she appeared to be troubled about Randy's accident, despite reporting that he was all right.

Dale's years as a pastor had given him insight into situations like this and from just their short conversation he knew there was a bigger problem nagging at Patty. The long story behind Randy's accident might actually be only peripherally connected to it.

He didn't want to believe any serious family problems could exist with the Stevensons. Among their friends and acquaintances, Troy and Patty were thought to have the ideal marriage and two of the least troublesome kids anyone knew.

The major area that needed working on, in Dale's opinion, was getting Troy to attend church more often. He had been raised a Presbyterian but didn't seem to be a diehard loyalist to any denominational creed. He was

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a Southern Baptist now because he had married one. He attended Sunday morning services with his family two or three times a month.

There was no point in trying to guess what was troubling Patty. He would have to wait until his visit with Randy to find out.

The kitchen telephone rang just as Carol Jordan, a petite, dark-haired beauty with a heart-shaped face and long-lashed eyes, finished putting supper on the table. A preacher's daughter as well as a preacher's wife, she had a lifetime of dealing with difficult people and situations with non-judgmentalness and objectivity—except where her sons were concerned. Her mother-love obliterated objectivity when it came to them, particularly John Mark.

She called them to supper and reached for the phone. The voice coming through the handset belonged to her husband.

"Honey, I'm going to be late getting home. I'll have to miss supper, so you and the boys go ahead and eat."

"I figured as much, so I just called them. Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, more or less. How about with you?"

"All right, considering."

"Considering what?"

"I watched John Mark skateboard this afternoon. You're right. He is tougher than he looks, he knows what he's doing and he's really good. No falls, no broken arms, no skull fractures. He's also a show off. I think he was rather pleased to have me for an audience."

"No doubt."

"Well, are you going to grab a burger while you're out or do you want me to save you a plate?"

As they talked, their sons wandered into the kitchen—Tommy with his broad smile and silvery-brown curls, John Mark of the angelic face and big brown eyes—Tommy's hands slapping a cadence on his stomach, John Mark's feet sliding on the floor as if he were skating. They looked over the supper table with intense interest.

Carol covered the mouthpiece and whispered to them, "Go ahead and sit down but keep your hands off the food."

"I'll tell you more about it when I get home," Dale said. "Not sure when that will be."

"Where are you going now?"

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"I'm going to Abbott's and get the tires rotated. They've started staying open till seven. I've got a few minutes and I've put it off way too long. Then I'm going to the Stevensons' house to see Troy. Don't know how long that'll take, just a few minutes, probably."

"I don't think they're at home. I've tried to call twice in the past hour and got no answer."

"What were you calling about?"

"John Mark asked me to call and see if anything's wrong. Patty and the kids weren't at church last night and Randy missed school today. I left a message on the answering machine but nobody's called back yet."

"Where is John Mark?"

"He's right here at the supper table."

"Tell him to get on the phone in the den, and both of you listen."

Carol looked toward her son. John Mark was leaning across the table, his fingers an inch from the wedges of cornbread stacked on a serving plate.

"Huh-uh! What did I just tell you? Go pick up the phone in the den. Your daddy wants to talk to you."

John Mark slid off the chair, "skated" to an end table in den and picked up the phone. "Daddy?"

"Hey, son. Your mama says you're concerned about Randy missing school today."

"Yes, sir."

"I don't want you to worry, so listen...."

"Did Daddy say when he's coming home?" John Mark asked when supper was over.

"He has several places to go, still," Carol said. "I don't know how long it will take."

"I wish he would hurry up and home. I wanted him to help me fix the ramp in the parkin' lot. It's messin' up."

The quarterpipe ramp Dale and John Mark had built several weeks ago was coming apart. They had used exterior grade plywood but it had nevertheless begun to delaminate, making the ramp unusable.

"You looked good out there today," Carol said.

"It wasn't nothin'," he said, but the compliment made him smile. "All I did was baby tricks. I need the quarterpipe fixed so I can practice." His shoulders rose and fell with a heavy sigh.

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“Practice?” Tommy said. “What for, squirt? Olympic skateboardin’?” He cackled.

John Mark looked at his brother ominously. “They might put skateboardin’ in the Olympics someday, you don’t know. And I’m not a squirt.” He turned to his mother. “Make him stop calling me that.”

“Tommy—”

“I’ll call you whatever I want to, squirt,” Tommy said with a spiteful grin.

John Mark’s eyes started to snap. “Then I’ll—I’ll tell Melissa you want her for a girlfriend!”

Tommy grabbed the neck of John Mark’s T-shirt and twisted it tight. “You keep your mouth shut, you hear?”

Clearly pleased at the effect his words had on his big brother, John Mark smiled slyly. “Then don’t call me squirt.”

“Tommy, turn loose of him and both of you stop this,” Carol said. “Right now. Go do your homework or reading or whatever you’re going to do. I don’t want to hear anymore bickering. I don’t want to see anymore choking. If I do, I’ll have to get your father in on the discipline.”

“I didn’t hurt him.”

“It was an excessive reaction to his transgression.”

Tommy looked at her sullenly but said nothing more. John Mark sneered at his brother and stuck out his tongue.

“And you stop that egging on,” she said.

Tommy got up and bolted from the room but Carol called John Mark to her. She put a hand under his chin and lifted it a little to look at his neck.

“He didn’t hurt me, Mama.”

John Mark could be contrary, he could be petulant, he could even be forlorn on rare occasions. But he didn’t know what vindictiveness was and he loved his big brother very much despite their volatile relationship.

“I just wanted to check.”

“Mama.” He lifted his big, brown eyes to hers.

“What, darlin’?”

“Would you call Shelby’s mama and daddy and tell them about Randy so he won’t worry? If they tried to call Randy’s house, they might of got the answering machine, too.”

“I sure will. I’ll do it right now.” She leaned forward to kiss his pretty face. “You go do your homework. Come get me if you need help.”

“Okay.” He turned and scurried from the room.

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Fifteen blocks away in modest brick ranch house in Cloverdale Estates, Gina Kincaid was about to put the finishing touches to supper. Her husband, Kurt, relaxed in his recliner in the den, watching television after a long day at the office.

A ruggedly handsome outdoorsman, Kurt had somehow let himself be trapped in a suit-and-tie desk job and the first thing he did upon arriving home every day was to shuck the business attire and slip into cutoffs blue jeans and a T-shirt.

In the floor next to his chair, Shelby played with his two-year old sister, Ainsley.

Like Patty Stevenson and Carol Jordan, Gina was part of a dying breed, a stay-at-home mama, and she took her responsibilities to her husband and children as seriously as any feminist executive took her obligations to the corporation. As part of that commitment, Gina planned and cooked the most appetizing and nutritious meals she could. It was rare for the Kincaids to sit down to frozen dinners heated in the microwave.

Tonight, supper was a slow-cooked pot roast with new potatoes and side dishes of turnip greens and sliced tomatoes, and it was almost ready. From the kitchen, Gina watched her children for a moment while dinner rolls browned.

Shelby's appearance came primarily from her. They shared the same honey-blonde hair and wide smile. Her deepset blue eyes were darker than his blue-gray ones, but set under the same gullwing eyebrows. Their warm, peach-toned skin darkened to pale tawny in the sun.

Tonight, Shelby was a horse, down on all fours, a red plastic belt clamped between his teeth serving as bitt and reins. Ainsley sat on his back, her hands grasping the belt, her bare feet dangling by his sides. Now and then, she would spur his ribs with her heels and he would rear up, grunting and whinnying, and paw the air with his hands.

They had the routine down and Ainsley knew the exact moment to lock her arms around his neck to keep from sliding off his back. Each rearing and whinnying episode resulted in escalating laughter.

Gina glanced at her husband. So far, the children's squealing and laughing had not intruded on his news-watching.

Her eyes went back to the children. She knew there was something extraordinary about the relationship between them. A lot of big brothers loved and protected their little sisters, but with Shelby there seemed to be

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an extra dimension to the love that resulted in his taking protectiveness to a fierce level.

He was also extraordinarily tolerant of Ainsley, even now, when she was going through the terrible twos, and she could be pretty terrible, getting into everything in his room, throwing epic tantrums, demanding his time and attention.

Now and then, his tolerance would blossom for a few moments into the sweetest displays of affection. He would put his face close to Ainsley's, smile, pat her cheek and say, "Hey, little sister!" These displays always got a, "Hey, Bubba!" in response, usually accompanied by a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

The telephone rang just as Gina took the rolls out of the oven and another display of equine rearing and whinnying commenced.

Gina said, "Hush, now, you two!" and picked up the phone. Her end of the conversation was spare—"Oh, goodness," and "Thank God," and "I'm sure he will," and "I appreciate you calling,"—but it was enough to get Kurt's attention. He turned his head to look toward her.

"What wuzzat?" he said, his syrupy, south Georgia drawl rendered in resonant bass.

"I'll tell you at the table. Come on, everyone. Supper's ready."

When Ainsley was secured in her elevated chair and the family was seated around the table, Kurt said grace after which Gina shared her information.

"That was Carol Jordan with news about Randy," she told Shelby. He looked at her, his eyes big and curious. "He's fine. He did have a little accident and he went to the hospital, but he's okay."

"Ac-suh-dent," Ainsley said.

"Right, an accident," Gina repeated.

"What kinda accident?" Kurt said.

"He fell off the porch."

"Oh."

"I'm not sure what his injuries are, but they must be pretty mild. He's going home tomorrow." She looked at Shelby. "Would you like to go with John Mark to visit him the day after that?"

"Oh, yeah!" Shelby said. "I'm glad he's gonna be okay. I was worried."

"Wuh-weed," Ainsley said.

"Well, you don't have to worry anymore," Gina said. "Tonight, when you go to bed and say your prayers, be sure and thank the Lord that Randy's okay."

Chapter Eleven

When Troy came home less than twenty-four hours after the accident, the house was dim and silent. The sun would be setting soon.

The object he had come back for was stored in the drawer of his beside table. The drawer was locked with a special mechanism operated by a concealed lever that kept the contents safe from little hands, but allowed quick access when necessary. He located and toggled the lever, opened the drawer, and pulled out a flat, leather-covered box.

He took it to the family room and in the yellowish afternoon light shining through the curtains he opened the lid and looked at the object within, a Smith and Wesson .38 caliber revolver. He removed it from the box and inspected it. All the cylinders were loaded.

The doorbell rang. He laid the firearm on the coffee table, went to the front door and opened it to see Dale Jordan standing on the porch.

“Pastor.”

“Troy.”

They shook hands and Dale said, “I went to the hospital earlier today and talked with Patty and Melissa briefly, and visited with Randy.”

“Well, thank you, I know Patty appreciated that. I do, too.”

“She also asked me to stop by and see if you were here. She said when you visited Randy this morning, she may have forgot to tell you the ringers on your phones are probably turned off. She wants you to call her.”

Troy knew about the muted ringers but had forgotten it. In all the preparations he was making, it had slipped his mind.

“Thanks for stopping by and letting me know.”

“Glad to do it.”

The men stood there in silence for a moment and Troy said, “Dale, have you got a few minutes?”

“I have an appointment in forty-five minutes with fifteen minutes drive

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time. Would half an hour suffice?"

"Plenty of time. Come in," Troy said and they walked to the family room.

Dale took a comfortable upholstered chair and Troy sat on the couch. He made no attempt to hide the object on the coffee table, or to call attention to it, but Dale didn't need help to notice it.

"Did my wife tell you what happened to Randy yesterday?" Troy asked.

"She said he fell down the front steps and hit his head on the sidewalk. Got knocked out for a minute. I looked at the steps just now. Quite a tumble for a little kid."

"Yes. Probably a two-foot drop. She didn't tell you what caused him to fall?"

"No."

"How did you know Randy's a patient? Did Patty call you, or do you have some sort of arrangement with the hospital to let you know if a church member is admitted?"

"Patty called me a little after lunch time today."

Troy nodded. "Let me guess. She wanted to talk to you but when you got there, she couldn't. Or wouldn't."

Dale nodded. "She talked a little. Not much."

"She's going to need to confide in someone in the foreseeable future. It would mean a lot to me to know she doesn't have to hold the trouble inside. You'd be a good counselor for her but I know she won't talk to you if she thinks she's being disloyal to me. I'll try to get through to her that it's not disloyalty when you're talking to your pastor."

Troy smiled but Dale could see disquiet in his eyes.

"Can you give me a heads up about what's troubling her?"

Troy was silent for a moment. "Well, I asked you in here to talk about Patty, not me. But what's bothering her is me. I have a problem I've got to deal with."

Dale waited without comment for Troy to continue. It took several moments. Troy cleared his throat, inhaled deeply and steeled himself to discuss something that caused him observable discomfort.

"We had visitors from the parent company at my office yesterday. About two-thirty, we stopped by the Scoreboard Tavern for a few drinks. By four, I was completely looped. I drove home that way.... I don't remember how it happened, but Randy fell down the steps because I hit

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him. My hand gave him that black eye.”

Dale kept his face neutral. “I suspected at the hospital that you were involved in his accident in some way, because he told me he forgave you. But he wouldn’t tell me for what. Can I ask what happened between you and him yesterday?”

Troy shook his head. “I can’t remember. I’ve been trying all day. It’s just bits and pieces, and the harder I try, the more it recedes. I remember what happened earlier but I guess by that time I was too drunk for it to stick.”

Troy looked into the distance. “He and Patty have entered some kind of conspiracy to relieve me of all responsibility in the matter. They’re both calling it an accident. They even have me saying it. Did they tell you how insignificant his injuries are?”

“From what I understand, they’re quite mild.”

“That’s the other part of the conspiracy. Even if I did bear some small responsibility in Randy’s ‘accident,’ it’s no big deal because nothing really bad came of it.”

“Are they really minimizing it? Or could you be blowing out proportion? Particularly since they can remember it and you can’t.”

“I know enough. I know that yesterday when I went to work, I was a good father who had never hit either of my children, ever, for any reason. Today I’m a man with a history of violence against my son that resulted in his hospitalization. Now I have that to deal with, too.”

With each sentence, it became clearer to Dale that Troy was facing catastrophe and he was deeply frightened and ashamed. The pastor knew that those emotions were out of character for Troy, just as he knew that such emotions and the object on the table did not add up to anything good. He had seen situations where people had dealt with catastrophe in their lives by putting a bullet in their brains.

“Unless you leave a firearm lying on your coffee table as a matter of course, it’s a little disturbing to speculate on why that’s there right now,” he said.

Troy laughed, quick and mirthless. “I’m pretty bummed out, preacher, but I’m not suicidal, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. It’s just that I encounter all kinds of things in my work.”

“I’ll bet you do,” Troy said pensively. “I came back for the gun to take it to the cabin at the lake. There’s no security out there, no alarm system. It’s for protection, just a precaution.”

“Protection for who?”

Southern Man

"I'm going to stay there for a while. I took some clothes and things out there this afternoon and realized I needed to come back for this." He nodded toward the revolver.

"You're not thinking of leaving your family?"

"I have to separate myself from them while I work through things." Troy ran a thumb across his lips. "I don't know how hard I hit Randy, but not nearly as hard as I'm capable of, I'm certain of that."

He inhaled deeply, blew an uneven breath out of his mouth and looked at Dale, the depth of his fright showing in his eyes. "I could've killed him. If I binge again—and what is there to guarantee that I won't?—it may be Randy next time or it may be Melissa or Patty. Whichever one of them gets in my way might not survive it. I can't take that chance. I cannot."

Troy shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. "I didn't even know I had a problem with alcohol until yesterday. How can a man of reasonable intelligence not know something like that? Not see it coming? Especially somebody with my family history."

"I don't know what your family history is," Dale said, "but I have a hard time imagining that you're a danger to your family. You're a good husband and father and you have the great advantage of a family that loves you who can help you deal with your problems."

Troy looked away. "No. I can't burden them with this. I'm supposed to take care of them, not the other way around."

"Husbands and fathers aren't invincible. Sometimes they need the help of their family members, too."

"Then mine will have to help me from eight miles away, where they're safe."

Dale shook his head in incomprehension.

"You don't understand?" Troy said. "I've always prided myself on being a superior provider and protector for my family. Can you appreciate the grotesque irony that nobody's ever put my son in the hospital but me?"

"You're feeling guilty," Dale said. "It's understandable right now, but eventually you'll have to get over it. You need to realize and accept that."

Troy looked at Dale, mystified. "I *am* guilty and if you have a problem grasping that, think if it was John Mark was up there in the hospital with a sprained ankle, a skinned elbow and a twisted shoulder. His face is disfigured by an ugly bruise put there by your hand. You may not remember it happening but you know you did it. Now, you can tell me you wouldn't feel guilty about that if you want to, but I won't believe you."

Dale was silent a moment. "I see your point."

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“Well, thank you, preacher. I appreciate that. I really do. After the denial of my wife and son, it’s good to talk to someone who will deal in truth with me, even when it’s as...hard as this is.”

“You’re welcome. It doesn’t change the fact that you must overcome the guilt—or the effects of it—as quickly as possible. It destroys as surely as alcohol.”

“That makes no sense. I will always be guilty of hitting and injuring my son. There’s no way to go back in time and undo it.”

“That’s the human condition, Troy. Every single one of us is guilty of doing wrong things we can’t undo. That’s what makes redemption necessary and that’s why God gives it. I know you were taught this growing up.”

Troy shook his head. “I don’t see how it works now anymore than I did then.”

“Yes, it’s too profound for human understanding. We just have to accept it. Come to church, Troy. Associating with people of faith will go a long way toward helping you understand redemption—at least, as much as human beings can—and accept forgiveness.”

“I’ve already been thinking about that.”

“Good. I still have misgivings about you leaving your family, though. You need to come up with some way to work though things from home.”

“No. Not until I know my wife and children are safe around me and have no reason to fear me.”

“In that case, may I offer you some advice?”

“I welcome it.”

“If you’re convinced you must go, keep it to the shortest time possible, or bad things will come of it, you can be certain. Don’t tempt the devil to snatch your family away from you and destroy it, or to take you away from them. He will contend with you, and target what you love most. So keep in very close touch and stay as deeply engaged with them as you can. Don’t stay away long. Your family needs you and you need them. Come back as soon as you possibly can.”

Troy inclined his head. “I will.”

Dale added, “I’d also welcome your keeping in regular contact with me, if you like.”

“I’ll do that. You’ve been evenhanded about this and I’m much obliged to you.”

Neither man spoke for a moment.

“Well, I guess I’ll head on,” Dale said.

“Preciate you stopping by.”

Southern Man



Troy put the gun back in its storage box and laid it on his desk. His hands trembled lightly as he adjusted the ring volume lever on the phone at his desk, called the hospital and asked for Randy's room.

"Hi," he said when Patty answered.

"Hi," she replied.

"You sent your preacher looking for me."

"He must've found you."

"Yes, he did..." He glanced at his watch. Almost seven o'clock. "I should have called you before now. Have you had supper? I'll bring something if you haven't."

"We got a bite to eat from the cafeteria."

"Okay. Well, I'll come sit with Randy so you and Missy can come home and take a bath and change, maybe take a nap in a real bed."

"That sounds wonderful."

"Be there in a few minutes."

She kept checking her watch, averaging one look every two minutes. It was seven fifteen. Troy should have been here by now. She closed her mind to all the negative possibilities trying to crowd in—fender bender, running out of gas... stopping at a bar—and forced herself to stay calm.

A few minutes later, the door opened and Troy stepped into the dim room. Patty sighed with relief.

Randy pushed himself up right and grinned. "Hey, Daddy!"

"Hey, son," Troy said, ruffling Randy's hair.

"Daddy!" Melissa squealed, reaching up for him. It was the first time she had seen him since the flight to the emergency room and Patty was deeply relieved to see that her relationship with her father had suffered no permanent damage.

Troy shushed her, picked her up and stood her in her chair so she could kiss his cheek. "Gotta be quiet in the hospital. How are you, Punkin?"

"She's stir crazy," Patty said. She nodded toward Randy. "So is he. So consider yourself forewarned."

"Thank you. And how are you?"

They walked toward each other and embraced. She laid her head against his shoulder and felt his breath brush her cheek. "I'm glad to see you."

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“You’re tired. Go home, take a hot shower and relax. Don’t do any housework or anything, just rest.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t worry about me and this stir-crazy kid, either. We’ll be fine.”

Patty let go of him and stepped back. She was concerned about the distance between them. He didn’t bring up the *tarnished* word again, didn’t say anything mean or even impatient. But there was still a wedge of, of...*something* driven down between them. Perhaps it could be attributed to nothing more than the disruption of their routine, but given her earlier disrespect of him, it made Patty uneasy.

She stood for a moment waiting for him to kiss her. When he didn’t, she kissed him. He smiled at her with his eyes as well as his lips, and looked more like her husband than he had at any time since the trouble began.

She took her purse off the nightstand and held out her hand to Melissa. “Come on, Missy. Let’s go.”

“I’m tired of stayin’ in bed,” Randy said.

“I know. You’ve already told me, several times,” Troy replied.

“I wanted to go outside and play but they wouldn’t let me.”

“Well, that’s about par for the course when you’re a patient in the hospital. If you’re tired of staying in bed, come here and sit in my lap and we’ll read this.” Troy held up a *Highlights* magazine he’d found in a nearby waiting room.

Clad his favorite rockets-and-Saturns pajamas, Randy climbed into Troy’s lap, his head resting on his father’s chest. He might be tired of staying in bed, but he had trouble keeping his eyes open when Troy started reading to him and he soon nodded off. His life had been in a tumultuous interrupt for over twenty-four hours, and it was almost his bedtime.

Troy shifted his son around sideways and cuddled him a few moments before putting him in bed.

The quiet time with Randy had temporarily calmed his fear and the other emotions assailing him. It allowed him to think. Now that he had put some distance between himself and the events of yesterday, he could consider the wider scope of things.

Back in the recliner, Troy laid his head against the backrest and closed his eyes. The first thing he thought about was Patty and how the whole ordeal had affected her. She was tired and wrung out but handling the disruption of their lives pretty well. She didn’t seem to be holding his ear-

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lier nastiness against him and for that he was thankful.

It was not a good idea to convey to Patty that she was in disfavor with him. Such a message coming in the midst of this turmoil could have triggered one of her fear and doubt episodes. That was what Troy called the brief periods she had gone through several times during their relationship when she feared that she did not have what it took to hold on to her man.

The first time it happened, they weren't even married yet....

Chapter Twelve

Tuscaloosa, Alabama
July 1972

At Rivertown Nursery, Troy looked up from the pots of shrubs he was price-tagging and watched a canary yellow Camaro stop in the parking lot. Max Ingram got out and walked toward him.

They hadn't seen each other since classes ended several weeks before, when Max had gone home to Birmingham.

Clamping his lips between his teeth to stifle a grin, Troy watched his friend approach. Thin, unshaven, grungy-looking, Max was wearing wide bellbottom jeans that drug the ground, a tie-dyed T-shirt in fuschia and turquoise and wire-rimmed sunglasses. His ash brown hair, already too long in May, now hung halfway to his shoulders.

They shook hands and Troy couldn't stifle laughter any longer. "How far'd you have to chase that hippie queer to get them clothes?"

Max lit a cigarette and blew smoke while he took in his surroundings. "So you're an agrarian, now."

Troy lifted a shoulder. "I get six hours a day. That leaves me time for one class and regular workouts. Don't matter much what I'm doing."

Max nodded with theatrical enthusiasm. "Oh. Of course not. How was your birthday?"

Troy had turned twenty-one on July third, a few days before.

"It was fine. My folks called. So did your daddy."

"Yeah, he told me. He's taken with you. Canceled a trip to Barbados in October so he'll be stateside for the Georgia game. He wants to see you run the wishbone in person."

"I'll try to do good for him. I thought you were going to quit smoking."

"I did. Twice, as a matter of fact. Did you get laid on your birthday?"

Southern Man

Troy tilted his head and looked defiantly at his friend from beneath his brows.

For two years, Max had tried unsuccessfully to get Troy drunk and laid. Once, last year, his efforts had almost ended their friendship and now Max knew to keep both subjects at joke level.

“I know, I know, you don’t drink, you don’t have time for girls.” Max looked around. “How do you get to work without a car? This is a pretty fer piece from the jock dorm.”

Troy pointed to a bicycle leaning against a tree in the parking lot. “Gets me to work and back, helps me stay in shape.”

Max grimaced and shook his head. “You poor boys—you’re so pathetic. Always putting the best light on your humble circumstances.”

“Which reminds me,” Troy said. “What are you doing here? I thought you were going to spend all summer in Vestavia Hills, sittin’ by the pool at the country club, hobnailin’ with rich chicks.”

“Hobnobbing.”

“I said what I meant.”

Max grinned wryly. “Pretty clever, for a hillbilly. Rich chicks can be real bitches. There wasn’t much chance of doing either kind of...hob.” Max shrugged. “I got bored. And I had about as much of my mama as I could take, so here I am. Now I’m hungry. Want to go get a hamburger or something?”

“That sounds good.” Troy let the comment about Max’s mother go by without response. Little evidences of the troubled relationship between Max and his parents always activated Troy’s sympathy, but he had learned to keep it to himself. Max would not allow expressions of sympathy to be directed toward him.

Troy pulled off his gloves and unzipped his coveralls and stepped out of them. In stark contrast to Max’s, his pants were the straight-leg, work-style jeans he’d worn all his life and his T-shirt was plain black.

“Hey, where you going?” Max said when Troy headed for the nursery office.

“Gotta go punch out.”

Max rolled his eyes. “You’ll never develop an executive attitude that way.”

They went to a small fast food place called the Dairy Freeze. It was farther away than Troy’s usual lunch places—a little too far to bicycle to—but he didn’t have to pedal today.

Max fed coins into a juke box and got the place rocking while Troy

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stepped to the counter where three or four high school girls in pink tunics milled around, chatting and laughing, awaiting the lunchtime rush. With the Cornelius Brothers and Sister Rose crooning in the background, Troy looked up at the wall menu.

“What can I get you?” The voice asking the question was a girl’s voice, no doubt, but toned down and midrange, not shrill and giggly. He looked down to see who accompanied the voice and found himself looking into the face of a girl that was so sweet and pretty it mesmerized him for a moment. It was framed with long brown hair that reached her shoulders and rested there in big curves. She was chewing gum and looking at him with wide brown eyes.

For the rest of his life, he would look back on that instant and pinpoint it as the moment he began to fall in love.

“Um...two double burgers, fries, Coke.”

She stopped chewing, gazed at him for a moment as if she were mesmerized, too, and murmured, “Two bubble durgers, fries, Coke. Uh, small or large?”

At her unaware Spoonerism, his face broke into a grin that could have lit a football stadium and, still looking into her eyes, he said, “Medium.”

“All we have is small or large.”

“Okay, large.”

She tore her eyes from his face to look at the cash register. Her fingers pressed the keys and she said, “That’ll be a dollar and ten cents.” She looked up and their eyes met again.

Troy started digging in his pockets but Max slid a sawbuck across the counter and said, “Here ya go.”

“Thanks, man,” Troy said, finally pulling his eyes away from the girl to look at his friend. “Preciate it.”

In the dining room as they ate their burgers, Troy kept an eye on counter, following the girl’s movement as she waited on customers. At one point, when he glanced up, she was looking at him. He smiled at her and inclined his head.

Max saw Troy’s smile and glanced back over his shoulder just in time to see the brown haired girl return the smile and then, shyly, duck her head and turn away. He looked back to his friend, his eyes narrowing.

“Troyster. Are you crazy?”

Troy suspected the look on his face was preoccupied. Dreamy. Ridiculous. He didn’t care.

“She’s beautiful.”

Southern Man

“She’s jailbait.”

“Did you see how she looked at me?”

“She wasn’t looking at you. She was looking at number twenty.”

Troy’s expression hinted that the idea troubled him. “No, she wouldn’t know that.”

“She knows you’re the Tide’s star halfback. Every one of those girls do. You can put money on it.”

He rode his bicycle to the Dairy Freeze the next day and she was there again. When he ordered lunch, he flirted with her and although her response was a bit shy, he could tell she was interested in him.

“I’m Troy Stevenson,” he said when there was a lull in the conversation.

She nodded. “Number twenty. Halfback.”

His face didn’t change but he frowned inside. “I hope you won’t hold that against me. What’s your name?”

“Patty Ayers.” Her eyes were fastened on his face.

“Patty...” He said it softly, liking the sound of it spoken in his voice. “What time do you get off work?”

“At three.”

His brows went up. “So do I. Has to be fate. Do you think it would be all right if I came back to see you after work?”

“I would like that. A lot.”

He smiled broadly, the smile that girls called his thousand watter, according to Max. “I’ll be back here a little after three.”

That day, they sat in the dining area of the Dairy Freeze until dusk, talking, getting to know one another and, as they both remembered it later, continuing to fall in love. It had begun the moment their eyes first met.

Patty was sixteen. She would turn seventeen and start her senior year in high school in September. She was also a pretty thing. Her brown eyes with a touch of green were expressive and captivating. She spoke in a soft alto that was unusual in a girl so young. She was somewhat reserved but by no means cold or uncommunicative. She possessed dignity beyond her years that Troy found immensely appealing.

The next day, he asked her to go out with him.

From that first date in July of 1972, neither Troy nor Patty ever dated anyone else.

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It had been the start of a wonderful time in his life—a time permeated with anticipation and longing mixed oddly but excitingly with the beginning of fulfillment.

Football practice started in August, classes a few weeks later.

With money he'd earned over the summer, Troy took Patty to dinner at a fancy restaurant on her seventeenth birthday in early September. He gave her a plain gold bangle bracelet and was gratified by her delight over it.

He told her, "I don't want to go out with anyone but you. I think about you a lot, when I study, when I'm in class, even on the football field. But I don't want to make any demands on you. It's your senior year, and it's supposed to be fun."

"I don't want to date anyone else, either, so that's settled," she said, making him very happy. "But you should keep your mind on what you're doing."

That summer, he had attended church with the Ayers family most Sundays. When he was around them, he sensed the rivalry between Patty and her two sisters and eventually learned of Patty's nervousness any time he was around Diane and Elaine, as if she feared one of them would steal his heart. Subtly but unmistakably, he let Patty know she was the one—that his heart belonged to her—with a look, a touch, a sweet nothing whispered against her hair....

Thanks to Max, who was generous with both his vehicle and his money, Troy and Patty went out at least one night each weekend, sometimes to an event at her high school—a party, dance, or ballgame—sometimes just for pizza and a movie. Their dates always ended at her parents' doorstep with a tight embrace and lingering kiss.

On September ninth, Bama faced Duke under the lights at Legion Field in Birmingham.

As a member of the team, Troy received four free tickets to home games, and for two years he had given most of them to Max to sell for him, except on the few occasions his parents were able to travel to Tuscaloosa to see him play. But now he gave his tickets to Patty and her family. To know she was in the stands watching him added a new dimension football he had not experienced in all his years of playing.

By the time the Georgia game rolled around—which the Tide won handily, 25 to 7—Troy knew beyond a doubt that he wanted to marry Patty. He wanted to marry her as soon as school was out.

It seemed almost too good to be true, but this high school girl with so

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much life, so many possibilities ahead of her—dating, college, career, whatever she wanted—was willing to give it all up to marry him.

“I wish we could do it right now,” he said, one night as they held each other in the chill shadows of her parents’ front porch, “but I’ve got football and we’ve both got school to finish and you’re not of age, anyway. Besides, I want to know that your parents are okay with it. I don’t want us to start with any family doubts. What do you think they’ll say?”

“I don’t know. I know they think the world of you, though.”

It had not been easy to convince Don and Virginia Ayers to let their youngest daughter marry straight out of high school. At the kitchen table in their home, Troy eloquently pleaded his case from every angle he could think of; his ability as a provider (“My friend Max’s father has offered me a job at Commander Industries in Atlanta with a great salary and benefits, starting right after graduation. I really want her to be with me when I go...”); their compatibility (“We see eye-to-eye on so much—religion, money, family...”); and his feelings for their daughter (“I love her so much. I’ll do everything I can to make her happy...”).

When they finally capitulated at another kitchen table talk, Troy, almost too immersed in happiness to think, had shaken Don’s hand heartily and hugged and kissed Virginia. Afterward, the lovebirds slipped away to the living room and snuggled together on the couch.

“Now, to make it legit,” Troy said. He took a velvet box out of his jacket pocket and opened the spring-hinged lid. Inside was a diamond solitaire ring of gold, the one-carat round stone held high by six platinum prongs. It would probably take him the rest of his life to repay Max the money for it, but it was worth it to see the look on Patty’s face.

Her eyes widened, her mouth dropped open and she gasped. “That’s beautiful!”

“I must’ve done good, huh. You really like it?”

“Oh, yes! It’s perfect!”

He pulled the ring out its padded setting, reached for her hand, slipped it on her finger and brought her hand to his lips. He put his arms around her and kissed her, long and sweetly and then with as much hunger as he felt he could show without frightening them both.

They reluctantly pulled apart and she looked down at the ring, her face growing pensive.

“What is it?” he asked. “Something wrong with the ring?”

“No, no!” she said. “It’s beautiful. It’s just that it all seems too good to be true.”

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“All what?”

“You. Getting engaged and then getting married to you. You’re just like this ring. You’re perfect. I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve you because I’m sure not perfect and I don’t know if I’ve got what it will take to keep you.”

“Keep me?” Troy was thunderstruck. “Good Lord, girl! I have just asked you to spend the rest of your *life* with me!”

She stared at him and blinked. “I know. I know. I didn’t mean that. I really didn’t mean it.”

Troy accepted her denial because he didn’t want to think she might have misgivings that would cause problems in the future. So the plans for their marriage moved forward and with time, his uneasiness faded.

Seven months later, a week after graduation, he and Max drove to Atlanta and spent several days there while Troy looked for an apartment. He found a perfectly located place, a bit small but close to both Commander and Georgia Tech. He and Patty would come to the apartment after the wedding because there was no money for a honeymoon trip, but they were both too happy to care about that.

Two weekends before the wedding, the mothers of the betrothed couple had traveled to Atlanta to clean and prepare the little honeymoon nest for them, stocking it with minimal necessities and adding little touches that would give it a welcoming atmosphere until they had time to make it their own.

They were married in a little country church with white clapboard siding and a tall steeple set in a grove outside Tuscaloosa. A small gathering of family and friends, a short but moving ceremony and a reception at the Ayers home created priceless memories that would last them a lifetime.

After the reception, the newlyweds changed clothes and ran through a shower of rice to Troy’s combination graduation and wedding gift from his parents and grandparents, a 1968 Mustang painted in gleaming steel city gray and beautifully reburbished by his father. They had driven the three hours to Atlanta to first visit the revolving, glass-walled Polaris Restaurant, high atop the Regency Hyatt House, for an elegant wedding dinner, a gift from Hamilton Ingram.

Afterward, at the apartment, Troy had gallantly lifted his bride off her feet and carried her inside where they lay on the sofa and talked softly about their beautiful wedding and the beginning of their life together—and made out like they never had before.

With the fullness of desire pulsating in their bodies, they reluctantly

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pulled apart. Troy was the first to prepare for what came next, showering and shaving and elbowing into a cropped T-shirt that showed his lean, hard midriff above drawstring pajama bottoms slung low on his hips. Excitement quaked inside him—the excitement and anticipation of protracted longing at last about to be fulfilled.

While Patty bathed and dressed, he waited in the living room, sprawled on the couch they had just vacated, his unseeing eyes on the muted television while the stereo, set to a top forty station, played softly in the background.

In a while he heard her call to him sweetly before she stepped into the living room, her feet in satin slippers. She halted a few paces into the room and he sat up and inhaled deeply, his eyes, his attention, his whole being focused on her.

What an vision of beauty she was! The babydoll piegnoir of white chiffon barely reached to her thighs and skimmed her body like a cloud. Her hair rested on her shoulders and gleamed satin-like in the lamp light. He saw so much on her lovely face—sweet, unhesitant love and trust so deep they humbled him, even now, along with a hint of apprehension that called forth from him the greatest attentiveness and tenderness of heart he had ever felt.

He saw desire in her eyes, too, as she looked at his face and form. He snapped off the television and went to her. Bathed in the warm, dim glow of the table lamp, he took her in his arms. They pressed their bodies together and trembled with the longing to give and the equal longing to take what the other was giving. Passion made their hearts beat faster, their breathing uneven, their skin hypersensitive to the other's touch.

His voice was so thick with arousal it hardly sounded like his.

“No need to hold back anymore.”

And they had made love—the first time for both of them—not in an impersonal bed in a hotel room or a gaudily furnished honeymoon suite used by countless unknown couples before them, but in their own bed, a new and virgin bed that became that night a marriage bed. It was a night of gentleness and joy, of thrashing, panting ecstasy, of tears and softly spoken words of comfort and the beginning of a profound bond of oneness—the first of many such nights to come.

But hints of Patty's insecurity—this fear that she could not hold onto her man—surfaced again almost a year into their marriage.

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Troy knew that growing up in the shadow of her beautiful sisters, and losing every boy she ever loved to them, had something to do with it. But that was a holdover from an earlier time and did not apply now. He suspected there was some other, deeper reason for her completely groundless fear of losing him.

This episode was different from ordinary crying spells. She'd had about three of those during their first year of marriage. He'd discerned a pattern associated with them, pegging them to her menstrual cycle combined with some external mishap—burning supper, locking her keys in the car, washing a red sock with the whites. Crying from such episodes got the annoyance and embarrassment out of her system and normalized her emotions quickly.

There had been a couple of lovers' quarrels that resulted in crying, as well. But in those episodes, painful tears of temporary rejection and estrangement had quickly given way to the sweet tears of love and reconciliation.

These were minor compared to what happened a year into their marriage, though, when Patty missed her period and turned up pregnant fully a year before they had planned to start their family.

Troy was ecstatic, despite having to juggle their plans and finances, classes and work hours, but Patty was filled with misgivings.

She was working as a receptionist at a small insurance agency and in the days after her doctor confirmed her pregnancy, she answered the phone and greeted visitors like a sleepwalker. At home she looked like a shock victim. It went on for days. Troy, thinking it might have something to do with hormones or the psychological aspects of pregnancy, put on the kid gloves and waited for her to adjust and recover.

One night after they went to bed, he was sitting up against the pillows reading an assignment for economics class—struggling with it, a little—when Patty snuggled against him and began to kiss him provocatively. He laughed softly and said, "Whoa, baby! What is this? Every night, for five nights in a row, sometimes twice? I mean, it's great, but that's a little much, even for us."

She looked at him, surprised. "It is?"

He put an arm around her and said, "Well, yeah. I'm a graduate student and I work almost full time and you're wearing me out, girl!"

She stiffened and tried to push away from him, but he laid his book aside and held her close. "No, you be still. Tell me what's going on. Does being pregnant make women horny? I've never heard that but there are

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lots of things I don't know."

"It's not for me, it's for you. So you'll stay."

"So I'll stay where?"

"Here. With me. In this marriage."

Troy was rendered speechless for a moment. "You think I want to leave?"

"Maybe not now, but maybe later."

"Why?"

"Because I've messed everything up. You had everything all planned and I ruined your plans. I'm supposed to be your helper, not a ruiner."

"They're not my plans, honey, their ours. And they're not ruined; they'll just have to be adjusted."

"But you're already overextended and fatigued. That'll just make it harder on you."

He smiled at her and kissed her temple. "I'm a man. I can take it."

But she was not responsive to his levity. "I'm making it harder on you. I wouldn't blame you if you did want to leave." She looked at him, anguished. "But please don't! I couldn't stand it! I'm sorry, I'll make it up to you, I promise! If you don't want to make love, tell me some other way!"

She laid her forehead on his shoulder and her body spasmed with sobs. This was not like her other crying spells. She was filled with fear and failure and she was crying from sheer anguish. Troy's hold on her gradually relaxed. He wasn't embracing her to keep her in place, now, but to comfort her. He kissed her temple and stroked her hair while tears wet his shoulder and chest.

His thought back over their conversation and realized there was something familiar about this. He placed it in seconds—the day they became engaged, and she told him, *I don't know if I've got what it takes to keep you.*

Oh, she had what it took, as long as their troubles were no worse than burned supper or pink laundry. But taking on the responsibility of a *child*...

Sometimes he forgot how young she was. Not twenty yet. And he sometimes wondered if he had been fair to her, pulling her into marriage when she was just a teenager, a girl.... But it was done now, and looking back with regret would serve no purpose at all. What mattered was today. And tomorrow.

"I want you to stop crying long enough to listen to me. Will you do

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that?” His love for her came through in the timbre of his voice. She nodded and her sobs became involuntary sniffles. He got tissues from the bedside table and handed them to her, got another and rubbed it across his shoulder. He rolled her onto her back and pushed himself up on his elbow to look down into her face.

“Patty, why do you think my love and commitment are so puny they can’t survive this? What have I done to make you doubt me?”

Her sniffing stopped abruptly and she focused on his face. She was feeling less, thinking more. He pressed on while he had her attention.

“We took vows to love each other and stay together, no matter what, as long as we’re both alive. We said those things in a church full of our family and friends and before God. Now, you either believe I meant what I said, or you don’t believe it. If you don’t believe me, I don’t know how to convince you. But I meant it. I love you. I’ll never leave you. I couldn’t stand being without you.”

The enormity of what she had done—what she had accused him of, and the hurtfulness of it—came to her. She didn’t start sobbing again but she did weep briefly, tears of contrition and shame. She put her hand on his cheek.

“I know you love me, I see it all the time. I don’t know what made me so afraid. I’m so sorry!”

“It’s okay. Are you over it? Because that’s the important thing.”

“Yes, I’m over it.”

“And you believe in your heart that I’m happy about the baby and I truly don’t mind the changes we’ll have to make?” Joy suffused the smile he gave her. “You believe that...Mama?”

His happiness was contagious, and her smile reflected joy and love back to him. “I believe it...Daddy.”

He gave her short, sweet kisses that became long passionate ones. Turmoil gave way to elation and intense desire that quickly engulfed them. He lifted his mouth from hers just enough to say, “That part about you wearing me out? I was just jokin’.”

Once Patty realized that he was truly delighted about the baby, and that her fear of losing him was groundless, she delighted in her pregnancy, too.

There were two or three more episodes after that, but somehow, Troy always figured out what had brought them on, and seemed to know

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instinctively what to say and do to reassure her and banish the fear.

The last one had occurred shortly after his promotion to vice-president. Extra attentiveness to her plus a long, kidless weekend at Fernandina Beach, punctuated with nights on the town and several episodes of lovemaking, now sweet and tender, now wanton and wild, had snapped her out of it, sure enough.

Chapter Thirteen

Verona, Georgia

May 1983

It felt wonderful to Patty to bathe in her own shower and change into fresh clothes. Although she'd didn't waste time, she didn't hurry herself too much. Troy and Randy would be enjoying their time together. She took a few minutes to reapply her makeup and pull her hair back into a barrette at the nape of her neck.

Melissa had finished her bath, too, and was in her room changing into night clothes Patty had laid out for her. While her daughter dressed, Patty stepped through the house. She didn't remember what she had been doing yesterday afternoon when Troy had unexpectedly turned up drunk so early in the evening.

When she parked in the driveway tonight, she had seen by the porch light that the tumbler he put on the window sill was gone. She found the it in the top rack of the otherwise empty dishwasher. Troy had evidently done his eating off-premises today. As she neared the laundry room door, she remembered an unfinished task from yesterday. There was another basket of clean clothes to put away.

She was surprised to find Troy's expensive Stefani suit in the laundry room, thrown across the garment rack, all rumpled. His silk tie and other apparel were hanging beside it and it dawned on her that they were water-damaged. She wondered how that happened. Surely he hadn't been so drunk he stepped into the shower fully dressed. The mental image made her heart ache.

The laundry basket sat where she had left it and she took it to the master bedroom. Troy's T-shirts topped the contents. She opened his T-shirt drawer to put them away and felt a shock. It was empty.

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There was no shirts in the hamper, and only three clean ones to put away. Where were all the others?

One by one, she checked his dresser drawers. Sock drawer, practically empty. Underwear drawer, cleared out.

As it came to her what she was seeing, a sphere of aching hollowness grew in her upper abdomen and her throat constricted. For certainty, she went to his closet and slid the mirrored door aside. All his winter suits and clothes were still there. Nearly all his summer clothes were missing. Tie rack, gone. Belt rack, gone. Shoe rack, half empty.

The room blurred and Patty blinked. She didn't want to think what she was thinking, it was just too horrifying, too catastrophic, for belief, but what else could she think?

Knowing what she would find, she had to look anyway. She went to the door to his bathroom, hesitated a moment and then pushed it open. Toothbrush, gone. All his toiletries and grooming implements were nowhere to be seen.

He was leaving. She had disrespected and betrayed him, and now he was leaving. Periodically, she had been terrified of losing him ever since she fell in love with him and now it had happened.

This was a catastrophe of such magnitude she couldn't even cry. She grew lightheaded. She felt frozen inside. Lifeless.

"Missy," she called weakly. "Let's go. We've got to hurry and get back to the hospital."

She had a crazy fear that they would get back to Verona General and find that Troy was already gone.

Something was wrong with Patty, Troy knew it the moment she walked in. She had the face of a shock victim.

He stood up and said, "Missy, here's your chair."

Melissa, sweet smelling and comfortable in summer pajamas, crawled into the chair and looked up at the muted television. Almost immediately, her eyelids began to droop.

Troy walked to Patty, studying her face, her stance, watching her movements. She didn't return his look, but laid her purse on the bed and fastened her eyes on their sleeping son.

"What's the matter?"

She didn't answer.

"Is it about this morning? I was a bastard to you and I apologize."

CONNIE CHASTAIN

Although she remained mute, the fear and sorrow behind her blank expression gave him a pretty good idea what the problem was.

"You had hurt me and pissed me off," he explained, "and I wanted to make sure you knew it. Now it's brought on one of your fear and doubt episodes. Sweetheart, please snap out of it. You were never really in trouble with me and I was sorry about being mean to you as soon as I did it."

She looked at him, stupefied. "I'm *losing* you! I love you more than *life*, and I'm *losing* you! And you're telling me to snap out of it?"

"Yes, that's what I'm telling you. You know nothing has ever come of these fears of yours. I've never left you before. It's a ridiculous notion—always has been."

"Clothes gone from your closet!" she said in a shrill half-whisper. "Drawers empty! Even the cabinets in your bathroom, cleared out!"

Troy grimaced. "It's not what you're thinking."

"There aren't too many ways you can interpret that." She turned away from him so he couldn't see her face, but there was no mistaking what he read in her movements and posture. The imagined catastrophe had overwhelmed her, sucked her under, and she was drowning in it.

He hated to see her distressed and unhappy. All other considerations, including his own catastrophies, receded to the periphery of his consciousness, and his concern centered on her, on alleviating her distress.

He glanced around the room as he tried to think of the best approach for handling her emotional state and saw that the children were both asleep now. Good. They didn't need to hear this.

"Patty. I should have known better than to let you go home and maybe find what you found, knowing how it could affect you. But my head's not screwed on straight right now. I wasn't thinking."

"All that tells me is that I found out before you meant for me to."

"There's nothing to find out. I'm not leaving you."

She looked at him over her shoulder, griefstricken.

"You have already *left!*" she said, her voice high-pitched and thin. "You have packed *up* and cleared *out!*"

"Shhhh, calm down. You'll wake the children. I'm telling you, it's not what you're imagining."

He moved closer to her, removed the barrette and stroked her hair loose. He stepped in front of her and put his arms around her. She was rigid and didn't return his embrace, but she didn't protest or push him away, so he pulled her closer and stroked her cheek with his knuckles.

"I couldn't leave you for anything and you know it. We're soul mates,

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joined at the heart, paired for life. We fell in love when we first laid eyes on each other. I was remembering that while you and Missy were gone. I can still see you standing behind the counter in your little pink Dairy Freeze jacket, poppin' that Double Mint with your back teeth, and you looked at me and said, 'What can I get for you?' and I fell in love, boom, just like that. And you saw me do it. Remember?"

Her stiffness and resistance melted a little and that, along with the memory, brought a smile to his face.

"And I said, 'Two hamburgers, fries and a Coke,' and that's when you fell in love with me, and I watched you do it. It just came up in your eyes, and on your face. I was exhilarated and humbled at the same time."

"It was double burgers," she murmured.

"Oh, yeah, that's right. You called 'em bubble durgers. You were already so overcome by my irresistible charm you couldn't talk straight."

He gave a low chuckle, trailed his lips lightly along her hairline and kissed her forehead. "Think if I'd ordered uh apple pie, too. You probably woulda leaped across the counter in a single bound, straight into my arms, right then and there." He laughed softly at the mental picture. "Do you remember what was playing on the Rockola?"

She nodded. "*Too Late to Turn Back Now.*"

"That's right. Perfect song for the moment. Fifteen seconds of looking at each other and it was already too late to turn back. We were both goners. But I've never wanted to turn back. God has been so good to us. We've had ten wonderful years together. We made these two great young'uns together. I don't know anybody who has a love like ours."

Her arms went around his waist and she looked up at him, her reddened eyes filling again. "But I did a terrible thing to you, trying to take your children away behind your back. It was so disrespectful of you it was sinful."

"Why were you taking the children and leaving? Because my coming home drunk made you not love me anymore?"

"No, of course not!" she said, aghast. "You know that's not why!"

"Yes, I do know. So what you're thinking is that your love for me is deep enough and strong enough to withstand unexpected adversity, but my love for you isn't. I make a mistake, you still love me. You make a mistake, my love fizzles and I'm ready to haul butt."

She held her breath and stared at him.

"Mhmm," he said. "You didn't think of it that way, did you? Your head's not screwed on straight, either."

CONNIE CHASTAIN

“Oh!” It came out as a whimper.

“Sweetheart, if I thought you truly believe I don’t love you and want to leave you...if I thought you were blind to all I do for us...it would do real bad things to me inside. But I know you don’t believe it. You know I love you. Most of the time, you’re very confident of it.”

It took a few moments, but her face gradually transformed. Contrition replaced pain and loss, cognition reined in her runaway emotions and she thought about what he had said. “It seems like a miracle sometimes, but yes, I know you love me. And I’m not blind. I just get crazy now and then. I’m sorry.”

“I am, too. Let’s sit down and talk.” He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to her. She dabbed at her eyes as they walked to the chair.

Seated sideways on his lap, she cut her eyes to him...panda eyes, black-ringed with mascara melted by tears. “I think I’m snapped out of it.”

He studied her face a moment and smiled. “Yes, I think you are.”

Her crisis of confidence was just about spent. He could see her love for him, her trust in him, reasserting themselves as her turmoil gave way to calm. Somehow, once again, he had managed to find just the words she needed to hear.

He stroked her forearm and gave it a pat. “My stuff’s out at the cabin.”

The look on her face said she had not expected this, and didn’t know what to make of it.

“I’m going to stay out there a few days, a few weeks, however long it takes to work through some things. But I’m not leaving the way you meant, not to break up our home, our marriage. In fact, I need you now more than I ever have.”

She put her arms around him and hugged him tightly, moved by his admission of need. “What things are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Drinking to excess. Well, no. Drinking, period. I know you want me to deal with it. You’ve wanted that for a long time.”

“Yes, but why do you have to go out there? Can’t you do it at home?”

“I’ve thought about it. I don’t think so. Patty...” He held her away from him enough for them to see each other’s faces. Now, it was his that was etched with emotion. He swallowed hard and started to say something, but looked away.

He couldn’t tell her the truth—not the whole truth, that he was scared...scared to death and unsure and floundering. He didn’t know

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what he would do if she lost confidence in him. So he told her only part of the truth.

“I have to confront this thing. I have to face the why of it, head on. And I don’t even know why, yet.”

“Then stay home and let me help you figure it out.”

“I can’t. There are are things you don’t know because I haven’t told you, out of respect for the privacy of my kin. It may or may not have a bearing, but I have to find out. I’ll tell you about it, in time. Then you’ll understand. But right now, I have a lot of questions and not many answers. And I suspect I won’t ask them or answer them if I stay home.”

“Then how will I be able to help you?”

“You’re already helping, more than you know.”

She searched his eyes and he wondered if she saw fear there, or sensed it in his mood or behavior.

“Oh, Tro! Please don’t be afraid anymore! Randy’s not hurt, either physically or emotionally. He loves you like he always has. We all do!”

She had said it—the A word, afraid—but she didn’t realize the depth of his fear, he was certain, or it would have made her afraid, too. She wasn’t happy about his going to the cabin; she wasn’t looking forward to his absence, but she wasn’t afraid anymore.

He brought himself under strict control. At least he could act like the responsible family leader, provider, protector.

“I know. I love you and the children, too, so much.... We’ll come through this spell of trouble. As hard as it has been on all of us, I know it’s nothing compared to the kind of troubles some families have to deal with. I think of what’s on the news and in the paper, and I truly can’t conceive of the horrors people live with, day after day. But, Patty, it could get bad for us, really bad, if I don’t do something now. That’s why I need you to support my decision to go out there. And your help while I work through it.”

She nestled against him, her head on his shoulder, and held his hand to her heart. “I don’t want you to go. But if you think you have to, I’ll support you.”

Troy had not planned to stay the night in Randy’s room but after he and Patty had resolved some of their immediate problems and it came time for him to leave, he couldn’t do it.

It was his last night with his family for an indefinite period of time, and

CONNIE CHASTAIN

he wanted to be with them through all of it. It didn't matter how uncomfortable he might become.

After their talk, he and Patty got to their feet and he gave her the recliner in front of the bedside table where she had slept the night before. He turned off the light and took the other chair, reclining with Melissa curled in the crook of his arm. In bed between them, Randy slumbered deeply, clutching his Geo-bot.

Troy was unable to sleep and his eyes darted around the dim room.

Neither memories, however precious, nor his sweet wife's heartfelt love and support, had the power to shield him from fear, and it charge him like tiger within minutes of his lying down. It had been this way for more than twenty-four hours. It went for his throat at every unguarded moment.

How could I have let this happen?

He offered up a prayer of supplication for comfort, for help, for strength ...and for forgiveness...and then a prayer of thanksgiving that he had caused nothing worse to happen. After a while, he nodded off into shallow, unrestful half-sleep.

He awakened when it was barely light. His muscles were stiff, his bad shoulder sore and he was amazed at how heavy Melissa had grown during the night.

He took her into his arms, got up and lay her in the recliner alone. For a moment, he looked at her face in slumber. Patty might be right about her becoming plain for a while when she reached early adolescence before blooming into a beautiful young woman. But to him she would always be the prettiest little girl in the world.

He looked toward the bed. Randy was on his side, his hands caught between his knees, his head tilted back. In the dimness, his face looked shadowed, but Troy knew it was not a shadow, it was a bruise, and he felt the same regret and shame he had felt yesterday every time he saw it.

He stepped around the bed to where Patty slept in the other chair. He bent toward her. "Patty," he said, barely above a whisper.

She was not comfortable and came out of shallow sleep quickly. "Hey."

"Hey. I'm going to the cabin to get ready and go on in to work."

"Okay." She raised the recliner until she was sitting and got to her feet.

"Do you want me to come back when Randy's discharged?"

"No," she said. "I'll take care of it."

"All right." He stroked her face. "How are you, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine." She took in his face and grew concerned as she mirrored his gesture, her fingertips trailing down his jaw. She frowned.

"Oh.... You have those purple fatigue fans under your eyes, like you

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used to get in graduate school. Promise me you'll rest and catch up on your sleep."

"I will. I promise. You promise me the same thing."

She nodded. "Okay."

"Good. Call the office any time if you need me. I'll come home for a few minutes after work and talk to the children about being away for a while."

Her head bobbed once and he saw her swallow hard.

"Patty. I love you. Don't ever doubt that."

Chapter Fourteen

At fifteen minutes before eight Friday morning, Dinah Langley arrived at work and found the door to her office locked. That meant her boss had not arrived yet, if he was coming in today.

Not knowing what to expect with his return—meetings, visitors, presentations or none of the above—she had dressed in her most professional outfit, a navy blue suit and white blouse, navy heels and gold buttons at her earlobes. Her naturally curly red hair always looked a bit mussed. But these days, a bit mussed was fashionable.

Most of the time, Troy came in at seven and stayed until at least six, and sometimes seven or later. On the days he arrived that early, Dinah would come in at her usual seven forty-five to find both offices brightly lighted, music playing in the background, and Troy in his executive chair—it was big, but he filled it nicely—his shirt sleeves rolled up and his desk elbow-deep in work.

Not today, though. She unlocked the door to her office and went inside.

Thundershowers were predicted this afternoon, a typical summer weather pattern in these parts. But for now the day was cloudless and sunlight was streaming through the windows so brightly she had to adjust the mini blinds.

When the light was subdued, she put her purse in the bottom drawer of her desk and unlocked the inner office door. She took the pot from a Mr. Coffee machine on her credenza into Troy's office where she adjusted the blinds and turned on the overhead fluorescents and the recessed fixtures that added focused light around the perimeter of the room...the way he preferred it.

With the lighting out of the way, she went to a door at the inside corner of his office.

Like the other executive office suites upstairs, this one had a closet and

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a small bathroom, including shower. When Troy had become vice president of the department two years ago and moved into this suite, he had bought a dark, antique armoire for changes of clothing and other personal items and filled the closet with an all-in-one compact kitchen, including minimal cabinetry and a microwave oven. Patty had furnished it with a small collection of cookware, dinnerware, utensils and accessories.

For a man who worked late a lot, in a business park where there were no places to eat, the tiny kitchen came in handy—when he remembered to stock it.

Dinah went to the sink and filled the coffee pot with water.

Back in her own office, she started the coffee making and wondered whether her boss would be in today. He had not been to the office since Wednesday afternoon, when he and Max got back from squiring dignitaries from Atlanta out to the company's new acreage. They were both besotted and feeling no pain when they came back after seeing the visitors off. They'd holed up in Troy's office for a few minutes and left for the day around four-thirty.

Dinah hadn't learned until later that Troy drove home in that condition. She was appalled.

The phone call from Patty yesterday morning had alleviated some of her worry but it was almost mid-afternoon before she was reassured by a call from Troy himself.

"Hey, Dinah."

"Hey, Boss."

"Anything?"

"Nothing urgent."

"You're sure everything can wait till tomorrow, huh?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sure."

"Good. Thank you, ma'am."

Dinah had taken that to mean he would come in today but now she wondered. On the days he didn't come in early, he still arrived at the office a good fifteen minutes before eight but today, at ten till, he still hadn't showed up.

Finally, at five minutes to eight she heard the familiar squeal of the hinges on the door to the utility stairwell down the hall. She and Troy were the only ones who used it routinely. Downstairs, it opened on one side to a secondary corridor that ran beside the offices of the Marketing Department and on the other to a gravel parking lot where Troy usually parked.

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Dinah looked at the doorway. In a few seconds, he walked in.

Most people couldn't help being struck by Troy's looks, and Dinah was no exception. He was especially sharp today in a light gray suit—his favorite color for business suits—with a white shirt and a red and gold striped tie. But she was momentarily taken aback by the fatigue and sleep-deprivation etching his face. Delicate shadows of pale mauve fanned downward from the inner corners of his eyes and his expression was passive and distant.

Regardless of her formal job title, Dinah had been Troy's secretary for eight years and she had seen him at his best and his not so best. She suspected that very few people had ever seen him at his worst.

Despite his being a man capably handling adult responsibilities, she had twelve years on him and he evoked her protective mother-instincts. The world they shared was the predatory corporate world and in her experience, vice presidents were target material, bigtime. Shearwater-Ingram was a fairly docile company in that respect, but competition for positions in the hierarchy could get down and dirty sometimes, and there were a few people who still resented his promotion two years after the fact.

The fatigue pinching his face ratcheted up her protectiveness toward him, and her sympathy.

"Good morning, sir."

"Morning, Dinah. How you doing?"

"It's Friday so I'm fine." She studied him. "Welcome back, it's good to see you. That's yours." She pointed to a stack of work for him in a tray on her credenza.

Troy picked up the files, mail, trade journals and memos and headed for his office. "I'm absent one day and all this piles up?"

"Well, it's two days worth of stuff."

"Oh, yeah. I don't suppose there's anything from Norm in here explaining last quarter's sales fall-off."

"I don't think so. He's as concerned as you are but hasn't had much time to study it. I'm sure he'll fill you in."

Troy took the stack of material into his office. She gave him several minutes to get settled in, poured a cup of coffee and took it to him.

"I don't know if it may have slipped your mind, with everything else happening," Dinah said, "but I'm leaving early today, right after lunch."

"I remember. Head start on a weekend at the beach. Savannah, or was it Brunswick?"

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“Savannah. Do you want Joy to come up here and fill in?”

“Nah. It’ll probably be pretty quiet. Ah, that coffee smells good. Do I have any thing to eat in there?” he asked, pointing toward the compact kitchen.

“I don’t think so. Why? Are you hungry?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m starving. I need to start keeping food in there.”

Troy rarely came to work hungry because of Patty’s breakfast-like-a-king approach to family meals, so this was unusual. Then Dinah remembered; Patty and the children had gone somewhere Wednesday evening. Perhaps they had not returned home yet.

“You know they serve breakfast, more or less, in the cafeteria until nine-thirty, ten o’clock, something like that,” she said.

“I’d forgot about that. Hmmm...”

“You want me to go get you something?”

“I don’t like asking you to do that.”

“Piffle. You know I don’t mind.”

She didn’t have to offer twice. He stood and his shoulders tilted as he pulled a billfold out of his back pocket. He extracted a twenty, handed it to her and said, “Orange juice, biscuit or toast, some kind of bread like that. Do they have eggs?”

“Well, they have something that looks like eggs, and they call it eggs, but I don’t recommend eating it. Everything else is fine.”

“Okay. I trust your recommendation. Get me a piece of sausage or...oh, heck, just get me something, I don’t care what. And whatever you want for yourself.”

Eight years ago, when Troy was still a wet-behind-the-ears assistant marketing coordinator at Commander Industries, juggling his young family, his job and undergraduate classes—and wondering how he was going to make it in such a cutthroat company—an older officer retired. The gentleman’s department was absorbed by another and his position was abolished. That left the question of what to do with his secretary, Dinah Banks.

To most of Troy’s peers, secretaries were more ornamental than functional. There were two basic requirements: they had to be young, and they had to be lookers. Dinah was thirty-seven and while it didn’t hurt anyone’s eyes to look at her, she wasn’t a looker.

Brown-eyed and auburn-haired, she was of slightly above average

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height and, though not anorexic, she was noticeably thin. She tried hard to look and dress professionally, but it was difficult to do with clothes from dollar stores and discount houses.

Dinah was a divorcée who was lucky to see a fraction of the child support she was owed; thus she was trying to raise two daughters mostly on a secretary's paycheck. There just wasn't a lot of money left for a professional wardrobe.

Because of these and other reasons, Dinah's stock didn't go far with most of the future officers and executives at Commander, but when Troy looked at her, he saw a priceless asset. She had been with the company fourteen years. He had been there two. She knew a hundred times more about the company than he did. She would have been worth her weight in gold simply for her knowledge, but the fact was, she was also smart, hard-working and personable.

So he boldly approached Hamilton Ingram and asked that another secretarial position be assigned to the marketing department for her.

"We shouldn't let someone with her knowledge and experience get away," Troy said, among other things, as he made his case.

Hamilton was as impressed with Troy's audacity as he was with his arguments. "Let me look into it."

Several days later, he called Troy into his office and pointed at a column of figures on a printout. "We think we can fund that position for Dinah by taking one percent from books and publications, three percent from employee activities, one percent from travel...." On down the list he went to the last entry. He looked at Troy with a slight smile and said, "... .and three percent of your salary. You still want her?"

It was completely unexpected, but Troy handled himself well, keeping his face neutral as he guarded the feelings inside him—his realization that Hamilton Ingram wasn't as admirable as he had always thought, and his chagrin at being painted into a corner this way.

He didn't even take time to pretend he was thinking it over, but said, "Yes, I want her," without hesitation. He pointed to the total at the bottom of the page. "Is this what she was making before?"

"Yes."

"Then take four percent out of my salary and give her a little raise." He would figure out a way to explain the missing chunk of his paycheck to Patty later.

Troy's instincts had been right. Dinah had turned out to be a priceless asset, worth far more to him than the small percentage of his salary it took to get her.

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She became a general clerical worker for the whole marketing department but everybody knew who she really worked for and who had her loyalty. Grateful to Troy for the raise—grateful to him that she even had a job—Dinah was determined to become every bit the asset he thought she was. Her willingness to impart company knowledge to him provided his career with an impressive jump start few of his peers would experience. It would eventually enable him to become the youngest vice-president in either company.

As he clawed his way up the rungs of the marketing department ladder in Atlanta, he was intrigued by the struggling little Commander-owned company in Verona. Competition from the European firms colonizing the Southern textile industry had nearly done it in. In the last decade, Swiss and German companies had become so prevalent in the Carolinas that Interstate 85 between Greenville and Charlotte had been dubbed “The Autobahn.” The Euros not only manufactured textiles—they manufactured the machinery that produced the textiles, including looms and their control panels.

After Commander bought the company in 1966 and renamed it Shearwater-Ingram, it diversified to the extent of producing control panels for other types of industrial machinery, and thus managed to stay solvent, but Troy saw far greater opportunities for the little company. It would require that marketing maintain a close working relationship with research and development but success would not come without it.

When he came to Verona, he brought Dinah with him. Again, she had a department secretary title but again, in reality, she was his secretary. When he was promoted to vice president, he made her his administrative assistant. Professionally, she was his right arm. She kept him organized, on time, on track and on budget. He acknowledged that he couldn’t function in his job without her, and he made certain she got her share of recognition for his achievements.

Because she had done so much for him, Troy took good care of her. Most everyone knew that he believed he owed a huge chunk of his success to her, but few people knew that after coming to Shearwater-Ingram, he had given standing orders to reduce any raises or bonuses he got by four percent and transfer that amount to Dinah—a tradition Hamilton Ingram had unknowingly begun. This was in addition to any seniority or merit raises and bonuses she got as a matter of course in her position.

Over the years, she had learned to dress and make up professionally and attractively, and while she might never be a looker, Troy couldn’t

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have been more pleased with her. He was proud to have her at his side at meetings, conferences and business lunches.

After eight years of working together, they knew each other well, probably better than any two people in the company except for Troy and Max. Each had enormous respect, both professional and personal, for the other. In addition, they had developed a friendship that extended beyond the office and the workday. Three years ago, when Dinah had met a man, fallen in love and got married, the small wedding ceremony had taken place in the Stevenson's formal living room in Oak Terrace.

For her part, Dinah was devoted to Troy and excessively loyal to him. She did whatever it took to make him look good in his job, and, as a matter of course, went above and beyond the call of duty to ensure that his career was a success.

And, as everyone at Shearwater-Ingram knew, she guarded him like a Doberman Pinscher.

By the time Dinah returned, Troy had emptied his in-tray of the batch of material she had given him, and reassembled the contents into separate stacks on his credenza, in order of importance. He had also started the music.

On a stand along the back wall near his desk, he had a component stereo system with magnificent sound and a collection of cassette tapes in his favorite genres. For working, he preferred what Dinah called easy listening music. He scorned that designation, and always corrected her.

"It's called smooth jazz."

"Whatever," she rejoined.

He varied his listening, though, with everything from the rock oldies and Motown of his youth to bluegrass and country-western, and an occasional classical piece.

The saxophone music playing now was not as smooth as some of the stuff he played.

"That ought to keep you from going to sleep," Dinah said.

"That's David Sanborn. He's very versatile. He sure enough can lullaby you with some of his music. It's beautiful, dreamy. But not that tune." He looked over the tray she had brought him. "Thanks for getting breakfast."

"You're welcome, thanks for buying. You look like you could use a lullaby."

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“Yeah, I know. I’ve missed some sleep. If I have to, I’ll stretch out on the couch and—what was that old hippie term? Cop a few Z’s?”

“Groovy.” Dinah took her apple juice and muffin off the tray and headed for her office.

Just before nine, when they had barely finished their unexpected office breakfast, Dinah heard a knock and looked up to see Max Ingram peering around the door facing.

“I see himself decided to come to work today,” he said, stepping into Dinah’s office. “You know, missing work without calling in and telling somebody is grounds for dismissal at a lot of companies.”

Dinah gave him a look. “Max. Don’t come in here and start.”

Flashing her a sardonic smile, he went into Troy’s office and made himself comfortable in the wingback chair.

Chapter Fifteen

“You really can miss important things when you’re absent from work,” Max observed. “Not to mention that when an officer does it, it sets a bad example for the whole company. Especially when you haven’t called in and let somebody know something.”

Troy laughed. “You’re not really lecturing me about missing work, are you?”

“No. Just trying to find out how you’re doing without coming out and asking. Called your house twice yesterday. Got the answering machine.”

“How are you doing?” Troy countered, getting a quick, ethereal flashback of Max and his father at the Scoreboard Tavern—was it just two days ago? It seemed longer, so much had happened since. He didn’t mention the friction between father and son, but they both knew that’s what he was asking about.

“I’m good,” Max said. “How are you?”

“Fine.

“You look like crap.” Max studied Troy’s face with narrowed eyes. “Patty and the kids all right?”

For a moment, Troy didn’t say anything. “They’re fine, too. I smacked Randy in the face and knocked him off the front porch, but he’s all right.”

Max stared at Troy blankly a moment before he gave a quick laugh. “Troyster, you’re gonna have to come up with a better explanation than that.”

“Ah-ight, I’ll try to think up something else. What happened around here while I was out?”

“Well, you know, the new computer software went live at eight yesterday.”

“Oh, yeah. How’d that go?”

“Like a Chinese fire drill. Huge learning curve. The customer database

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is screwy. I'm sure you'll get an earful about it from your people. Turn on your computer, I'll show you."

Troy turned toward the computer extension perpendicular to his desk and rocked a toggle switch on the machine. Max pulled a small side chair behind Troy's desk and sat backwards, his arms folded across the backrest.

"Okay, main menu," Max said. He pointed to the black screen with green text. "Two for Marketing and Sales. Two again, and there's your customer database. This is how the personnel database is set up, too. For sales, it searches on customer name or account number. Highlight here to pick a customer, hit F-four to go into an individual customer's account, like so. Got that?"

"Yeah, I got it. Very similar to the old software."

"Uh-huh. In fact, this is supposed to be exactly like our old program, only better, right? Faster, more intuitive. So, where are the log notes? Do you see the log notes for this customer?"

Troy's eyes skimmed the screen, particularly the function key designations at the bottom. No links to notes of any kind. "Where are they?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I know you don't use the customer database much, but I thought you might be able to figure it out, since sales is part of your department. My personnel files are just as screwy, though. I can't make heads or tails out of them. Neither can Dugan."

"They using this at Commander?"

"Heck, no," Max said. "We're the guinea pigs. They're gonna let us tear out hair out and gnaw our fingers off and debug the thing before they start using it." Max pulled the keyboard closer to him and began searching the screens but every lead that looked promising turned out to be a dead end.

Troy observed Max's fruitless search with a touch of impatience. "Surely Norm has figured this out."

"Not as of five o'clock yesterday. But he was pretty busy with other things all day."

"Did you ask Dinah about it? She spent a couple of days in Atlanta training on this system last month."

"No I didn't ask her."

Troy leaned back in his chair to see around the banker's lamp on his desk and looked toward the door. "Dinah, can we get your help in here for a minute?"

"Sure." She came to Troy's desk and stood behind him and Max.

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“Do these customer files in the new software have log notes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where? How do you get to them?”

“Let me see.” She looked at the screen. “I think you hit F-six, Assignments.”

Max shook his head. “Nah, that can’t be it. Don’t make sense.”

Troy gave Max a pointed look. “Mash F-six,” he said, and Max did.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Dinah said. “Look at the bottom of the screen. All the F-keys, or most of them, have changed functions. Now F-nine is Log Notes. The exact same notes are found in the History, too—that’s F-ten—but they’re mixed in with notes put there by the system.”

Troy glanced up at her. “What kind of notes does the system put?”

“Oh, really dumb things like, it keeps a record of when the time changes, things like that.”

“Time changes. You mean like daylight savings time.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s nuts,” Max said. “I don’t know why that needs to be recorded in a customer’s file. Who wrote this software, anyway?”

“They didn’t tell us that. The program also records system outages and down time and puts that in each customer’s history, too, and it—”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Max said. He looked at Troy and rolled his eyes. “Leave it to a woman to tell you a hunnerd things you don’t need to know.” Then, to Dinah, he said, “Thanks, that’s enough. All we wanted was how to find the log notes.”

She looked at him and raised her brows slightly. “Oh. All right.” She headed back for her office.

Troy called after her, “Dinah, shut the door, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

He waited until she was back in her office and the door closed and then turned to Max. “I’m glad you’re all right. ’Preciate you checking on me and the family. And thanks for the computer lesson.”

“You’re welcome. That sounds like a dismissal.” Max pulled the side chair to its place along the wall and leaned back against the credenza.

Troy swiveled toward him. “I’ve just got some catching up to do. There is one thing, though.”

“What?”

“In the future, try not to be such a jerk to my secretary, okay?”

Max shook his head in incomprehension.

“You know what I’m talking about. That crack about women telling you

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more than you need to know. It was unnecessary and it hurt her feelings.”

Max’s jaw dropped. “You’re joking, right? Because if you’re not, then she’s way too sensitive. Anyway, it’s true. If I hadn’t stopped her she would have jaw-jacked on and on about things we didn’t ask about and don’t need to know.”

“She was trying to be helpful. That’s what women do, because that’s how God made them—to be helpers and companions to men. Mainly wives to husbands but you find it in the workplace, too.”

Max looked at him in silence. He had tendency to get quiet when Troy brought up God.

“They want to help us,” Troy said, “and they want to please us, and so they go overboard sometimes. You don’t have to get bowed up about it.”

Besides, Troy knew, but did not tell Max, that sometimes, seemingly useless tidbits provided by secretaries could turn out to be priceless information in the overall corporate scheme of things.

“You’re a sentimental slob on top of being a hillbilly,” Max said. “You always have been but it gets worse every year.”

Troy gave him a hint of a smile. “Sentimental has its advantages. You’ve had, what, two wives and three secretaries, and now you don’t have either one? All I’ve ever had is one wife and one secretary—and both of ‘em would rip your head off if I asked ‘em to.”

After lunch, Dinah told Troy again that she was leaving early, and that reminded him he had other things to discuss with her. He relaxed in the chair in front of her desk and said, “Before you go, I have some information for you. Please keep it on a need-to-know basis.”

Dinah took pen and notepad in hand. “Okay, shoot”

“Until further notice, on Sunday through Friday, I can be reached at this number after work.” He told her the number and she wrote it down.

“Is it all right to put it in my Rolodex? Nobody looks at it but me.”

“Sure. Oh, and you can tell Max. No, never mind. I’ll tell him.”

“All right.” She flipped through her Rolodex and said, “Hey, I thought that sounded familiar. It’s already in here. That’s the cabin at Lake Lucy.”

Ah, so that’s where Patty and the children are.

“Yep. If you need to get in touch with me after work, that’s where I’ll be. If I’m not there, a machine will answer.”

“You said Sunday through Friday?”

“Yeah. On Saturdays, you can try my home number.”

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Dinah scribbled something on a sticky note and put it in the Rolodex. Troy knew she was curious but she would not ask, not this soon. Because it was personal, not business, she would wait for him to tell her, or until curiosity—or concern—got the better of her

“One more thing, if you don’t mind,” Troy said.

“What?”

“On Monday, find out if the Falcon’s going anywhere near Aberdeen within the next week or two and, if so, is there an empty seat I can take.”

“Got it.” Dinah made more notes. “Your parents all right?”

“Yeah, they’re fine. I just need to talk to my pop about some things. If the plane’s not available soon, I’ll take a couple of days off and drive up.”

Dinah looked up from her notepad in the short silence that fell.

“I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop this morning,” she said, “but I thought I heard you tell Max something about Randy—you said he wasn’t hurt too bad.”

“He fell down the front steps. He’s all right, though.”

“Your steps, at home?”

“Yeah.”

Dinah looked mystified. “I can’t believe Max laughed about that.”

“You didn’t hear the whole thing. He thought I was joking.”

“Oh. Well, I’m really glad Randy’s okay.”

Troy smiled at her. “Thank you. Me, too.”

Shortly before three, Dinah powered down her computer and cleared her desk. She was looking forward to her weekend in Savannah with her daughter’s family but she was leaving work with an uneasy feeling.

She suspected Randy’s fall had something to do with the fatigue and preoccupation on Troy’s face. She knew, like most everyone else at the company, that he doted on Randy. He said the boy was okay, but Dinah knew her boss well, and she suspected there was more to the story than he was letting on.

At any rate, there was *something* going on and it troubled her.

Her uneasiness had begun yesterday when she found out Troy had driven home drunk after the visitors from Atlanta had departed. It was so unlike him to take unnecessary risks—even more out of character for him to behave so stupidly. He was not a stupid man.

The unease had grown this morning because of the fatigue and sleep-deprivation etching his face, and it had continued throughout the day

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because of the missed breakfast and his comments about going to Aberdeen.

But mostly, that business of staying at the lake made her curious and suspicious. Why would the Stevensons be staying at the vacation cabin, except on Saturdays? If their house or street or something was being worked on, some mundane thing like that, Troy would have told her.

Then it came to her quite suddenly, like a slap. Troy's family was not with him at the cabin. If Patty had been with him, she would have made him his usual king's breakfast. He was batching it out there for some reason. That being the case, where did Patty and the kids go?

She hoped there wasn't a problem with their marriage. Everyone who knew the Stevensons beyond acquaintance knew they had a storybook marriage. It would be heartbreaking if their relationship was in trouble.

But why else did a man move away from home?

The fourth day of Brooke's new job was drawing to a close and as she clocked out for the weekend, she decided she had lucked out here. The pay wasn't great, but it was more than adequate and a moron could have done the work.

Breezing through the storage area to push in the locks on file cabinets, she wondered what that last observation said about her mental abilities. But she laughed it off, preferring instead to look at the advantages she'd found here thus far.

Her acquaintanceship with Claudia Tully and David Foster was turning into friendship already. Of course Angie, her roommate—the one responsible for her unexpected relocation from Tampa to Verona—would always be her best friend, but it was good to have other friends, too. The more the merrier, she thought, and wrinkled her nose at the cliché.

And for a woman who had a tendency toward man-craziness, as she did, this place was a potential gold mine.

She had already learned of several available men, starting with Max Ingram—quite a catch for whoever landed him, a corporate executive and possibly CEO of the company someday. There were two ex-wives in the background, according to Karen, and that took a little of the sheen off him, but still, he was nothing to sneeze at.

There was also Clint Shearwater in Research and Development, not bad looking, really, with his green eyes and honey blond hair, but people said he was a techno-nerd of the highest order. Clancy Daniels, market-

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ing coordinator, was one of the company's top young hunks, to hear the Gossip Tablers tell it. Brooke had seen him a couple of times and he was, indeed, hot, no doubt about it.

But Clancy couldn't hold a candle to his boss. There wasn't a man in the company who could.

Brooke snatched up her purse and stepped into the corridor, wondering about Clancy's boss. She hadn't seen Troy Stevenson since Tuesday, her first day on the job, when she took the cartful of sales reports to his office. She'd seen other denizens of the lofty second floor—executives and their secretaries or assistants—often enough since then, but not Troy. And she *really* wanted another look at him.

She walked past the marketing department and glanced through the doorway, as she always did when she came this way, in case he might be there visiting with his staffers. But it was five o'clock on Friday and the place was already deserted.

Her heels tapped on the tile floor as she neared a door that opened onto a utility stairwell. Beyond it loomed an exterior door that opened onto the employee parking lot. No tile here, just painted concrete and railed stairs of steel diamond plate.

She heard footsteps clanging on the stairs and as she stepped to the doorway, movement in the stairwell caught her eye.

It's him! He's coming down the stairs!

Indeed, it was him and his foot hit the concrete at the moment she stepped through the door. An involuntary gasp escaped her and echoed through the stairwell.

He shot her a swift, curious glance as he turned toward the exit.

"Oh, my!" She brought a hand to her cheek. "I thought for a second I forgot to clock out! But I did. I remember now."

Idiot.

He glanced back to give her a polite but distant smile, pushed open the exterior door, stepped through and held it open for her.

"Thank you." It came out as an embarrassing squeak as she moved past him into the afternoon heat.

He nodded and said, "You're welcome," his voice soft, distant, almost like the look in his eyes. A thrill went through her at the sound of it.

She crunched across the gravel to her car, glancing to the side every few steps, and saw him get into a silvery beige Audi sedan parked a row back from the building under a young live oak. That was odd. As far as she knew, company executives parked in their designated asphalt lot on the

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other side of the building, near an entry that opened just a few steps from the elevator.

Perhaps he took the stairs every day to help maintain that magnificent body.

Her heart racing and hands trembling, she slid behind the wheel of her white Chevette and watched the Audi roll out of the parking lot and turn left. Curious. Shearwater employees had to turn right out of their parking lot and meander through the office park a short distance before reaching Fowler Avenue, the route into Verona. The road Troy took curved into woodlands and the Audi disappeared.

Wonder where he's going.

Her body's reactions began to normalize and she examined purposely something she had noticed without thinking when face to face with him.

He was every bit as handsome as she remembered from her short encounters with him Tuesday, but now he looked tired—no, almost pathologically fatigued—and there was something in his eyes...distance, yes, but something more, something *consuming*....

But it did nothing to diminish his astonishing good looks or dampen his masculine magnetism.

And seeing him did nothing to assuage her desire to see him again. She could hardly wait for another look.

Chapter Sixteen

Troy began his goodbyes with Melissa. He talked to her in the family room, she seated on the couch, he on the coffee table in front of her. He took her hands and briefly explained that he had to go away for a while.

“But I’ll only be eight miles away, at the cabin. You can call me there anytime you want to. I’ll come home every Saturday to cut the grass and do honey-do’s for your mama and play with you and Randy and make sure you’re all right. How’s that sound?”

“When will you come home all the time?”

“I don’t know yet. I hope it’s real soon.”

She asked a few more questions and he answered them the best he could. Tears came to her eyes. She slid off the couch, put her arms around his neck and squeezed. “I don’t want you to go, Daddy.”

“I know.” He hugged her gently, kissed her dear little face and felt something in his chest crumple painfully. “I love you, Punkin.”

He left Melissa with her mother in family room and went down the hallway. Randy was sitting up in bed with a wicker bed tray on legs pulled to his chest. A coloring book and crayons were on the tray and he was coloring a picture of a barn on a hilltop with mounds of hay in the foreground. His lips were compressed in concentration and the tip of his tongue peeped between them.

He might be bored with staying in bed, but he was clearly happy to be home in his own room. He looked up when his father stepped into view, smiled, and pointed to the coloring book.

“This barn is not red. It’s brown ’cause the paint came off,” he told Troy. His coloring skills weren’t as sophisticated as Melissa’s, but she had two years on him.

“I see that,” Troy said, sitting on the bed facing his son. “I need to tell you something.”

Southern Man

“What?” Randy looked up at him with suspicion. Troy could read his thoughts. Just when the trouble was supposed to be over, he heard it in his father’s voice again.

“I have to go away. I’m going to stay out at the lake for a while, by myself.”

“Why?”

“To take care of my problem.”

Randy’s brows pulled together. “How long?”

“I don’t know. Until the problem is fixed.”

“Daddy, I forgave you! Let’s just forget about it now! Ain’t that what they say you’re supposed to do, forgive and forget?”

“Son....”

“Don’t you love us anymore?”

“More than anything.”

“Then why are you goin’ away from us?”

Troy stroked Randy’s cheek just below his black eye. “I have to make sure nothing like this ever happens again.”

“I don’t care! You didn’t mean to! I don’t want you to leave!”

Troy blinked hard to clear the stinging in his eyes. What he was about to ask of his son was a terrible demand to put on a child.

“I know you don’t understand why I have to go. So I’m going to ask you to just...trust me...on this. Accept it that I’ve made the right decision and things will be better when I come back. Will you do that? Will you trust me?”

Randy didn’t answer for a moment. Troy could plainly see him wrestling with turmoil. The conflict between what he so badly wanted—his father, at home—and what was being asked of him was tearing him apart inside. But his father needed him to do something—to trust, to accept—and he had to do it. He could do nothing less, nothing else.

Tears pooled in his eyes but he didn’t sob. “Okay.”

Watching his son’s dilemma and reaction, Troy had to clamp tight control on his emotions to keep his own tears at bay.

“You be good while I’m gone. Mind your mother, be sweet to your sister, do your school work and your chores, say your prayers. No more muting the phone ringers, either, because I might be the one trying to call.”

Randy bobbed his head, wiped his eyes and took a deep shuddering breath.

“That’s right. Dry up those tears. Hold them in and be strong.” Troy moved the tray aside and took Randy in his arms. “Be my big, strong boy.”

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There was no explaining needed with Patty. It had all been said already. There was only the painful wrenching of separation. In the foyer, by the front door, he took her in his arms and held her tightly. For a moment his resolve left him and he thought he wouldn't be able to leave.

But then he closed his eyes, and Randy's still, white face against concrete swam before him, and he heard again the litany of his son's injuries that only barely hurt.

He extracted himself from the embrace and said thickly, "I have to go."

On Saturday, a day after Randy came home from the hospital, Dale Jordan and his wife took John Mark and Shelby to visit him.

Mindful of Troy's desire that Patty have someone to confide in, the pastor took the opportunity to chat with her in case she needed to talk. She did talk about Troy, although nothing she said fit the criteria of confidence, and it certainly wasn't disloyal. What Dale found most interesting was that the conversation involved Carol more than himself.

Sometimes women just needed the understanding of other women.

While the adults talked in the kitchen, Tommy and Melissa watched Saturday morning cartoons in the family room, and in a bedroom at the front of the house, Randy told his visitors, "I gotta stay in bed one more day."

"Why?" John Mark asked. "Are you sick? I thought you fell and got hurt."

"Yeah. I had a concussion."

"What's that?" Shelby said.

"It's where you hit your head and get knocked out. Look, these are Transmuters," Randy said, showing his friends the toys scattered on the covers. "This one's a Geo-bot. My daddy brought me these in the hospital." A pensive look accompanied his sigh. "Come here, I'll show you how they do."

He crawled to the middle of the bed and sat crosslegged, facing the side where his playmates stood. They climbed onto the bed and sat with him, putting their heads together while he showed them how a Transmuter went from robot to automobile and back again—tow-headed Shelby on the right, John Mark of the long brown tresses on the left, Randy with his black bangs in the middle.

While they played, Shelby got an up-close look at Randy's bruise. With the frankness of childhood, he asked, "What happened to your eye?"

Southern Man

For a moment, Randy was silent. “My daddy hit me before I fell. But he didn’t mean to.”

“When my daddy hits me, he means to,” Shelby confided. “But he hat’n ever give me a shiner.”

“He don’t drink alcohol, does he?”

Shelby shook his head.

“My daddy’s gonna quit drinking, though,” Randy said. “When I came home yesterday, he moved away so he can quit. Then he’ll come home.”

“Yikes,” John Mark exclaimed softly. Despite Dale’s long work hours, he could not imagine his home without his father’s presence. Neither could Shelby.

“I wish he would come home now.” Randy said wistfully. “I want my daddy....”

Randy’s playmates heard the catch in his voice and looked at his face. It had crumpled into a frown as tears rolled from his eyes and he wailed softly, “I want my daddy!”

Shelby wasn’t certain what to do. Randy was hurting as surely as if he had fallen on the playground and badly skinned his knees and elbows, and his crying was so sad. John Mark, big-eyed and solemn, was feeling the same inadequacy.

As far back as Shelby could remember, one thing always happened when he cried—one of his parents, almost always his mother, would hold him and comfort him until his crying stopped. Maybe if he put his hand on Randy’s shoulder and patted him that might comfort him some.

That’s what Shelby did, and a second or two later, John Mark did the same thing.

“I bet your daddy’ll be home real soon,” said John Mark, the emerging optimist. “Then everything’ll be all better. You’ll see.”

In a few minutes, Randy’s crying subsided, and he wiped his eyes and nose on his pajama sleeves. Listlessly at first, he went back to playing with the Transmuter in his lap. His enthusiasm for his new toys gradually returned. By the time Dale appeared in the doorway to get the visiting boys, the three were laughing and playing happily together.

That experience of sorrow and sympathy, encouragement and heartening, was the first step in changing the boys’ relationship from that of early childhood playmates to lifelong best friends.

Chapter Seventeen

“Stevenson,” Troy said into the condenser microphone of the new answering machine. “I can’t take a call right now, but leave your number and a message and I’ll call you back.” He lifted his finger off the record button, heard a beep and pressed another button to listen to the recording. It would do.

Now he could mark another chore off his list

It was his first Saturday at the lake cottage. Next weekend he would begin his Saturdays at home but today he had to unpack, settle in, make the place liveable, plus buy food, batteries for the TV remote control, a package of light bulbs, and some music tapes—the more he looked and thought, the longer his to-do list grew.

The cabin could sleep up to eight, two in each of the tiny bedrooms, and two on each of the sleeper sofas in the main living area, with their complement of mustard-colored throw pillows. At full capacity, it wasn’t as crowded as it might have been since so much leisure time at the cabin was spent outdoors. He and his family and friends had found their holidays here immensely enjoyable.

Now, though, it was the scene of Troy’s self-imposed exile and as neat as the little cabin was, his time here looked bleak. It was so quiet. No goose-pimpled children in sippy wet swimsuits and damp towels jumping and squealing and laughing. No sweet wife in the kitchenette calling them to supper. Four places to sleep and all of them aching lonely....

Even television sucked. Troy had installed an enormous antenna on a tall, bracketed and guy-wired tower at the time of renovations, but reception was mediocre, at best. He’d considered having a satellite dish system put on the property since cable didn’t reach this far but the buggers had cost ten thousand dollars two years ago. He wasn’t hopeful that the prices had come down much since then.

Southern Man

Well. The point wasn't watching television, anyway. The point was dealing with his problem.

"This ain't the way to Granny and Pappaw's," Randy said. He was buckled into the front seat beside Troy, looking out the window, perplexed.

It was just the two of them on this trip. They were no longer on the interstate. This was a two-lane state highway and Randy knew he was in unfamiliar territory.

Troy pointed to a sign coming up. "Look."

Randy gasped. "The Giant's Staircase! Are we goin' there?"

"We sure are." Troy grinned at his son's excitement.

On every trip to Tennessee since he could look out the window, Randy had seen the signs advertising the enormous natural rock formation named the Giant's Staircase, huge terraces of solid rock stretching away from a scenic overlook, and he always asked to see it. He never got to because it was at least fifty miles out of the way. But Troy had decided, on this trip, they would finally go there.

"It was made by glaciers in the ice age," Randy said confidently. "It was on TV."

"Maybe not. I don't think the glaciers got any further south than Pennsylvania."

Randy gave Troy an inquisitive look. "Then how?"

"I don't know. Maybe there'll be a placard that tells."

Such attractions abounded in the Southern mountains. Some of them, like Rock City and Ruby Falls, had been elaborate tourist destinations for generations. Some were mere scenic views, like the Giant's Staircase. There were no rides or food and souvenir vendors, and Troy hoped his son would not be disappointed about that.

They arrived and Troy braked the Audi to a halt in the small parking area. Randy unfastened his safety belt and bounced in the seat. No other cars or people were present. They got out and walked toward a large, wooden platform cantilevered over a deep valley.

A glaring haze made the sky white and the day preternaturally bright. Troy had not noticed it when he was driving. He squinted and felt for his sunglasses in his breast pocket, but he must have left them in the car.

"Look, there's a display with text," he said. "Maybe it will tell how the stairs were formed."

They stepped onto the platform and Randy went to the wooden hand

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rail that surrounded the edge. Off to the left, the enormous tiers of rock jutted out from the woods that sloped steeply from the highway to the valley floor far below.

“See it?” Randy cried, pointing, but Troy was looking at the other side of the platform. Two men had suddenly appeared there and he couldn’t pull his eyes from them.

One of them was dressed in mechanics coveralls, the other in the apparel of an old-time coal miner. They were as tall as he, but two-dimensional and colorless, like black and white photographs. Even so, they looked at him with living eyes. Dark eyes. Stevenson eyes.

“Pop?” Troy said softly. “Grandpa?” He stared at them, mesmerized and alarmed. As they looked at him, he felt changed in an instant. Dizzy, shaking...drunk.

“Look, Daddy!” Randy insisted. “The Giant’s Staircase is over here!” He grabbed Troy’s shirttail and tugged. “Don’t you see it?”

Troy turned to look at Randy. “Let go of me.” His voice was rasping, his words slurred.

“But don’t you want to—” Randy was silenced by the look on his father’s face.

“Let go, I said.” Troy raised his hand in front of him, past his shoulder, and then his arm made a swift and powerful arc through the air. The back of his hand slammed into Randy’s face, lifting him off his feet and knocking him against the railing. The wood splintered with the impact and Randy fell backward off the platform, a strangled cry in his throat.

Troy froze as terror filled him, body and mind, and overflowed into his soul.

He stepped to the side of the platform and looked down, down to where his son’s body lay broken on the rocks at the bottom of the Giant’s Staircase.

His anguished scream rent the air and echoed unendingly down the valley. “*Randeeeeeeeeeeee!*”

A muffled cry from his own throat jolted Troy from sleep. He gasped for breath. His heart pounded. Cold sweat coated his skin.

It was a dream. Though the horror of it held him in a merciless grip after waking, it was still just a dream.

He closed his eyes and remembered it, purposely, beginning to end, watched in in his mind like a movie. Again and again.

Southern Man

With each replay, the terror lost potency and he gradually calmed.

It was just a dream.

He lay still and opened his eyes, straining to see where he was. Slowly, faint gray light appeared—the gray of night coming through windows—but it was the wrong size and in the wrong place. He reached out to his side but Patty was not there.

More of the grayness resolved and he saw where he was, on a sleeper sofa in the cabin at Lake Lucy. He closed his eyes and a frown came to his face when he remembered that he was alone here, and why.

The dream was impossible. His grandfather was dead—had died before Troy was born. His father was retired now, no longer the strong, young mechanic of Troy's boyhood. There was no such rock formation as the Giant's Staircase in the Appalachians. Randy was at home in south Georgia, asleep in his room, just eight miles away.

As his spirit calmed, Troy recalled Randy in the hospital, his bruised face crumpled with distress, looking at his father and entreating him, *I forgive you! Please don't be sad!*

Troy was grateful for his son's forgiveness, and deeply thankful that Randy had a forgiving heart because resentment was a destructive force, a terrible companion that he would not wish upon his son.

But the dream demonstrated that forgiveness for himself was an altogether different matter.

The last of the dream-horror receded and even thoughts of his inability to forgive himself were swept away by another realization.

Ever since the dream had wakened him, he had wanted a drink. No, needed it. Craved it.

That had never happened before and it was more terrifying than the nightmare.

It was six-thirty Monday morning and under normal circumstances at home, Troy and Patty would be finishing breakfast, he to leave for work, she to begin cooking again for the children.

But he wasn't at home and he wasn't dressed for work. He hadn't even started getting ready. He was still in bed, propped against the back of the sofa, going over notes he had jotted on a legal pad and adding more.

After a few minutes, he reached for the telephone, brought it to his lap, and dialed.

Patty answered it on the second ring. "Hello."

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“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

“I’m glad to know you can hear the phone ring. Children still asleep?”

“No, they’ve been up about ten minutes. They’re in the family room watching cartoons.”

“How are they?”

“They’re fine.”

“Randy’s okay?”

“Yes. He’s looking forward to seeing his little friends at school. They came over Saturday, but he was in a sick bed, they couldn’t really play. They were glad to see him at church yesterday but they couldn’t play there, either. I mean, not like they can at recess.”

“Anybody say anything about his face?”

“Not to me.”

There was a short silence.

“Okay. Listen. Don’t let anyone use the sink in the guest bathroom. I think there’s a leak in the drain. I’ll check it Saturday.”

“All right.”

He marked through a note on the legal pad. Another short silence.

“I went to church yesterday,” he told her.

“Oh, that’s great!” He could hear pleasure in her voice. She never nagged him about going to church, but she didn’t soft-pedal her approval and gladness when he did.

“I thought that would please you. Small Disciples of Christ church out here near the lake. Nice folks.”

Troy had found out what he needed to know, that Randy was okay, and he basked in momentary relief and gratitude.

“Next Monday is Memorial Day,” he said. “I want you and the children to spend the day with me out here. We can barbecue, play games. They’re going to have a petting zoo and other stuff for kids at the recreation area, and I thought we could row across the lake for that. I’ve borrowed the Utleys’ boat.”

“That sounds wonderful. They’ll love that.”

“Yeah. I’m looking forward to it. Well, if anything comes up for me that can’t wait till Saturday, call me, here or at the office, anytime. Anytime, Patty.”

“Okay. Troy?”

“What, sweetheart?”

“I miss you.”

Southern Man

“I miss you, too. I’ll talk to you later.”

He hung up and said a brief prayer of thanks that Randy was all right and his sleep undisturbed. He was thankful, too, that his job awaited him, his own place of normalization where he could rest from what confronted him and rejuvenate to face it.

“Shut the door,” Troy said when he looked up from his desk to see Max in Dinah’s office.

Max closed the door behind him, crossed the room and tossed a small envelope on Troy’s blotter before taking his customary seat in the wing-back chair. “What’s up?”

Troy picked up the envelope. Inside were photos from last week’s land-viewing expedition. He riffled through them wordlessly, stuck them back in the envelope and leaned across the desk to hand them to Max.

“I’ve got a meeting with Norm at nine-thirty,” Troy said. “I don’t have a lot of time so just listen and try not to ask too many questions. Last week, you thought I was joking but I really did hit Randy and knock him down the steps. He was unconscious and Patty took him to the emergency room.”

Max was stunned speechless.

“I didn’t mean to. I was drunk. It was Wednesday, after we went to the Scoreboard. I can’t even remember it. My memory isn’t reliable until the next morning, when I went to see him in the hospital.”

“My Lord,” Max whispered. “Is he all right?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. It’s amazing, but he was...only barely...hurt. He was there mostly for observation.”

Max took a deep breath and made a puffing sound when he blew it out. “I’m glad he’s all right.”

“Yeah. I took some clothes and things out to the cabin last Thursday and I’m staying there for a while. To deal with my drinking and whatever’s behind it. Somehow or other, over the years, it has become a problem.”

Max’s brows lowered as he studied his friend. “Is everything all right between you and Patty?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s fine. This is not a problem between us—it’s my problem to deal with, and I don’t think I will if I’m living in the bosom of my family. They...approve...of me too much. I’ll let that lull me and I’ll let it slide, and sooner or later I’ll binge again. With who knows what consequences.”

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“What about you and Randy?”

“We’re fine.” Troy swallowed hard, knowing his emotions were just seconds away from erupting on his face.

“I’m glad to hear that. Troy, I’m so sorry about this. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Yeah. Understand that I can never take another drink, ever, so when you ask me to, don’t be surprised when I say no.”

Max went back to his office, a cool and comfortable room in monochrome grays, as elegant in its sparseness as Troy’s was in its richness, but not as personalized. Except for the photos of his kids, Brian and Kathy, there was little of a personal nature mingled with the company decorator’s color scheme and design style.

Nor did he have big windows on two sides like Troy. But he did have a bank of windows behind him, almost as wide as the wall, that looked across a small slice of the office park and a large field lying fallow where cotton once grew. In the distance, sparse traffic traveled old Highway 41, beyond which rose the rim of dark pine forest.

Max had but to swivel to see this panorama, and it was fascinating to watch it as the seasons went by—indeed, to watch it alter simply with a change in the weather.

He swiveled now and looked, but his eyes were unseeing.

This was the closest Max had ever seen Troy come to a crisis and it wasn’t even that bad. From what he said, Randy wasn’t hurt, to speak of.

How did some people manage to go through life so lucky? Despite his dark, luxuriant mane, Troy was one of fate’s fair-haired boys. Raised in humble circumstances, but loved and uplifted by both his parents, he had no idea what it was like to be used by warring ex-spouses as a weapon against each other. Had no idea what it was like to drive one loving wife away, and find the next one cheating. No idea what it was like watching his children grow up at intervals.

Yet, for Troy, drinking to drunkenness and striking his son was a personal crisis of monumental and devastating significance. Max saw it in his friend’s subdued demeanor and dark frightened eyes.

He couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt. Troy probably would not have started drinking but for Max’s efforts to corrupt him, going back to their second year of college....

Chapter Eighteen

Tuscaloosa, Alabama
September 1969

Max sunk his incisors into the perfect drumstick. Flavor burst onto his taste buds; he wallowed the smooth chicken flesh and the crisp coating in his mouth, savoring the goodness.

He was at the Chicken Box, a favorite hangout for students because of its proximity to the campus of the University of Alabama and its delectable menu.

It was early afternoon and the lunch crowd had begun to dissipate although the place was rarely empty except when it was closed.

Max was a month into his second year of college. He had few friends, but between his fraternity brothers and classmates he had plenty of social acquaintances. He was not a loner, but it wasn't rare for him to be alone.

As he finished his meal, he noticed a bunch of burly jocks with necks like tree stumps—football players, kings of the campus at this university—approach the door in the late September glare. They all came inside except one who appeared to be heading back to campus.

“Where'd Stevenson go?” said one of them as they sauntered to the counter.

“Back to the dorm to eat. He's broke.”

“He ain't broke,” said another. “He just don't ever have any money.”

“Nobody bought his tickets, huh?”

“Guess not.”

“You'd think after Saturday people'd want 'em just 'cause they're his.”

A couple of the jocks turned to look out the plate glass window. “Well, it ain't like he's starving.”

The fellow strolling without haste down the sidewalk certainly didn't

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look like he was starving. Tall and well-formed he was probably a touch lanky, naturally, but beefed up now to play football by workouts in the weight room.

Max knew who he was. After the spectacular eighty-seven yard touchdown run against Florida last Saturday, everybody on campus and in Tuscaloosa, and most people in the state of Alabama and a goodly number throughout Southeast—particularly in Gainesville, Florida—knew who Troy Stevenson was. Including the three chicks crossing paths with him now.

Max watched the girls stop in front of him to talk, saw even at this distance their intense interest in him, saw the way they fastened their eyes on his face. He slowed and talked to them in passing and they laughed with delight, looking from him to each other, ducking their heads and scrunching their shoulders, before resuming their walk to the shopping center across the street.

Tossing his lunch trash in a nearby bin, Max got to his feet. He stepped outside into the heat and glare, and strode rapidly after the halfback.

“Hey, jock!” he yelled. His quarry seemed to not hear, and Max began to trot, quickly closing the distance between them. “Hey, number twenty!”

At the sound of his jersey number, the jock turned and watched Max approach.

“Max Ingram.”

The jock nodded once. “Troy Stevenson.”

“I heard your team brothers back at the chicken place say you have game tickets to sell.”

“Yeah, you know anybody that wants ’em?”

“Me. I do. How many you got?”

“Four for each home game. That’s all they give us.”

Max looked at Troy with narrowed eyes. There was something about this guy, something unusual in a big-ego’d athlete.

“Okay. Four’s enough.”

“And no price break. I’m asking what’s printed on them.”

“That’s fine. They’re still a bargain, after that run Saturday. That was ...awesome.”

“Preciate it.” A smile tugged at the corners of Stevenson’s mouth that looked like the result of genuine pleasure, and Max realized what was unusual about him. Something kept his jock’s ego in check, a genuine humbleness that prevented his taking greater pleasure in the compliment than he should. A jock who didn’t let praise swell his head was indeed rare on this campus.

Southern Man

“You want ’em now?” Troy said.

“Yeah, I got the money now.”

“They’re in my room at the dorm.”

Troy started walking toward campus again and Max said, “Hold it, hold it. Bryant Hall, the jock dorm? Clear across the campus?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re walkin’ over there.”

“Yeah.”

“Well how about let’s ride?” Max aimed at thumb over his shoulder. “My car’s right back there in the parking lot.”

“Ah-ight.”

Twice on the way to the car, their progress was hindered by gaggles of co-eds who seemed to materialize out of nowhere—twitchy, mod-looking girls with short skirts and long hair and iridescent lips, their black-fringed eyes fastened on the handsome halfback.

“Hi, Troy,” and “Great game Saturday!” and “That touchdown was fantastic!” they said, and that smile of pleasure tempered by humbleness played with his lips again as he gave them short, courteous replies.

Eventually the two guys worked their way through the chattering co-eds and reached a bright yellow Camaro. Max slid behind the wheel and drove them out of the parking lot.

“Dang! Guess it’s true what they say about chicks and jocks.”

Troy shrugged. “Some chicks and some jocks, prob’ly.”

“Where you from, Stevenson? Seems like I remember Keith Jackson saying something about Tennessee.”

“Right. Aberdeen. Northeast corner, up in the mountains.”

“Ah,” Max nodded. “That explains the hillbilly accent.”

“Yeah.” Troy’s electrifying smile made him look like anything but a hillbilly. He was a triple-A chick magnet, and anyone with him when the gals happened to come around would surely enjoy some collateral benefit.

“This is a really nice car,” Troy said on the drive across campus.

“It’s a bribe.” Max lit a cigarette and blew smoke out the window. “My mama got it for me so I would side with her...”

Troy looked at him curiously.

“...but mostly so I’d make good grades,” Max finished.

“Are you?”

“Yeah. In everything except my business courses.” Max grinned “And that’s my major.”

“Mine, too. Business is easy. Economics, organization, finance, mar-

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keting—no problem. It's literature and ph'losophy, stuff like that, I have a harder time with."

"Piece-uh cake," Max said, "cause it don't mean nothing. If you ever need help learning to bluff your way through it, just give me a call."

Troy did call him a few nights later, and they began to study together, and from that beginning, a friendship grew.

"Football season's been over for weeks," Max said, "and I still haven't seen you go out on a date. You like girls, don't you?"

"I love girls," Troy replied. "That's why I don't go out. I don't need any distractions. I'm on a scholarship and I gotta keep my grades up."

They were in a study room in Max's fraternity house, their books and papers spread across an old wooden table in a corner. It was a chilly, damp February day and the view out the tall windows, with sunset approaching through the overcast, was gloomy.

Max looked at his friend, perplexed. "You know you don't have find a girlfriend and get serious to have a good time. There are lots of girls that are just looking for fun with no strings attached."

Troy met his eyes with a mild you-know-better look but said nothing.

Now that football season was over and they were spending more time together, it was coming to both of them how unlikely their friendship was—the poor boy and the poor little rich boy—and yet they both valued it more as time passed.

It had started out quite superficially. For Max, the major attraction was the very pleasant fallout of hanging around with a chick magnet; he had met dozens of girls from among those throwing themselves at the half-back—girls whose interest in Troy seemed to not faze him.

For Troy, the initial attraction of the friendship was wheeled transportation.

But it had become more than that, for both of them, when football season was over.

What stood out about Max to the people who knew him was his generosity of spirit. He was always lending money, driving people around, buying his friends and acquaintances everything from textbooks and food to booze and cigarettes.

What Troy saw in him was tenderness and caring trapped like lightning bugs in a Mason jar. There was a shell around his heart that made him cocky, prickly, a wisenheimer sometimes, but Troy sensed the soft heart

Southern Man

within the shell. It came to him that Max's generosity was the only way he had of expressing the love in his heart.

Although he wouldn't have admitted it even if he recognized it himself, Max was drawn to Troy's goodness. He wanted to be around it, to bask in it, to have some of it rub off on him. But at the same time, Troy's innocence and honor shamed and challenged him—and that annoyed him increasingly as time passed.

On some level he was not fully aware of, Max wanted to corrupt Troy.

He had discovered that two of his favorite activities, getting drunk and getting laid—although not engaged in very often—were forbidden in Troy's mentality. He wouldn't consider doing either one, wouldn't even talk about doing them, and refused to listen to Max when he talked about them.

Only once had Troy offered an explanation for his avoidance and aversion.

"My mama and daddy taught me that sex is for marriage. That's what the Bible says. Some day, I'm going to marry a girl who waited for me. It's only right that I wait for her."

Max, who had lost his virginity at fourteen, looked at him, stunned. "You mean you've never screwed a girl?"

"Never have." Troy simpered and tapped his left hand prissily. "I don't plan on givin' it away until I get that ring on my finger." And he had smiled his trademark smile—the one that made his eyes sparkle and melted female hearts.

Troy's religious faith was another factor that made their friendship seem so unlikely. Max had flirted with atheism as a freshman away from home for the first time, and rejected it. But the remote and unknowable supreme intelligence he believed in differed drastically from Troy's Biblical God.

As for drinking, one of the most prevalent pastimes on campus, even among athletes, Troy steadfastly refused to participate. He dismissed all of Max's arguments, including one that Max thought would persuade him for certain:

"Your exhalted coach drinks."

"No reason for me to," Troy rejoined.

He had explained it to Max only once, but his words were more enigma than explanation. Not, "My daddy would kill me if I drank," but "It would kill my daddy if I drank."

No beaming smile had accompanied this explanation, just a momen-

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tary haunted look in those dark, Stevenson eyes.

They reached their junior year with Max still serving as Troy's ticket broker and after more than a year of friendship, Troy's goody-goodness was starting to get on his nerves.

One Thursday before a home game, he scribbled a note for Troy between classes and said, "At lunch time, drop off the tickets here. I've got to be somewhere." He tossed his keys to his friend. "Take my car."

Troy looked at the scribbling on the note—a room number and the address of the Slumber Suites Motel on the bypass. Max must have sold the tickets to some alumni coming from out of town for the game.

At lunch, he drove to the motel and knocked on the door to room 125.

A female voice called faintly, "Come in." Troy opened the door and pushed it back a little. The bright midday sun threw the interior into darkness.

"Hello." He took a hesitant step to the door.

"Come on in," said the voice again. "I've got your money."

He still didn't see anyone but he took a couple of steps inside.

The door slammed behind him and he whirled around to see a girl he didn't know stepping between him and the door. Her voluptuous body was clad in a skimpy red teddy and beneath golden hair that tumbled around her face, her eyes gleamed with sexual hunger. He stared at her, chagrined.

"Hello, Troy. I can't tell you how long I've wanted this." She flattened her hands against his chest and pushed him.

It was completely unexpected. Caught off balance, he stumbled backwards and found himself seated on the edge of the queen-sized bed. He scrambled to gain his feet, but she was much too quick and she was on him, pushing him supine against the bedspread, covering his mouth with hers and pressing her body against him.

He turned his head to the side with a grimace and squeezed the word "Stop!" between his teeth. She ignored that and began to writhe against him. His discomfort grew and turned to anger at the edges as he wondered how best to stop this. The way she was clamped onto him, there was no pushing her away without possibly hurting her.

He rolled atop her. Passion and triumph glowed in her eyes and she lifted her face to kiss him. He tilted his head back, looked down at her from beneath half-closed eyelids. He felt the stirrings of sexual response in his body, purely physical and against his will. It ignited inside him a flame not of passion but of rage and he brought to the situation all the

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self-control he could command.

“Kiss me!” she insisted.

He shook his head, an indication of incredulousness as much as a denial. “I want to leave. Turn me loose.”

She frowned. “What? Leave?” Her hold on him did loosen though it seemed to be the result of her surprise rather than compliance with his demand.

He levered himself off the bed. As he looked down at her, she reached between her legs and pulled apart the snaps that fastened the crotch of the teddy. She raised herself on her elbows and undulated her body to further reveal what she had just exposed.

“If you know what’s good for you,” she said, her voice husky with lust and fury, “you’ll get back on this bed and do me. If you don’t, I’ll tell everybody you tried and couldn’t. I’ll tell ’em you’re a hillbilly queer.”

Troy shrugged. “I don’t care what you say.”

His anger turned to a strange sort of sadness and he left the room without another word.

“Stevenson,” said Troy’s roommate, arriving at their room around supertime. “Ingram’s calling again.”

“I’m busy,” Troy said. “I’m studyin’.”

His roommate sighed. “I don’t know what’s going on, but y’all need to take care of it. He ties up one of the pay phones every night.”

Troy’s mountaineer stubbornness surfaced like a whale rising from the sea. He gave his roommate a pointed look and said, “I’m *busy*. I’m *studyin’*.”

That was the way it had been for a week. Hardly a night went by that somebody didn’t knock on Troy’s door and say, “Ingram’s callin’.”

He wanted to talk, did he? Well, that was just too bad. He had known for a long time about Troy’s beliefs and convictions, and if he thought so little of them—so little of Troy himself—that he could pull something like that girl in the motel...well, he could tie up the freaking pay phone forever.

Two weeks after the incident, there was early evening knock on the door and Troy opened it with minor irritation. But there was no jock there to tell him about yet another incoming phone call. Max himself stood in the corridor with fists shoved into the pockets of his hoodie and a hint of trepidation showing through his blank expression.

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After avoiding him all this time, Troy was not prepared for what the sight of his friend did to him—not prepared for the flare up of hot anger nor the burdensome affection and the pain it caused.

Max looked at him somberly.

“I figured out pretty quick my stunt pissed you off but I sure didn’t know you’d hold a grudge this long. I came to apologize for making you mad....” He looked intently at Troy’s face, and then averted his eyes. “But I did worse than make you mad, didn’t I?”

Troy’s brows drew together, his lips clamped, as he realized his anger was giving way to something else. He groped for indignation, not wanting it to get away.

“Well,” Max murmured in the face of his former friend’s silence. “I’ll go. I just want you to know I don’t blame you for avoiding me. Evil companions corrupt. Ain’t that what the Bible says?”

The last remnants of Troy’s displeasure evaded his grasp and vaporized, pulling his hurt away from him, too. He swallowed and found his voice.

“You’re not evil. You’re just loony. And you didn’t corrupt me.” A hint of mirth came to his eyes. “I’m still as pure as a Tennessee snowfall.”

Max breathed in deeply and blew it out. “Yeah, I heard. And you’re still as stubborn as a Tennessee mule.” They looked at each other for a moment.

“You hungry?” Max said. “Long time till curfew. Plenty of time to go get a burger.”

“Ah-ight.”

“Sure you want a burger? Or would you rather have chicken?”

“I’d ruther have pizza.”

Max nodded. “See? You just gotta be contrary, don’t you, hillbilly?” His impatience was theatrical, but his smile was from the heart. “Pizza it is. Let’s go.”

A few months after the ticket fiasco, Max’s father met Troy and talked to him about coming to work for Commander Industries after graduation, sweetening the offer with a generous salary and flexible hours to accommodate graduate school. Eventually, Troy took him up on the offer.

Those days of early adulthood in Atlanta had been hectic but satisfying. Max and Troy were both graduate students, both executives in the making, both young husbands and fathers.

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For Troy, with his pretty girl-bride at his side, it was step one into the family-man life he had wanted since boyhood.

For Max, it was—or seemed like—the opportunity, at last, to have a real relationship with his father.

But the satisfaction began to wear off early. The hoped-for relationship with Hamilton Ingram never materialized. Three years into his marriage, Max's wife divorced him and took their young son out of his life. He dropped out of graduate school.

It was Troy's quiet friendship and support that got him through these early adult setbacks. Considering the high premium Max put on their relationship, his genuine esteem of Troy, and his gratitude for Troy's help and support, he would never again have attempted to corrupt his friend.

Not intentionally, anyway.

It just happened.

It began a few days after Randy was born.

"Let's go celebrate, Troyster," Max invited, his pleasure over the birth only a fraction of the level of Troy's but genuine. They had gone to Henri's in the Regency Hyatt House and he had talked Troy into having a real drink. It was just a sip of scotch but it was a beginning.

And that beginning had ended with a drunken Troy's hand sending seven-year-old Randy careening down the steps of their home.



*Verona, Georgia
Spring 1983*

In his office, his back to his desk, Max watched the fascinating pattern the wind made on the crop of wild grasses that had taken over the fallow cotton field, his expression pensive.

He felt bad about what had happened—who wouldn't?—but why was he feeling responsible?

Is it my fault Troy can't hold his liquor?

Chapter Nineteen

“Karen, what’s this?”

By now it was a habit for Brooke to glance at the trays on the passthrough shelf when she returned from lunch and breaks. She picked up a packet of photos and held it up for Karen to see.

“Max dropped those off right after you went to lunch. Just mount them and caption them.”

“Huh?”

“They’re for the current photo album.”

Karen saw Brooke’s puzzled look and said, “Oh, I guess David hasn’t told you yet. I’ll show you.”

They entered the back room and Karen led her co-worker to a tall metal cabinet along a side wall. Brooke had seen it often enough since her first day on the job a week ago, but hadn’t been interested enough to ask about it or look inside.

Karen opened both doors wide. “Top shelves, company scrap books. Middle shelves, photo albums, next shelf, newsletters. The bottom shelf is for blank pages and supplies.” She stooped and retrieved a couple of flat boxes. “What size are those pictures?”

Brooke pulled the photos out of the envelope. Her eyes widened and a piercing thrill shot through her stomach as she stared at the mesmerizing face of Troy Stevenson.

“Uh.... um....”

“Here.” Karen took the photos from her and eyeballed the size. “Use these.” She stood and handed the photos and a box of peel and stick photo pages to Brooke. “Max wrote the captions he wants on a scrap of paper and stuck it in the envelope.”

“Ah...all right.”

“And they’ll go in this album.” Karen took a ring binder-style photo album off a shelf.

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“Okay...”

The receptionist went back up front and Brooke nearly floated to her cubicle. She dropped into her chair and, with trembling hands, took the photos from the envelope to stare at Troy’s image. After several moments, she laid the photograph aside looked through the others.

There were six or seven men dressed in suits and ties in the pictures. Some were made outdoors in a field somewhere, others indoors in what looked like a restaurant or bar and grill.

She flipped through the pictures looking for more images of Troy. He was in several of them, but that first one, a close up, was the most captivating. She reached for the box of mounting pages but the photo album beneath it caught her attention. She moved everything aside, opened it and slowly turned the pages.

Oh, my.

Every few pages, there he was...Troy presenting a salesman with an award and bonus check; Troy speaking at a podium at somebody’s retirement; Troy and high school kids posing out front for a career day photo op....

She heard voices up front and grimaced. *Not an order for files, please!*

The door opened and Karen said, “Returns.” Brooke heard her walk to the big table where returns were left to be checked in, heard the plop of papers on the tabletop.

“Thanks!” she called.

“I’m going to lunch now,” Karen said.

“Okay. Enjoy.”

The room grew quiet and Brooke went back through the loose photos and the album, savoring the pictures. Several minutes passed before it occurred to her—there were four or five big scrapbooks in the cabinet, at least a dozen photo albums, and several notebooks binding company newsletters.

There was bound to be lots more photos of Troy in that cabinet. The realization made her stomach swoop with anticipation.

The glare of midafternoon sunlight bathed the parking lot at Shearwater-Ingram Company and glinted off bumpers and windshields as Jessica Grant shut off the engine of her yellow Jetta. She gazed through the brightness and a sullen look came to her face. The massive brick edifice rising before her was perfectly designed for the masculine enterprise

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it held—a monument to patriarchy if there ever was one.

She snatched up her briefcase and stepped smartly across the asphalt, the concrete walkway, and through the doors to the cool interior. The tapping of her sensible, low-heeled pumps on the polished tile floor created a slight echo as she crossed the reception area.

It was Tuesday. Tonight the Women's Assistance Group would hold its monthly meeting for officers and new members at the Howe Street Cafe. Jessica wondered whether she would find any recruits for the cause among the smug women in this place.

As the head of the EFO, Arlene was an obvious candidate. Dugan Haynes was emphatically not WAG material.

After her first lunch here last week Jessica had visited HR, where Arlene would occupy a cubicle adjacent to Dugan's. That very moment, she had determined that these meetings would not take place there, where Dugan could hear every word.

Besides, there was more room in the cafeteria. She bypassed HR and headed down the back hall. The caterers had removed the food and wiped the tables and the place was vacant and silent. Light from the overhead fluorescents and big windows gleamed off the formica and chrome tables and reflected off the floor.

She was a little early. The EFO director would be tied up with a departmental staff meeting for another fifteen minutes. Jessica took documents, pamphlets and books from her attaché case, along with pens and writing pads, and laid them on a table. Everything would be ready when she let Arlene know she was here.

The thought of Arlene made Jessica roll her eyes. The EFO director seemed clueless about starting and managing even a small department, even more clueless about women's issues, despite her claim that she had "worked in the field" before. She was definitely recruit material but the rest of the women at Shearwater-Ingram were question marks.

As if on cue, female voices echoed toward her from the corridor and in moments, two employees came into view, one dark-haired and petite, the other blonde and a good bit taller. They went to the vending machine alcove for bottled soft drinks and snacks and took them to a nearby table. Jessica remembered their faces from last week's lunch, but not their names.

Always on the lookout for opportunities, she took change from her purse and went to the machines, too. With a cola and bagged munchies in hand, she stopped by their table to say hello.

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“You’re Arlene’s friend,” said the dark-haired sprite.

“Right, I’m Jessica Grant. I remembered you both from last week, just not your names.”

“I’m Claudia, this is Brooke.”

They invited her to sit, and as their conversation resumed, Jessica deftly manipulated it in the direction she wanted, which was the condition of women at Shearwater-Ingram.

“So what sort of advancement opportunities are there for women at this company?”

They looked at her blankly.

Brooke’s shoulders rose and fell. “I’m new.”

“Well, I’ve been here over two years,” Claudia said, “but I’ve never really thought about that.”

“Do either of you have any ambitions to move up in the company? Maybe get a management position, make more money?”

“I don’t need to,” Claudia said. “My husband brings home a good paycheck. I just work so we’ll have a little money for extras. We’ll be ready to start a family in a year or two and I’m going to quit working after I have kids—at least, while they’re little.”

Jessica carefully masked her exasperation and hoped her questions would come out sounding like simple curiosity. “Are there any women in any management positions here? Or any who want to be?”

They couldn’t think of any, right off the bat.

So basically, all the women here are Stepford secretaries, happy with subordinate, low-paying jobs and content to kowtow to the male power structure.

But Brooke surprised her.

“I’ll have to think about that. It might be nice, being a manager over a whole bunch of people. But I’ll have to get to know the place better. Heck, I don’t even know my way around town, yet.”

“It’s a little town,” Claudia said with mock impatience. “Anybody that knows their way around a big place like Tampa-St. Pete can learn Verona in no time.”

“Oh, you’re from Tampa?” Jessica said, her curiosity completely bogus.

“I grew up on Orlando but I lived in Tampa almost two years. My best friend Angie met a guy at Thanksgiving, an airman stationed up here at Martin—he was down there on leave—and she fell for him like a brick. She came up for the weekend a few times after that and in March she moved here to be closer to him. But she needed somebody to share rent,

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so she talked me into coming up here and now—here I am.”

Jessica was appalled at the idea of a woman following a military man around, and she knew it would show on her face if she did not exercise careful control of her emotions. She pulled the corners of her mouth into what she hoped was a smile. “Yes. Here you are.”

“It didn’t take much to persuade me. Angie said it’s a big base and a small town, and the ratio of men to women is advantageous.”

Claudia looked at her watch. “I better head back, so Roland won’t have a hissy. It was nice seeing you again.”

“I better go, too,” Brooke said.

Jessica watched them depart with mild contempt. At that age, she was already a committed feminist working for the cause. She had not needed men either for material support or self-esteem. She still had no use for men and her dedication to the cause was stronger than ever.

If any company needed an Equality and Fairness Office, it was this one. Like every other major enterprise in Verona, Shearwater-Ingram was a man’s world—a world where men held power over women and basked in their enjoyment of it—but it was worse here than any place Jessica had seen. This company was absolutely awash in testosterone, to borrow Ruth Adamski’s phrase.

And if anybody needed help, it was Arlene Roper. The woman was a complete idiot. Jessica suspected as much after their lunch last week and a couple of phone conversations in the interim had done nothing to dispel her first impression.

On the other hand, Arlene’s cluelessness made her easy to manipulate. She would become an unknowing puppet, with Jessica pulling the strings.

It had to be that way, if things were ever going to change around here.

By Wednesday of her second week on the job, Brooke was getting a handle on what she could get away with at this company. Almost nobody ever came to her cubicle. Located at the back of Record Storage, it was a cozy little cave where she could do pretty much anything she wished when there were no requests to deliver and no returns to file.

Anything she wished included poring over sexy apparel catalogs and Cosmo magazine, doing her nails, trying new make-up—she kept a light-ed makeup mirror in her desk drawer for this purpose—and reading trashy novels.

She had found a used bookstore near downtown that sold them cheap

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and her bottom drawer was now stocked with a small library of used paperbacks by Harold Robbins, Jackie Collins and Sidney Sheldon, some of them written when Brooke was a preschooler.

But her favorite reading material came from the company's social-events archives because the scrapbooks, albums and newsletters were the source of fascinating information about Troy Stevenson.

The newsletters were the least interesting. There was a lot about the Marketing and Sales Department, less about Troy himself. She found a short article about him from a couple of years before when he was promoted to vice president, a modest career biography, stingy on personal information. But it was accompanied by a nice candid portrait of him standing in the lobby, his arms crossed, his eyes crinkled from that heart-stopping smile.

There was some mildly interesting general information in them. Brooke learned he had transferred to Shearwater from Commander almost six years before. She discovered that his birthday was July 3, 1951, that he attended Forsythe Street Baptist Church and he had two children, a girl and a boy.

If the newsletters were disappointing, the scrapbooks were a step up and the the photo albums were gold mines. Some of them featured events that were employee- or department-specific, and if they didn't involve Marketing, Troy was scarce or absent. But if he had attended the event—retirement, promotion, birthday, transfer—whoever wielded the camera managed to catch him in many of the frames.

Shearwater-Ingram sponsored sports teams in the city's youth leagues and there were separate albums for team photos. Since transferring to Verona, Troy had been a volunteer coach on S-I's football or softball teams for nine and ten year olds. There were numerous photos of him posing with his team, candid during games when he stood on the sidelines with his arms folded, watching the action, or talking to players, grinning, his hands frozen in a clap.

Her favorite, one that she looked at repeatedly, was a closeup of Troy looking back over his shoulder, his hair barely lapping over the collar of his striped knit shirt, his face shaded by the bill of a baseball cap that curved around his forehead. His lips were parted in a sexy half-smile that revealed tips of his teeth.

Brooke poured over the photos, savored them, went through the albums very slowly, so they'd last. She could stare at his likeness long minutes at a time, mesmerized, as excitement made her insides quiver.

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The only thing that disturbed her pleasure with this activity was that a woman sometimes showed up in some of the photos with him. The same woman. Had to be his wife—the one with whom he shared a storybook marriage, according to Dugan Haynes. She was slender, a head shorter than Troy and had mousy brown hair down to her shoulders. Her presence in the photos annoyed Brook and evoked a growing jealousy in her.

The photos and newsletters, magnetic though they might be, were not enough. She wanted to know more about Troy Stevenson, everything she could find out without revealing her growing preoccupation with him.

She developed a rather lame strategy for gathering information by pretending interest in advancing in the company—an idea given to her by Jessica Grant—and inquiring about the different departments and their management staff.

“If a new employee wanted to move up in this company,” she would ask an old-timer, “whose department would be best? What about Ingram in HR? What about Edleman in R and D? How about Stevenson in Marketing?”

Most people were willing enough to give their opinions to the ambitious new employee, but Claudia Tully saw through the ruse right away.

“You’re just wanting to know more about Troy Stevenson. I can’t blame you. Every woman who starts work here gets a crush on him. Happened to me, and I’m married! But it wears off, eventually.”

Brooke found out a few peripherally interesting things about Troy this way—he worked as hard or harder than any of his underlings, he coordinated with Research and Development like no marketing director ever before him, he sat on the boards of several civic and charitable organizations in town—but these were mostly job related tidbits and lacked what she wanted to know most about him. If others had personal information about Troy, they weren’t as willing as Claudia was to share it so the pixie from billing became Brooke’s primary source of information about him.

“If you want to see Troy,” Claudia advised Brooke one day as they stopped by the ladies room after their morning break, “don’t go out for lunch so much. Eat here in the cafeteria and sooner or later you’ll see him. He hardly ever goes out for lunch.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. If you don’t like the catered food, bring your own, but eat in the dining room. That’s what he does sometimes. He usually brings his lunches from home and he eats in his office but sometimes he brings it downstairs to eat with Max or with the folks in his department. His wife

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makes his lunches but she sure don't brown-bag him."

Gazing in the big mirror over the sinks, they replaced their lipstick and made adjustments to their hair.

"What does she make?" Brooke asked, inspecting her reflection carefully.

"Whatever he wants. She just controls how big the servings are."

Brooke shook her head, uncomprehending. "What for?"

"That's how she monitors and controls his caloric intake."

"My gosh, how do you know that?"

"I overheard him talking about it one day at lunch. Every now and then he lunches with Dinah and he'll sit with her—with us—at the Gossip Table. So one day somebody asked him how he stayed so trim eating lunches like he brought, and he said Patty made sure his caloric intake never went over twenty-six hundred a day, or something like that. He said he was glad she kept up with it because otherwise, he'd have to."

Claudia paused to flick a blusher brush across her cheeks.

"You don't think he stays lean and paunchless just from walking on a treadmill twice a week, do you?" she continued. "Oh, and Max says he runs on the track at Jefferson High School at the crack of dawn most Saturdays. But his diet has more to do with it and let me tell you, it ain't rabbit food. You should see some of the spreads she fixes for him."

"Well, they say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach," Brooke said, hoping the banality would disguise her annoyance that the wife had showed up in the conversation.

After several days of eating cafeteria food and listening to the company women's insipid gossip without so much as a glimpse of Troy, Brooke was tempted to start her fast food lunches again. But she stuck it out because sooner or later he would show up here, while running into him at a hamburger place didn't seem likely at all.

On Fridays, the pace and atmosphere at Shearwater-Ingram mellowed out. A laid-back effect blanketed the anticipation of the coming weekend's activities—beach trips, golf tournaments, shopping, family gatherings. Brooke felt the odd mingled feeling as she sat at her desk leafing through a new magazine and wondered whether Angie and her airman might find her a date for the weekend.

In the early afternoon, someone entered up front and exchanged a few words with Karen. A man's voice. Brooke grew still and alert.

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My gosh, is that Troy's voice?

She hopped up and stepped quickly toward the passthrough and looked into the reception area only to see the door to the corridor closing.

Dang! What if it was him? I missed him!

Annoyed all out of proportion, she snatched up an order in the gray tray and a thrill went down her body as she read. Oh, yes. It had been him. This was his handwriting, his signature. And she had missed him!

But wait....

He wanted files. Three of them. No hurry.

But he was going to get them. A-S-A-P.

Trembling with excitement, she collected the files with record speed and stepped into the reception area.

"Going to deliver these," she said to Karen, offhand.

"My, that was fast," Karen said with a smirk.

Bitch.

But a few steps into the hallway, Karen was forgotten. In moments, Brooke was in the elevator and moments after that, she approached the entry to the office of the Vice President of Marketing and Sales.

This was her first encounter with the Doberman Pinscher, Dinah Langley, and she expected the redhead to guard the door to Troy's office like Cerberus. But surprisingly Dinah motioned her on through.

"Just put them on the credenza."

Brooke stepped into Troy's office, her heart thumping in her ears, only to find it vacant. Where was he? It was well after lunchtime. Had he just gone on break or was he out of the building for some reason? She was terribly disappointed, but at least she had the opportunity to look around. One could tell a lot about a person by looking at their workspace.

On the wall next to the door to Dinah's office there was an autographed portrait of Bear Bryant flanked by photos of Troy as a Crimson Tide halfback. Two of them she disregarded because he was on the field, running, his helmet obscuring his face.

The third was much more interesting. A younger Troy held his helmet in front of him with both hands, as if he were about to put it on. He stood on the sidelines next to Bear Bryant in his iconic houndstooth fedora. The coach rested a hand on his star halfback's shoulder and they both looked off-camera, toward the field of play, Bryant pointing with what looked like a folded magazine. Hot and sweaty, his wet, Seventies-length hair hanging in strings, Troy wore a look of intense interest, his brows slightly pulled together, his lips parted and pursed.

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Brooke's stomach fluttered.

The other photo showed Troy with a girl whose hairstyle, make up and clothing were in the mod style Brooke remembered from junior high. They were on a football field after a game, in profile. She was standing on low wall and Troy, sans helmet, sweaty and tousled as in the other photo, had put his big hands around her ribs, just beneath her breasts. He was moments from swinging her to the ground when the shutter snapped. His head was tilted back and he looked up into her eyes, laughing. The girl looked down at his face, sharing his laughter. Her hands were on his shoulder pads, but not resting there, flat. They were fists clamped onto wads of his jersey, and there was something riveting about that, something intimate...covertly sexual.

Suddenly annoyed, Brooke abandoned the football prints and continued to the credenza, glancing about the office on the way.

Across the room an oversized sofa upholstered in navy wide-wale corduroy backed up to the wall. Above it was a large, old-timey looking photo of a bleak industrial building of wood. A sign on the building identified it as Credemore Coal Mining Company, Credemore, West Virginia. On a small shelf next to it sat a lump of coal half the size of a man's fist atop a polished wooden base.

Finding that singularly uninteresting, Brooke moved her gaze on around the room, to the tall cabinet and shelf unit behind Troy's desk. A bunch of books, a stack of magazines, a football in a glass case, a component stereo with twin cassette decks, a swivel caddy full of tapes—too much to take note of it all in a short glance.

She moved to the credenza, her destination. Above it hung a couple of childish crayon drawings on notebook paper—stick men and crude, slanting text that read *Daddy*, one signed *Missy* and one *Randy*. They were elegantly matted and framed.

They were part of a grouping of framed prints anchored by a twelve by fourteen photograph with a three-inch mat—a casual family portrait in an outdoor setting, full length view with the family seated on a rustic bench.

Troy, in a white, open-throated knit shirt over khaki bermuda shorts and leather sandals, sat in the middle, looking straight into the camera with those odd, compelling eyes, and wearing that knockout smile. His arm was around a dark-haired woman to his right who sported a taupe shorts set and brown grasshoppers—the same woman who was a girl in the football photo, and the photos downstairs. She was half-smiling, Mona Lisa-like, and turned toward Troy slightly, leaning against him, her hand resting possessively on his thigh.

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While rather pretty, she was no match for her husband's extraordinary good looks and Brooke wondered why it was that the handsomest men so often married mousy women.

Troy's other arm was around a dark-haired little girl of about seven or eight, dressed in a pink gingham sundress and white sandals. Her head was ducked slightly as she leaned against her father's side and looked up at the camera with big eyes.

In the middle was an adorable black-haired, dark-eyed boy about five years old wearing a white T-shirt and denim shorts, his feet bare. He was sitting astride Troy's other leg—the one not occupied by a dainty, French-manicured hand attached to the arm of the sweet-faced little wife. The boy was holding a small football and leaning back against Troy's chest. He wasn't smiling, exactly, but his face, set with the same arresting eyes as his father, exuded contentment that bordered on smugness.

Attached to the bottom of the frame was a small pewter placard with engraving that read *The Stevensons - Patty, Troy, Randy, Melissa - Summer 1981.*

Brooke's focus returned to the wife, Patty, to her left hand, adorned with a gold wedding set that showcased a huge, sparkling diamond. It wasn't really *resting* on his thigh. It was pressed loosely against his *inner* thigh, between his knee and the hem of his bermudas—an erogenous zone. For Brooke, the realization added another layer of dimension to the woman's smug, secretive smile—and to Troy's wide, happy one.

Sudden jealousy enflamed Brooke from head to toe.

She heard the sound of a throat clearing and looked up to see Dinah-the-Dobie standing in the doorway.

"Oh, sorry," she said, thinking quickly, wildly, as she put the files on the credenza. "This portrait caught my attention. This little girl looks just like my cousin's daughter. It's incredible. I mean, they could be twins. I don't guess there's any relation, though. My cousin is from Virginia."

"Interesting," Dinah said, lifting a brow. "You might mention it to Troy some time. His family's been right next door in West Virginia for generations."

"Is that right? Well, if I remember, I'll mention it to him." Brooke headed for the door and remarked, in passing, "Company decorator did a nice job on this office. It's the best one up here."

"Actually, Troy's wife, Patty, decorated it."

"Oh, really? Wow. Is she an interior designer?"

"No," Dinah said with a knowing smile that irritated Brooke to no end.

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“She’s just an expert on what pleases Troy. You have a good weekend, now. Enjoy the holiday.”

Back in her cubicle, Brooke moped. Her annoyance at the Doberman Pinscher had given way to irritation and frustration over the barrier represented by the smug little brown-haired wife in the portraits with Troy.

In the days she had worked here, her initial appreciation for Troy’s good looks had progressed to junior high crush-level, and from there to sexual attraction that by now had reached pure, intense lust.

In that same time frame, she had come to see her desire useless and irrelevant. He would never be free of his wife and children; never want to be, if company gossip could be believed.

Years before, a friend—a married man’s mistress—had given Brooke some advice.

“Younger, college-age women like you don’t have to worry about married men too much because most of the guys you know are your age and aren’t married, either. Older guys, mid twenties, are as likely to be married to their career as to a woman, and you might snag one of them for a husband. But when you reach your mid-twenties and practically all you have to pick from are married guys, choose a guy who’s thirty or older. They’ve had time for problems to show up their marriage and they’ll be more appreciative of, ah, diversion.”

Brooke hadn’t paid much attention to this advice at the time because it was irrelevant to her life, but now that she was so madly attracted to a married man, it came flooding back.

She daydreamed frequently about a relationship between herself and Troy freed from his marriage and family. But after seeing the pictures upstairs, the idea of an affair—of illicit sex with a still-married Troy cheating on his insipid little wife—excited her even more.

Either situation, though, seemed hopeless. Everything she had discovered about his marriage indicated so. He was crazy about his wife; she was crazy about him. Hopeless. Brooke would never be able to do more than look at him from afar—and dream.

Chapter Twenty

Troy stood shin-deep in the water and reached down to hold the rowboat steady as his family waded into the lake to board. The ten-foot dinghy, borrowed from the next door neighbors who rarely used it, rocked as Patty and the children climbed over the gunwale but he easily held it steady enough to prevent capsizing.

“I need to build a dock,” he observed as he took a step through the water and prepared to climb in.

A sudden wind raked the lake’s surface and the little boat began to bob and tilt.

Randy laughed. “We need a sailboat, Daddy, not a rowboat!”

“You’d still need paddles.” Troy glanced down at the rippling water now up to his knees. “Wind like this on the lake is rare.”

But as he spoke, another gust blew in, kicking up the surface of the water, turning ripples to waves. The trees on shore began to sway and sigh.

“What’s going on?” Troy murmured, looking up at the sky, perplexed. There were no clouds but the brilliant blue canopy above them darkened to gray as he watched. “What the—”

He heard sounds of alarm coming from his family and he looked back to see them holding tightly to the sides of the boat, their eyes darting about them in fright.

They were no longer on the small, landlocked basin in Yancey County. This was...this was the Atlantic Ocean at Amelia Island.

Troy’s confusion and concern became alarm as he looked around. Before him, nothing but the turbulent sea spread to the gray horizon. Huge swells rolled in from the east to break violently on shore. To each side of him, a strip of beach stretched to infinity, and behind him, the familiar coastal landscape disappeared into a gray mist.

The dinghy rocked madly and his right hand lost its grip on the gun-

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wale. Something was dragging it away from him. He held on with his left hand, pulled on it with all his might, grunting audibly with the effort, his arm quaking from the strain.

A searing pain in his shoulder shot down his arm, threatening his grip on the boat, and he wildly flung his other hand toward it. His fingertips grazed the gunwale and his hand plunged below the surface. He was thrown off-balance by the maneuver and his feet lost their purchase on the sandy bottom. He fell face first into the water that was now, inexplicably, ice cold.

Desperate to get his family to safety, he hurled himself upright, sputtering, shaking his head to clear the water from his face. He was in up to his chest now, and an excruciating burn tormented his eyes, far worse than saltwater would account for. Fear as cold and numbing as the icy surf enveloped him, multiplied by the panic-stricken cries of his family.

God help me save them! They're slipping away!

But the force dragging them from him grew stronger. The boat slipped from his numbed fingerhold and quickly drifted beyond his reach, bobbing precariously on the roiling surface.

Terrified screams filled the air as his wife and children shrieked for him to save them.

"Please, God, help me!" He half swam, half staggered toward them but they were moving away far too rapidly, and the water around him thickened like gelatin and held him fast.

"Patty!" he bellowed, his voice gravelly with panic. *"Randy! Missy!"*

An enormous swell rolled in, lifting the boat above him, then hid it from his view as it plummeted down the other side. Their cries for help stopped abruptly and ominous silence descended. The roiling surf itself made no sound. The wave washed over him and crashed silently onshore behind him, and he could see to the gray horizon again.

The boat was gone.

Terror gripped him and he thrashed in the water to do a three-sixty degree check of the surface. His family had disappeared.

"Nooooooooo!"

But they were gone.

With every ounce of strength he had, he strained against sudden and total paralysis, desperate to dive beneath the surface search for them. To no avail. He couldn't move.

They were what he loved most, the reason he lived, and he had let them slip away. He was alone with his agony in the lifeless gray void.

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Melissa had been a sound sleeper all her life, until her father moved away. Now it seemed the slightest sound woke her. The first few times it happened, she feared intruders in the house, burglars in masks come for the family's possessions, or kidnappers maybe, here to take her and Randy and hold them for ransom in some scary, hidden place.

But there had never been any intruders thus far, and once she figured out what sort of noise had wakened her, she usually returned to sleep quickly.

This night, she identified the noise readily because it was continuing—Randy, whimpering in his sleep.

She scooted out of bed and tiptoed down the hall to his room. Faint orangy light from the streetlamp on the corner filtered through the window and she could see him writhing under the covers. She gently jostled his shoulder and whispered, "Randy. Randy. Wake up."

It took a moment but his eyes flew open, glanced about and fastened on her. "Missy," he whispered.

"Hey, littabo. You had a bad dream."

His brow lowered and tears pooled in his eyes as he nodded. "I was cold.... The water was cold. It was over me...." His face crumpled and he wailed softly, "I want Daddy!"

She shushed him. "Don't think about that dream. Come with me."

It was nearly one a.m. and Patty lay in the big, empty bed, eyes closed as she drifted in and out of sleep. She felt something bump the bed and looked to the side. By the dim glow of the nightlight in the hall, she saw her children's shadowed faces, solemn and pleading.

"Can we sleep with you?" Melissa asked. "We're sad and scared."

"Of course you can."

They crawled into the bed and under the covers on each side of her.

"Randy had a bad dream."

"Poor babies." Patty put her arms around her children and they snuggled against her. She looked down at Randy and kissed his forehead. "You feeling better now?"

"Uh-huh. But I still want Daddy."

"I know, sweetheart. So do I."

Since Troy's departure, Patty, too, had dreamed a few times of danger

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lurking, pursuing herself and her children, vulnerable now that there was no one to protect them.

This had never happened before, except to Troy himself, who had been awakened by terrifying nightmares perhaps three or four times in their ten years of marriage. He told her that since grade school, he'd been prone to nightmares when he was under stress, although they had abated considerably when he went off to college.

Now it was happening to their son.

She almost picked up the phone to call Troy right then and there, to convince him how badly his family needed him and beg him to come home.

But something stopped her, something more than the children cuddled against her sides, holding her in place under the covers.

She had told him she supported his decision to face this thing as he thought best. She had to give him the time and space to do it.

Sleep had almost overtaken her when she felt Randy stir, heard him whisper, "Missy? You awake?"

On the other side of her, Melissa whispered, "Yeah."

"Promise me something."

"What?"

"You have to promise first."

"Okay."

Randy's breath caught softly. "Don't tell Daddy I cried."

Patty felt a small, piercing pain near her heart but lay still and said nothing.

"I won't."

"You promise?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die...."

He awakened from the nightmare in the usual way, with an electric jolt and a sense of disorientation as the residual horror gave way to oppressive wakefulness. He lay stiffly, looking into the shadows. How could such a wonderful day end with such a horrible dream?

It had indeed been a wonderful day, a family day. The four of them had hiked along the lake shore, swam and played in the water, rowed across the lake to visit the petting zoo and pony rides. The children had finger-painted big abstract posters drying now in one of the bedrooms of the cabin. Patty planned to have them poster-framed. Their bright colors

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would make them the perfect accent for the kids' bedroom at the cabin.

At midday Troy had barbecued on the deck while Patty laid out the holiday dishes she'd brought from home—potato salad, baked beans and cole slaw along with a pitcher of sweet tea. They had all eaten until they were stuffed and then napped on the sleeper sofas in the glass-walled living room.

At mid-afternoon, Troy read to the children about Memorial Day from a library book he had borrowed for the occasion. He followed the reading with a short prayer for the soldiers who had died protecting homes and families from peril.

Afterward, the children had mellowed out in their play, choosing board games on the deck, first *Sorry!* and now *Parcheesi*.

It had been so wonderful a family day, it was almost possible to forget he was living apart from them—until evening fell and they put on their brave faces and tore themselves away to go home without him.

He had been away from them—protecting his family from himself— for over two weeks, and how close was he to facing his fears, resolving his dilemma? Not very.

Part of what was preventing peace with himself was his stunned and utter disbelief that he could have let this problem happen. He knew better, he had been taught better, he had the added incentive of the guilt over a youthful incident with his father he would never be able to live down, not to mention a promise he'd made to God Almighty Himself—and still, somehow, he had let it happen anyway. He, Troy Stevenson, good son, good husband, good father, had slipped up somehow.

It had taken him several days just to get over his incredulity.

But now...he had to get on with. Had to figure it out, or nightmares about losing his family would just get worse. And might turn real.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jessica stuck her head in the door of the HR department and told Polly, the receptionist, “Let Arlene know I’m here, okay? I’ll be in the cafeteria, setting up.”

It was half past one. The room was empty of diners and the catering company employees were rolling food transportation carts toward the back exit.

Jessica took the usual materials from her attaché case and put them on a table. She had typed the notes she and Arlene made last week into a rough draft of the policies manual, and that was the number one thing on her agenda today.

The second item was perusal of a set of booklets, *Organizing for Results*, dropped off at the WAG office by a member yesterday.

Her study of the booklets was interrupted when a man in business attire enter the dining room carrying a fast food bag and large styrofoam cup, a leather legal pad holder under his arm. He took a table across the room and, unwrapping his burger absently, became engrossed in something written on the pad.

She recognized him from her first lunch at Shearwater and it only took a moment to recall his name and title. Troy Stevenson, Vice President, Marketing. A serial sexual harasser, Max had joked. And the Stepford secretaries around the Gossip Table that day had cooed over his good looks and defended him from criticism.

Jessica’s eyes fell to the booklet in front of her but almost immediately went back to Stevenson. She forced her attention away from him as Arlene appeared and took a seat at the table.

“Hey, how was your holiday?” the EFO director said.

“Fine.” Jessica was too distracted to point out that Memorial Day was nothing but another day to glorify men, since basically all dead soldiers were men.

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Arlene looked at her curiously. “You look very somber and introspective.”

“I’ve got some new material, these booklets, I haven’t read before. How about you read one, I’ll read the other, and if there’s anything relevant to your department in them, we’ll share.”

“Sounds good.”

Jessica stared at the text but didn’t read it because she didn’t really see it. She wasn’t at Shearwater-Ingram anymore or in Georgia or on the Eastern Seaboard. It was not 1983 and she was not thirty-five.

She was barely eighteen, she was on the West Coast and she was in love.



San Francisco

June 1967

The Summer of Love. Jessica and her best friend Zoey had come to San Francisco with flowers in their hair to find freedom for their spirits—well, free drugs and free love, anyway—in Haight-Ashbury and Golden Gate Park.

They had left staid Hartford just days after graduating from high school, stopping before they were out of the city limits to stick colorful funky flowers all over Jessica’s Volkswagen bug.

Shedding their school girl clothes and slipping into bellbottom jeans, lacy tops with foot-long fringe and leather headbands, they also shed their staid New England conventions and their school-girl mentality. With a change of wardrobe, they became lovers of humanity and seekers of freedom.

Ostensibly, they were going to California to spend the summer with Zoey’s mother, remarried now after a bitter divorce and living near Oakland. But it was the promise of freedom and love that drew them.

Oh, the boys they found there! Sweet boys, stoned boys, crazy boys but none that Jessica wanted love, and give herself to, until she met *him* on their fourth day in the Golden State. Nick Vincent. But he was not a boy, he was twenty-three, a man—and with his black hair, tawny skin and dark eyes, the most beautiful she had ever seen. Just looking at him took her breath away.

They met at an impromptu concert in small, drug-drenched Malone Park. By sundown, they were in the back seat of his rental car and he was

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taking her to heights of ecstasy she had never dreamed possible.

He was a sailor from Louisiana stationed in San Diego. His leave was almost over and it was time for the long drive down the coast, back to the base. When he left, Jessica followed him, after promising she would come back...whenever.

Zoey, stoned most of the time these days, said, "Far out."

In San Diego, friendly hippies gave her a place to stay until she found a tiny apartment and a burger-flipping job to pay for it, with Nick's help. The two of them spent every moment together that they could—lazing at the beach, wandering through the zoo at Balboa Park, making love under the stars in the desert....

Until it happened, she didn't know it was possible to love so deeply. None of her high school crushes had prepared her for this. It seemed that time had stopped; this was a magic kingdom and Nick was its prince.

But time had not stopped and before she knew it, August had come and was about to go. It was time for Jessica to head back across the country, home to attend college. The impending separation brought a fierce ache to her heart.

"Oh, baby, don't cry," Nick told her in his soft, Southern voice. "Until we can be together again, we'll write."

At first, their letters were full of love and longing and covert references to their joinings. But by Christmas, change was evident. As her letters grew more loving, his became chatty and distant.

In February, he wrote to tell her he had been transferred to another duty station in Jacksonville, Florida.

The next month was spring break, and she made a decision that would change her life forever. Against the wishes of her parents, she loaded the VW with everything she could get in it and headed south on Interstate 95. She didn't even tell him she was coming.

The drive down the Eastern Seaboard seemed interminable, requiring two overnight stops. It was barely spring, but Jacksonville was already hot and bright. Thousands of college kids on Easter break clogged the interstates and filled the motel rooms but Jessica was not there to party.

She stopped at a service station and asked directions to the return address on Nick's last letter. She could barely understand the kid who gave her directions, but she managed to find the small apartment complex near the base.

He wasn't home. Of course, he would be at work, doing whatever sailors did at Jacksonville Naval Air Station.

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She ate dinner at a fast food place, took a sponge bath in the restroom, changed clothes, reapplied her makeup and returned to the apartment at dusk.

At her knock, a woman opened the door. A pretty woman, tawny skinned and dark haired, somewhat older than herself. Confused, Jessica couldn't speak for a moment. At last she managed, "Is Nick here?"

The woman tilted her head noncommittally and called over her shoulder, "Nicky? Someone to see you."

He appeared behind the woman and looked at Jessica blankly for a moment. "Jess. What are you doing here?"

She looked from one to the other of them and as it dawned on her what she was seeing, a severe pain shot through her chest.

"Are you're down here for spring break?" he said. "It's a long way from Connecticut."

"I didn't come for spring break. I came to be with you."

He looked uncomfortable.

"I'll be back in a little while," he told the woman and she nodded. He stepped onto the small porch and said to Jessica, "Let's go for a ride. For a talk."

He was even more beautiful than she remembered, even more desirable; but she sat, wooden on the outside, frozen inside, her emotions short-circuited because she knew what he was about to do.

He stopped in Riverview Park, a small, neighborhood place not unlike Malone Park in San Francisco where they had met and first made love.

"You should have let me know you wanted to come down here. I would have told you not to. You should go back home."

The frozen landscape inside her thawed in a white-hot instance, and a flood of tears came to her eyes. "I don't want to go home. I want to stay with you. I came down here to be with you, all the time, forever! How can you tell me to go home? I love you! I thought you loved me, too!"

He looked sad but unrelenting and shook his head. "I'm getting married in June."

"What? No!" He couldn't have hurt her more if he had stabbed her through the heart. "But you loved me!" she squeaked between sobs. "Last summer, we were in love! We made love and we were in love!"

A look of deep shame clouded his face. "Jessica. I'm sorry. What I did to you was completely wrong, start to finish."

"Were you engaged then?"

"No. Brenda and I have been close for a long time. But we didn't want

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to tie each other down while we were so far apart.”

“Brenda,” she whispered. A bitter frown came to her face. “So you never loved me. All that time.... All those things you said....”

“I cared about you. How could I not? You were so sweet, pretty, warm and golden, like sunshine.... But I didn’t feel the way you wanted me to.”

An odd thing happened then. Her pain exploded like an atom bomb, permeated every particle of her love and transformed it to granite-hard hatred in an instant. “You bastard. That’s a lie. You did it just to hurt me. How many other girls have you done this to, just to get your kicks?”

He started to say something, but a look of futility came to his face and he closed his eyes and exhaled without speaking.

“You knew I loved you. You knew I’d follow you, sooner or later. You were just waiting with your brunette bitch, Brenda, just waiting to show me what utter contempt you have for me!”

“That’s not true. We had a wonderful summer together—”

“Don’t talk to me!” Her hands curled into hard fists and shook with rage. “Take me back to my car, now!”

“Jessica—”

“Shut up!”

He did. Her name would be the last word he ever said to her.

She was dry-eyed and dead inside on the drive back to the apartment. She got into her VW and drove away, catching one last glimpse of him in her rear view mirror as he walked toward his apartment without sparing so much as a glance her way.

She drove to Daytona Beach and joined in the rowdy party that was spring break. It didn’t matter that she had no place to stay. She would stay with whatever boy she could find.

She partied wildly, hysterically every day, boozing and drugging at dangerous levels, and coupled with a different boy every night, sometimes more than one. She was dead inside and a group of girls who befriended her on her third day there realized it.

They were a couple of years older, and they took her under their wing. Before the week was out, she told them what had transpired, how she happened to be in Florida, and how broken she was inside.

“You need to go back to school,” they advised her. “Get your life back on track. Stop sleeping around. That does terrible things to your self-respect.”

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“I can’t go back to Connecticut. I can’t face my parents, my friends....”

“You think Connecticut’s the only state that’s got colleges?”

Her new friends were students at Verona State University, a mid-sized college in Georgia, two hours from Jax.

“Come and stay with us,” they said. “You can go to school at VSU, if not this quarter, then next.”

Eight weeks after spring break, one of her new friends drove her to Atlanta where the baby she was carrying, fathered by any one of half a dozen boys in Daytona Beach, whose faces she couldn’t remember and whose names she never knew, was aborted.

Although it wasn’t a back-alley, rusty-coat hanger affair, it was performed in a non-clinical, unsanitary place—a motel room—and the massive bleeding and infection that resulted nearly killed her.

Five years later, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that the states could not limit a woman’s right to have an abortion, Jessica hailed the decision from personal experience. By then, she had graduated from Verona State with her parents’ blessing and funding and had become a paid officer of the Women’s Assistance Group, where she had volunteered since arriving in Verona.

The few friends and acquaintances who knew of her horrific abortion experience assumed that was the primary reason why she had become such a crusader for women’s rights.

Not even her closest companions knew the truth—that she was motivated far less by concern for women and far more by hatred of men. She had been ripe for the virulent writings of the most radical feminists in history, molded by their toxic misogyny—testosterone had poisoned the world, all men were brutes, all sex was rape—her hatred of men honed by them to razor-edged sharpness.

But it had begun that day in the spring of 1968, at Riverview Park in Jacksonville, Florida, when her limitless love for Nick Vincent had transmogrified in an eyeblink to immutable hatred that knew no bounds.



Verona, Georgia
Spring 1983

Jessica raised her eyes from the booklet she had been staring at, unsee-

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ing, and glanced toward Arlene, who was deeply engrossed, her lips moving slightly as she read.

She looked across the room to the table where Troy Stevenson sat eating lunch and writing on the legal pad with a shiny silver pen.

Ghost pain, like the pain of a missing limb, tingled, then burned, in the region of her heart and expanded until it filled her chest, her whole body, her entire being.

He was a dead ringer for Nick Vincent.

Nick, wherever he was, would be forty now while Troy was Jessica's age, perhaps younger. But he had the same dark hair, the same excruciatingly beautiful face, the same height, the same athletic build and easy grace, the same soft, Southern voice....

"Jessica? Are you all right?" Arlene said, her voice filled with concern.

She turned her preoccupied gaze to the EFO director. "I'm fine."

"You look like you've just seen a ghost. You're white as this paper!"

"I have indigestion. It's not serious but it sure can hurt. I knew I shouldn't have eaten that burrito on the way here." She smiled wanly. "Anything useful in that booklet?"

"So, Brooke, I hear you've got an eye for Troy Stevenson," said Janice Benton, the CFO's secretary. She and Brooke were seated with members of the lunch bunch at their customary places around the Gossip Table. "Have you figured out yet that he's really, really already taken?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm dating somebody."

It was a lie, just like her claim of a cousin in Virginia. Angie had fixed her up a couple of times, but she wasn't really dating anybody. Still, the lie was necessary to protect her ego from embarrassment, a motivation that had made her an accomplished fibber since childhood. "I just think Stevenson's nice to look at. Eye candy. Anybody at this table who doesn't think that?"

"No," Claudia piped up. "That's why the women in this company can't talk about the men in it without his name coming up. Doesn't amount to a hill of beans, though, considering his storybook marriage."

"You're behind the times, Claudia," said Irene Henderson, a secretary in Research and Development. "He's not living at home anymore."

All twittering ceased and even chewing stopped as eyes up and down the table widened and riveted on her. She pursed her lips and her short, golden hair sprinkled with silver reflected the light as she swiveled her

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head and looked around her, enjoying the reaction to the bombshell she had casually dropped.

Claudia stared, openmouthed. "Since when?"

Irene shrugged. "For a week, at least. Maybe a little longer."

At that moment, Dugan arrived and set her tray on the table. "What are y'all talking about?"

"Your ex-boss," Irene said. "He left home. He's moved out to the family's vacation cabin at Lake Lucy. By himself."

Dugan took her seat, a picture of skepticism in a sea of astonished faces but kept her thoughts to herself.

"I had no idea!" Claudia said. "Of course, I'm stuck in billing and don't know half of what's going on around here. This is incredible! This is the juiciest gossip to hit this place since Commander bought it! So, did he walk out on her, or did she kick him out?"

"Nobody knows," Irene said. "Can't find out. I'm sure Dinah knows, but she's not talking. Of course."

"Well," Brooke said, offhand. "Wonder if he'd like a date for the company picnic. Maybe some single lady here should ask him. When is that, next month? I saw a notice about it on the bulletin board."

"It's in July on the hottest day of the year," Dugan said, "but women better be careful about asking co-workers for dates. Hadn't they, Arlene? Or does the sexual harassment door only swing one way?"

With one ear on the conversation, should more riveting information come forth, Brooke kept her face calm—she hoped—and her hands steady as she finished her meal, but it was hard to swallow, her stomach quivered so. Her mind raced.

What did it matter whether it was his idea to leave, or hers? All that mattered was that he was out, free, unencumbered, and what had seemed hopeless moments before was now possible.

Chapter Twenty-Two

In the bright sunlight of late May, Patty walked across the downtown sidewalk to Quinley's Jewelry Shop and stepped into the cool showroom.

"Mrs. Stevenson," said the proprietor, James Quinley, with a welcoming smile. He was the founder of the company who, at seventy-five, still put in a full workday serving his clientele. "Come for your husband's ring?"

Patty smiled and nodded, her excitement evident. "Is it ready?"

"Indeed it is," Quinley said, reaching beneath the counter and bringing up a black leather ring box. "And it's as beautiful as you anticipated it would be."

Quinley opened the box and turned it around for Patty to see. Her eyes widened and her lips parted in awe.

"Oh!" she breathed. "It sure is! And he's going to love it!"

The face, a rectangle turned to an octagon by the angled corners, was taller than it was wide. The groove slanting down the left side both protected and showcased the circular birthstones, Troy's ruby at the top, her sapphire, then Missy's topaz and Randy's amethyst.

She held it a few moments and drank in the beauty of it before handing it back. "Could I get it gift wrapped, please?"

Quinley disappeared with the box into the back of the shop and Patty got out her checkbook. She glanced at the calendar on the wall to date the check, and her good mood dimmed suddenly and drastically.

Troy had been staying at the cabin going on three weeks and he had said nothing yet about coming home. She hadn't expected it to take this long. What if he was still out there in another three weeks, when their anniversary rolled around? What if he was still there three months from now? Three years?

No. No, don't you think that way. He'll be home. He'll be home soon.

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“Anyone need cream or sugar?” Patty asked, setting a small tray on the round oak pedestal table in the breakfast nook off the kitchen. Seated at the table were three of her fellow members of the the Executive Wives Association, sardonically dubbed the Ex-wives’ Club.

“Thanks,” said Nelda Worley, reaching for the cream pitcher. Her short, shiny pageboy reflected midmorning light from the wall of windows overlooking the patio.

“Wow. Real cream. Patty, you’ve got such style! People are lucky to find the CoffeeMate at my house.”

“None for me, style or not,” Jackie Talbot said. She was small, pale and delicately boned. “Learned how to drink coffee strong and black when I was a Navy wife. Never changed.”

“Well, I take both,” Patty said. “It’s the only way I could choke it down when Troy was in graduate school and I first learned to drink coffee. And I never changed, too.”

“And I never learned to drink it at all,” said Kendra House, who, at forty, was the oldest of the women at the table. The Coke on ice she was sipping and the two cinnamon rolls on her plate were fair indicators of why she was also the widest.

They were meeting to discuss the outcome of the association’s latest fundraiser, a huge second-hand sale, and Nelda said, “Blaine donated a lot of stuff, but then he bought as much as he donated, I think!”

“Well, Paul didn’t do a thing to help,” Jackie said. “He stays completely away from my activities and I stay away from his. It’s what’s kept our marriage strong all these years—that, and the fact that his girlfriends are all in other towns.”

“You’re very fortunate,” Kendra said bitterly. “There are people in this town who are only too happy to keep me, uh, apprised of all of Brett’s... activities.”

“Men are such sleazeballs,” Nelda said. “Blaine hasn’t had any more girlfriends since that peroxide blonde with the big boobs at work, but he’s been a real grouch since it ended. Still, they’re both with us.”

“Yep,” Jackie said. “It’d almost make you think a mistress hovering in the background makes a marriage stronger. I know mine is. It may be dull and boring, full of bitterness and but it’s strong. It’s almost like we can’t get rid of ’em—Oh, Patty!” Jackie gasped. “I’m sorry!”

Patty looked at her innocently. “About what?”

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“Oh, what a gaffe, talking about my intact marriage when yours is....” If she was waiting for Patty supply the proper term—on the rocks, washed up, deep-sixed, done for—she waited in vain, for no help from her hostess was forthcoming.

Nelda horned in. “Well, Troy did walk out on you.”

Taken aback by their knowledge of Troy’s absence and wondering how they’d found out, Patty said nothing. Her expression was unreadable but seeing no hostility and no tears threatening, her visitors charged on.

“Nobody could believe it when word got out,” Kendra said. “Everyone always thought you two were the ideal couple. Still so in love after all those years of marriage and two kids....”

“I know,” Nelda agreed. “If I’ve heard it once, I’ve heard it a dozen times—‘Who would have thought Troy Stevenson would have turned out to be such a fraud and a rat?’”

“Not that *we* ever said that,” Jackie said. “But I have to admit it’s pretty lowdown of him to run out on you and the kids that way.”

It was one thing to sit and suffer through a bitter rendition of problems in their homes and marriages; one thing to listen, bored and appalled, at their put downs of their own husbands, revelations Patty tried not to listen to and certainly did not respond to. However, it was quite another to listen to them transfer their bitterness to Troy.

When they finally paused in their caustic dialog, Patty spoke in a deep, trembling voice.

“I won’t have someone come in here and trash my husband in his own home. I want all three of you to leave now.”

After a moment of stunned silence, a chorus of indignation flowed toward her.

“Patty, you’re joking!” Kendra said. “*His* own home? He doesn’t even *live* here! He *left* you!”

“Are you blind, girl?” Jackie said, frowning.

“Look, he’s a charmer, no doubt,” Nelda said, trying to inject a tone of understanding into the conversation. “Unbelievably handsome devil and I know you love him, but honey, it was bound to happen sooner or later. They’re men—it’s what they do! The sooner a woman learns things about men in general, and her husband in particular, the better off she’ll be.”

Kendra, who seemed to drink from the deepest cup of bitterness, said in a shaking voice, “You need to understand, Patty, he doesn’t love you. Even if he hadn’t walked out on you, it doesn’t mean he loves you. Men don’t love. They’re incapable of it. Some men are just better at snowing

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women than others, and I guess Troy's had you fooled for a long time. But he doesn't love you. Men get married to have sex, and to have a cook, housekeeper and nurse and once you turn into their servant, they'll even get sex from someone else."

Patty still appeared outwardly calm, her dignity and reserve intact, but inside she was quaking with rage. She looked from one to the other of them and said, "I want you to leave Troy's house, now."

She met the second babble of protests with a thunderous expression.

First stunned by her demand, then annoyed, finally angered, her former friends gathered up their purses and walked together to the front door. Before leaving, Jackie turned to look at her hostess, who had gone from hospitable to hostile so quickly.

"Patty, it's stupid to defend a man who does what Troy has done to you. You need to admit he's not the man you always thought. He's a cad, just like all of them."

Patty was so enraged when she shut the door behind them she could barely breathe. Hot tears poured down her cheeks. Her hands were trembling and she wanted to scream and rage. How dare they!

They did not know Troy—they had no idea what he was like or what life with him was like.

Nobody knew him the way she did.

Nobody.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When Patty Ayers was sixteen and Troy Stevenson walked into the Dairy Freeze and took possession of her heart—when he demonstrated his interest in her the moment they first saw each other—it would forever seem a miracle to her.

That he had come back the next day and asked her out was almost too wonderful to believe. But from that point on, there was no turning back, no stopping the giddy fall into the depths of love for either of them.

There had been a few odd little bumps along the way, among them Patty's early reluctance to take him home to meet her family.

By their fourth date, when she was still having him pick her up at friends' houses or the Dairy Freeze and had not told him where she lived, she could tell he was growing deeply suspicious.

"Are you trying to keep it from your parents that you're dating a jock? Look, I know what kind of reputation football players have. I don't know how much weight it'll carry, but I'm tellin' you, I'm not like that."

She had looked at him, stricken. "I know you're not. I've told my parents I've been going out with you. They're looking forward to meeting you. It's just that I—" She clamped her lips on the forming explanation he wouldn't have understood, anyway, and capitulated. "You can come to my house tonight."

She gave him directions with a smile that she hoped would disguise the dull, throbbing ache that had started in her heart.

When he arrived at the white clapboard house in an older, settled neighborhood, she took him through the homey kitchen to the den where he met Don and Virginia Ayers and hit it off with them right away, talking the inevitable subject of football.

So far, so good.

It lasted ten minutes. That was when Patty's two older sisters, Diane

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and Elaine, showed up. Her two gorgeous, witty, sparkly sisters, who recognized Troy instantly and demonstrated not only their pleasure and excitement at meeting him, but their surprise that Patty was going out with him. They entertained him with the expert flattery and blatant flirting that had come naturally to them since the onset of puberty.

That was their M.O. That was the way they had stolen the heart of every boy she had ever cared about.

But not this one, please, she begged silently, her heart already breaking. Hope and begging were futile. Watching them work their magic on him, it was all she could do to keep tears out of her eyes. How could this beautiful man resist these beautiful girls?

But...

In the theater, munching popcorn and waiting for the movie to begin, Troy said, "I enjoyed meeting your family. And I really like your mama and daddy."

"And my two beautiful sisters."

"Yeah, I enjoyed meeting them, too. They're kinda chatterboxes, aren't they? But they seem like really nice girls."

She had given him an odd look just as the house lights fell and the screen lit up, stunned that he was no more impressed than that. Her heart, on the verge of breaking moments before, pounded with hope.

They would have to date a while longer, get a little more certain of each other's feelings before Patty could tell him, "They've taken every boy I've cared about, ever since I was thirteen. They weren't being mean or trying to hurt me. Sometimes they didn't even know. They're just more the type of girl that guys look for."

A tender look came to his face, while something stronger, deeper, sparked in his eyes. He gave her cheek a couple of swift strokes with his thumb and murmured, "Not this guy."

He made her last year of high school a year of pure Cinderella magic. Only her two closest friends knew she was dating the famous Tide running back that summer and the first time she and Troy had shown up at a school function, Forrest High School's first home game of the season, he had caused quite a stir. Monday morning, every girl in school looked at Patty with new and jealous eyes. The envy grew to epic proportions after Thanksgiving holidays when she back came to school with an enormous rock of an engagement ring on her finger.

But the highlight that fall had been Saturday afternoons at Denny Stadium or Legion Field in Birmingham, watching him on the gridiron,

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and knowing that this guy the crowds were cheering for and the whole world was watching—was hers.

And when the clock ran down and the game was over, and he would have Patty brought to him on the sidelines for a sweaty hug and kiss, whether of celebration or consolation, he showed the world that she was his.

And on Saturday nights, when they were alone and the world wasn't watching, he showed her in a different way that they belonged to each other. When he gave her that you're special look, whispered to her and his breath warmed her skin, tickled her hair...when he touched her, a thrill so intense it felt akin to pain vibrated through her from head to toe. The more she was with him, the more she discovered about him to love. The miracle of her life was that he loved her, too.

When he asked her to marry him before she was of age, and they both knew her parents would have to legally permit it, Patty was worried. By then, her parents loved and trusted Troy—knew him to be a good man and who put their daughter's well-being first and foremost.... But *marriage*.... She was so *young*.

Troy was persuasive when he and Patty made their case for marrying shortly after the end of school in June. Don and Virginia were impressed with Troy and his arguments, but it was Patty's that made their decision.

"Mama, Daddy. I need to marry Troy because he's better than I am and I don't know that I'll ever find anyone else who is."

"Wait a minute," Troy said, taken aback. "I'm just an ol' boy from Tennessee. I'm not better than you. I'm not better than anybody."

"Yes, you are. I don't mean it like you're thinking. The Bible says I have to submit my will to the man I marry. I couldn't submit to a man who's no better than I am so I have to marry someone better than me, someone I can look up to. And you are better. You're smarter, stronger, you have more courage, more responsibility. Things like that."

Still not sure how to take what she was saying, Troy murmured, "Well, honey, I've got four years on you..."

"No, it's not just because you're older. It's because you're better."

It was Patty's assertion that she could submit to Troy, and may never find another man who she could submit to, that persuaded her Southern Baptist parents.

And so the magic continued. Planning their wedding that spring was a blissful undertaking. As the time approached, Patty had no conscious misgivings at all, except a secret worry that she might disappoint him. But

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such a possibility never seemed to occur to him, and that gave her confidence.

If she had any misgivings about him unawares, they were obliterated late one night in May, in the swing on her parents porch. In the shadows Troy kissed her over and over and his sexual hunger got away with him. He turned her to face him and pulled her onto his lap. She felt the hardness in his jeans beneath her as his hands slid up from her waist, his palms pressing against her breasts.

The feeling that shot through her was like nothing she had ever experienced and a breathless moan sounded in her throat. A similar sound welled up in his and sent chills over every inch of her skin. When his tongue gently prodded her lips and found its way into her mouth, she thought for a second she would lose consciousness. Her muscles drained of strength; her mind lost the will to resist and she melted against him.

At that instant, he began to retreat. He stiffened, took her upper arms in a gentle grasp and carefully slid from beneath her. They sat side by side in silence a few minutes, coming back from the brink of passion.

“Patty.” His voice was soft and thick, gravelly with arousal. “I shouldn’t have done what I just did but I’m not sorry. I just want you, I want you so bad and I don’t apologize for it. It’s part of love and I love you so much. But we’ve got to be strong. I’ve got to be strong. You understand why, don’t you?”

With enormous eyes, she gazed at him and nodded. “Because it’s wrong.”

“No!” he insisted. “It’s not wrong. We’re supposed to feel this way about each other. That’s the way God made us. What makes it wrong is that we’re not married yet.”

He took her face in his hands. “Oh, baby, we can’t defile our marriage bed when we’re this close. We can’t let a lifetime of heaven on earth turn into ordinary sex just because we got too weak to wait. We’ve been strong all this time. We have to be strong one more month. If we can’t, I don’t think we need to be alone with each other anymore before the wedding.”

Wise beyond his years and experience, she had thought. Yes, she had chosen well this man she could so look up to.

Being each other’s first and only, Patty had nothing to compare him to, but she was quite certain that there was no better lover on earth. As newlyweds, they learned sex together, doing what came naturally and teaching each other.

He could be the tenderest, most attentive lover imaginable. Most of the

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time, he was sweet and slow, his attention focused on her—on loving and pleasing her. But other times, more rarely, he was animal, intense and vigorous and single-minded, in it for himself, driven by his body's physiological need for release. Then, he seemed hypersensitive to everything she did, every touch, every kiss, the very sound of her voice.

Both extremes filled Patty's heart with love for him, like Scripture said—good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over—even as they filled her body with cravings for him.

She especially cherished the knowledge that no one else in the world—nobody but she—knew what he was like when he was sexed up. That part of him was hers, and hers alone.

Nobody but she had ever seen him when his hair was tousled by his lover's fingers...when his lips grew red and his lipline went fuzzy...when moonlight slanting through the windows reflected off the whites of his eyes and the tips of his teeth, making them glow like nacre...when, under lowered lids, his dark eyes smouldered, and his beautiful face took on a sultry expression of yearning...when he was caught up in the warm, dreamy pursuit of ultimate gratification, and his respiration would go from long and deep to quick and staccato...when it would catch in his throat from a spike in pleasure as they slowly, tantalizingly worked their way toward fulfillment...it was like making love to an angel come down from heaven.

He had told her it was the same with him. Whether her need was to give or receive, it moved and excited him like nothing else in life. He knew her in the Biblical sense, as no one else in the world did—knew how she looked, how she sounded, how she moved when caught in the throes of passion—and it made her all the more precious to him.

Through the years, as it had at the beginning, cosmic-level sex had played a vital role in their relationship, cemented it, although it was only one of the ties that bound them. Their traditional marriage roles—he the breadwinner, she the homemaker—had worked out very much as they had planned them during their courtship, and helped to solidify their love.

Once, after moving to Verona, Troy asked her if she ever had second thoughts about the lifestyle they had chosen.

“Do you ever regret giving up your single life so young? Do you ever wish you'd had a career?”

She stared at him, taken aback. “I do have a career. Do you ever wish you had a career woman for a wife? Somebody more sophisticated, someone who has grown with you?”

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“What?” His brows had buckled in confusion.

“You know what the women’s libbers say,” she told him. “A man’s work keeps him in touch with the world, makes him grow, while his stay-at-home wife stagnates—some feminist actually said housework atrophies a woman’s brain—and eventually the husband will get bored with her “

She searched his face but it had gone neutral and he was silent.

“I love the career I’ve got,” she said. “There’s nothing I’d rather be than your wife and the children’s mother. But I didn’t go to college or anything, and I don’t want to stagnate and bore you. I don’t want you to grow away from me—”

That old fear, that she didn’t have what it took to keep him, threatened at the edge of her mind.

Please, not another fear and doubt episode! Don’t trouble him with that!

But he had dispelled this one before it started.

“Grow away.... No. Patty. You amaze me, with all you do—the way you take care of me and the children. You’ve made this beautiful home for us, a place where we belong, our refuge from the world. You’re beautiful. You’re smart. You’re way more than competent; you’re masterful at what you do and I’m so proud of you. I’m so proud you’re my wife.”

Her eyes had stung a little then, and she put her arms around him, held him tightly, as he returned her embrace.

“The only thing I’m a little concerned about,” he murmured, “as far as your intelligence goes, is why you’d pay any attention to what some idiot feminist says.”

She had to bite her lips then, to suppress a giggle. “Hey, I’m not the one who brought up this whole conversation, remember?”

He looked down to give her lazy grin. “And you can bet money I’ll never do it again.”

Aside from super-sex and their traditional roles, what really set their marriage apart from so many, Patty believed, was not just how great it was at the top, but how innocuous it was at the bottom. They kept problems to a minimum. They didn’t let slights fester. They determined from the beginning that they were not going to compete with one another. No games of one upmanship. Respect for and attention to the other....

That was why Patty had to give Troy the support he needed to face his problem as he saw fit even though she badly wanted him at home.

And that was one thing people like her erstwhile Ex-Wives Club friends would never understand.

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What a difference when Gina Kincaid and Carol Jordan visited her. The three women had been acquainted with each other for years through church. Now, another of their commonalities was their sons, whose evolving friendship had done so much to keep Randy from despair in his father's absence. But as they grew better acquainted, other common interests came to their attention and they were developing a three-way friendship simultaneously with the boys.

Patty was comfortable with them and trusted them. Not long after Troy left, without going into a lot of detail, she had told them about the circumstances of his absence—as much as she could without betraying him—and was greatly relieved by their response. They were sympathetic to her and nonjudgmental of Troy, and she was grateful for that, and for their words of encouragement to her.

As they spent more time together, they discovered even more things in common. One of them was their attitude about men in general and their husbands in particular, which was rooted in their Baptist upbringing.

A few days after Patty sent her former friends packing, the three young mothers got together at the Stevensons' house. Carol and Gina had come to talk about their boys' summer activities and develop a carpooling schedule.

While their children played in the back yard—Tommy and Melissa together and aloof from the others, and Ainsley trailing Shelby like a shadow—they sat around the dinette table consulting calendars and making notes. When they finished, they left the table and strolled into the kitchen to the coffee maker for refills and pastry.

Gina wandered to the family room with her coffee and looked at a small family portrait on Troy's desk. It was fairly recent, taken during the Christmas season just a few months ago. The happiness on Troy's face, the sheer goodness in his eyes, made her smile.

"How's Troy doing?"

Patty took her seat on the couch, put her coffee on the end table and smiled. "He's doing good," she said, but gasped as tears suddenly flooded her eyes.

"Patty!" said Carol, who was headed for a seat nearby. She put down her refreshments and sat next to her hostess.

Gina quickly joined them. "What's the matter? Is Troy all right?"

"Yes, he's fine. It's just that I had to listen to so many snide remarks

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and outright slander against him recently, I still get furious about it.”

She gave them a brief overview of what her former friends had said about Troy. “They finished with, men are rats and cads. I wanted to say, ‘Not my man!’ But what would be the use? Women that bitter are only going to believe what they want to.”

“Some friends!” Gina said.

“I agree,” Carol said. “Don’t listen to those women. Listen to us.”

“Oh, I didn’t listen to them. I told them to get out of Troy’s house.”

“Did you!” Gina said pleasedly.

“Yes, I did. They left and they haven’t been invited back. I just don’t understand why they would try to discourage me. They said really stupid things, like men don’t have feelings and they’re are incapable of love.”

“Well, that’s nuts,” Carol remarked.

Patty nodded and dabbed at her eyes with a napkin. “They said the only thing men want is food and sex.”

Her guests responded to that simultaneously. Gina said, “What’s wrong with that?” and Carol said, “I bet they said it like it’s a bad thing.”

In the abrupt silence that followed, the three women looked at each other, startled, and then burst into laughter.

Gina winked at Patty and said, “That’s drying up the tears, isn’t it? Bless their hearts, they are simple, easily satisfied creatures and they do so much in return!”

“They do want more than sex and food, though,” Patty said, giggling through her diminishing tears. “They also want sports and television. With remote control.”

“And a La-Z-Boy,” Gina said.

“And a grill,” Carol added, as the giggling started up again.

When it died down, Patty said, “It just flew all over me, these women saying such terrible things about my husband, and they don’t know anything about him. Gina, you’re so right. Our men do so much for us. Despite the constant pressure Troy’s under because he has so many people depending on him, he finds the challenges and rewards of his job deeply satisfying. But his real reason for doing it is to take care of me and the children...*because he loves us.*”

Patty almost teared up again as a great wave of mixed emotion associated with her husband washed over her—love and veneration, a hollowness inside because of his absence, and a sharp yearning for his return.

“It’s the same with Dale,” Carol said. “What they said about men being incapable of love is so not true.”

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“They’re not simple, really, they’re just different from us,” Gina said. “A lot of the problems between men and women come up because people don’t understand the differences, or don’t understand the how important they are.”

“Yeah, they say differences exist,” Patty observed, “but are inconsequential. That’s what women’s lib has tried to palm off on society...that women are basically no different than men. They say we’re equals but what they mean is we’re the same, and we’re not.”

“We’re all three married to wonderful men,” Carol said. “They’re not perfect—”

“Neither are we,” Patty said and her companions nodded. “But you’re right, they are wonderful men.”

There was short silence and Gina gave her hostess a calculating look. “Patty, you’re not letting what those women said give you ... concerns ...”

“About my husband? No, I have no doubts about him. But I am concerned about what he’s going through. He’s always been so confident of himself. Everyone experiences self-doubt on some level, at some time, I guess, but he has always dealt with his doubts, put them in their place quickly and firmly. But this is taking him so long to work through! I know he’ll do it, and everything will be all right, but—*I miss him so much! I want him to come home!*”

She didn’t cry again, but her misery was palpable, and her visitors rallied to her and gave her friendship hugs.

“Oh, hon, of course you do,” Gina said. “I’d feel the same way in the same situation.”

Carol gave Patty’s hand a quick pat. “When Dale gets back after talking with Troy, I always ask how he’s doing. Well, of course Dale isn’t going to betray a confidence or anything, but he’s told me how much he admires Troy’s integrity, and how impressed he is with his approach to dealing with problems. Whatever he’s doing, Patty, it’s working. I can’t be any more specific than that, but I do so hope it helps.”

Patty looked at each of them in turn and blinked rapidly to keep new tears from gathering in her eyes. She smiled and took each of them by the hand, squeezing gently.

“Thank you both, so much. You are wonderful friends.”

In her home on Cloverdale Road, Gina peered through the kitchen window to the back yard where Shelby and his friends played. The school

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year had ended several days before and weeks of summer fun stretched ahead. The carpooling schedule she and her friends had worked out earlier in the week promised to damp down summer's hectic factor.

The boys had been engaging in rough and tumble play in the back yard for nearly twenty minutes. There were six of them—Shelby, Randy and John Mark, plus Kyle and Trevor Townsend, who lived two doors down, and DeShawn Green, who lived on the next block east.

Gina opened the sliding glass door to the patio and stepped outside with Ainsley beside her. “Boys!” she called. “How about taking a break for a treat?”

“All *right!*” said Kyle who was the oldest, almost nine. His comment was copy-catted in the enthusiastic cries of the others.

“I want y'all to go inside one or two at a time and wash your hands while I bring your treats out, okay? Just don't run in the house.”

Play was fun at Shelby's house because his mother believed in letting boys be boys. She monitored their play to make sure it remained play and did not become violent or dangerous, and she doctored and kissed the occasional booboo, but otherwise she did not try to inhibit boy-play. She was convinced it was an important factor in helping boys grow up to be men like her husband—able, confident, empathetic, resilient, and courageous—in a culture inching toward misandry.

Today, the boys' treats were ice cream in plastic custard dishes, a crunchy granola bar and cups of cool water.

“Eat and drink slowly, now, so you won't get brain freeze,” she said, setting a tray on the redwood picnic table on the patio.

“Thanks, Mama!” Shelby said, his eyes getting big as she set his treat before him.

“Thank you, Miss Kincaid,” came from the other boys as they picked up their spoons and dug in.

When the boys were all provisioned, Gina went inside again. She returned in moments carrying a small tray with her own treat, a glass of iced tea, and a smaller dish of ice cream for her daughter. She pulled a patio chair to end of the table and sat with Ainsley in her lap.

Gina didn't always join Shelby and his playmates for treats, but she did so often enough that they were used to it. She enjoyed listening to them. That was an end in itself to hear their talk grow more sophisticated and to see their unique personalities emerge.

She didn't know DeShawn, who was barely six, or Kyle and Trev well

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enough to follow their emergence, but it was quite observable in her own son and the other two she knew well. Shelby's candor and impulsiveness, John Mark's optimism and expansiveness, Randy's dignity and reserve—they all grew more evident as time passed.

Sharing a treat break with the boys also presented Gina an opportunity to unobtrusively observe Randy and see how he was weathering the absence of his father.

Patty and Melissa found solace and companionship with each other that wasn't sufficient for Randy. So when he was invited home by the Jordans and Kincaids his mother let him go if he wanted to. It was both comfort and distraction for him, because when he was at home, he was acutely aware of his father's absence.

Without seeming to, Gina and Carol had kept an eye on Randy and had found themselves developing a special affection for the sweet, sometimes pensive little boy who was becoming so important to their own sons.

Gina noticed he still played hard but fair. He joked around, not as much as the others, but it was by no means rare, and when there was something to laugh about, he erupted in boyish laughter just like the others.

But he was developing a reserve like his mother's that intensified, now and then, into detachment.

When the treats were gone and it was playtime again, DeShawn did not stand up with the others. He was taking longer to finish his ice cream and he asked for more water.

"Shelby, watch your sister a moment." Gina set Ainsley in her chair and took DeShawn's cup inside for a refill. When she brought it back out and set in on the table, the boys were hovering in the yard beside the patio and the conversation took her aback.

"You're fibbin'," Kyle said to Randy, "because my mama says you don't have a daddy anymore."

Randy's reserve and dignity had completely disappeared. He was trembling with rage, his dark eyes were blazing and he looked to be in no danger at all of fainting. "I do too have a daddy! Troy Stevenson is my daddy!"

"Kyle! Randy!" Gina cried, but they both ignored her.

"Huh-uh," Kyle said. "He hit you and knocked you down the steps and he had to leave."

"He did *not!* It was uh *accident!*"

"My mama says he was drunk!"

"You shut *up!* You just *shut up!*"

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Tears streaked down Randy's cheeks and he threw himself at the larger boy. They fell to the ground, rolling and tumbling. With grunts and sobs marking his efforts, Randy pummeled Kyle with his fists. The other boys bent over them, yelling for them to stop, but to no avail until Gina stepped in and separated them.

They got to their feet, glowering at each other and bleeding from minor cuts and scrapes.

"Trev, DeShawn," Gina said over her shoulder. "I want you boys to go home. Playtime's over."

"Yes, ma'am," they said simultaneously in subdued voices, but they didn't move.

"Right now! Get going! And Trev, tell your mother Kyle will be home in a minute."

"Okay."

"Shelby, you and John Mark take Ainsley inside and watch television." She turned to Randy and Kyle. "You two, come with me."

They stepped inside through the patio doors. Gina took the combatants through the kitchen to the dinette table. "Y'all sit down. No fighting, no fussing, hear?"

She went to the bathroom and returned in moments with first aid items. She worked on Kyle first, pulling a chair around to sit next to him. His elbow had scraped something, perhaps the edge of the patio, and he had a dirty abrasion on one cheek. Gina treated the scrapes with antiseptic and put bandaids over them.

She walked him to the side door and stepped onto the carport with him. When they were out of Randy's earshot, she said, "Kyle, I don't want you talking to Randy like that anymore. I'm surprised you'd do that, when you can see it makes him feel bad. You're old enough to know better."

"But my mama said—"

"Honey, you hush, now. Your mother doesn't know because she wasn't there. She's just heard things from neighborhood gossip."

Kyle looked at the ground. "I'm sorry. I won't do it no more."

"All right."

He looked up at her sideways, squinting. Gina pushed his hair back from his forehead. She smiled at him.

"You've always seemed like a fine boy to me. You just need to be reminded of things sometimes, like all boys do. You run on home now. Take care of your scrapes and tell your mama to call me if she wants to know more about what happened."

Southern Man

Back inside, Gina pulled her chair around next to Randy to inspect his injuries. Solemn-faced, he looked up at her and said, “Am I in trouble for fightin’?”

“Not with me, sweetheart.”

His knuckles on one hand were skinned and he had a small but fairly deep cut above his right eyebrow, not so deep that stitches were required, but bad enough to probably make a small, faint scar that would stay with him for life. He had wiped blood from the cut with his shirttail.

Gina dabbed the antiseptic on the injuries with a cotton swab and then put a bandage on his forehead. It didn’t seem likely that one would stick to his knuckles for very long so she wrapped his hand with gauze and fastened it with surgical tape.

“There. Got you all fixed up,” she said. She looked at his face. “Except for your boobos, how are you doing, hon?”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I know you’ve had it kind of rough lately.”

“You mean ’cause my daddy’s gone.”

“Yes. And because people say things like Kyle did today.”

Randy’s solemn face took on a touch of sadness. “He comes to visit but he don’t stay long. I miss him a whole lot.”

“I know you do.” Sympathy colored Gina’s face and tugged at her heart. “You just keep hanging in there, though, and be strong. Make your daddy proud of you.”

“He’s already proud of me. He says I been real good since he left.”

“You sure have been. Mr. Kincaid and I are very glad Shelby has you for a friend.”

There was a pause and Gina said, “Randy, honey, your daddy is a very good man. One of the best I know. So don’t listen when anyone tries to tell you bad things about him. You don’t have to fight with them; just don’t listen to them.”

“Okay.”

“I hope he’ll be home real soon. Now, you run on into the den and watch TV with the others till your mama comes.”

Randy scooted out of the chair and took three or four steps, stopped abruptly and turned to come back to her before she could vacate her seat.

“I love you, Missis Kincaid,” he said, giving her a hug and a quick kiss on her cheek.

Touched by his sweetness, she gave him a hug in return and a warm smile. “I love you, too, Randy.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

After days upon days of eating cafeteria food and listening to the company women talk endlessly about their kids, their grandkids, their church, their hobbies, their vacation, Brooke was ready to give up the on-premises lunches.

Troy might no longer have fancy-schmancy lunches fixed by the smiley-faced little wife, but he wasn't eating in the cafeteria, either. She might as well go back to burgers and fried chicken. At least it got her out of the building in the middle of the day.

She was standing in the stalled serving line the day she made that decision. Somebody way up in front of her was taking his time about choosing an entre. Annoyed, she glanced behind her and was electrified to see Troy Stevenson standing there.

He was coatless and his shirt sleeves were rolled up to the middle of his forearms. He had traded his stainless steel watch for a gold one with with a brown leather band. It was just inches away from that big, gold wedding band. Why was he still wearing it if his marriage was breaking up?

Her eyes followed the line of his blue-gray tie up to the knot, and then moved farther upward. Looking at his face this close made her heart skip a beat. His eyes were so...*strange*.

She almost jumped when he looked at her.

"Hi," she said, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. "Moving slow today."

"How long have you been waitin'?"

"I've just been here a minute but the line hasn't moved at all." She found herself staring at his face, mesmerized, as he looked down the stalled line. He was squinting slightly, his lips were parted, his expression impatient. He looked almost like he did in that incredible football picture upstairs.

Southern Man

“Somebody can’t make up their mind.” He glanced down at her again, blinked and focused on her. “Is something the matter?”

For a moment Brooke was embarrassed about getting caught staring. She no doubt had a moonstruck look on her face. But what was wrong with letting him see she was interested?

“No,” she said, thinking fast for a cover. “You just look familiar. I’m trying to place who you remind me of.”

He was completely uncurious about that subject and dismissive of it. He looked at his watch and back at the stalled line. “I don’t have time for this. Hope you don’t have to wait too long.” He left her and walked toward the vending machine alcove.

Starry-eyed and weak-kneed, Brooke watched him go. He was the sexiest man she had ever seen. And he wasn’t living with his wife.

Brooke hated staying late, especially on Friday. Nobody had told her this might be a possibility, but here it was after six and she was saddled with new department policy of putting up all returns before going home. It was six fifteen when she finally finished and grumpily went to her cubicle for her purse.

She wanted to get to the Countess Boutique, which closed at seven, in plenty of time to shop. It would take at least fifteen minutes to get there.

She was awfully tempted to take what everyone called the “back way,” which rambled through largely undeveloped woodlands. Though longer by mileage, it reputedly cut off eight minutes drive time into town because there were no major intersections and no traffic lights with lengthy waits. Brooke had never driven it, but she was going to this evening, if she could find the map David had drawn for her.

It was in the top drawer of her desk. She took it and her purse, streaked through the storage area pushing in the locks on file cabinets and went to the back hallway to clock out. Growing more out of sorts every moment, she flounced through the mostly empty building and out to the parking lot. She was still in a huff when she drove away.

People were right about this route going through an undeveloped woodland. As she flew down the back road, identified as Highway 87 on the occasional road marker, she met only three vehicles the first couple of miles she traveled. There were none in her lane, in front of or behind her.

Presumably, everyone else who worked in the business park had gone home at five, like she should have.

CONNIE CHASTAIN

The road curved once and there were even a couple of low rises. Now and then she passed a house or a utility building and side roads, but it was mostly woods. She checked the road markers at the infrequent intersections to see if they matched her map, but David had not included them all.

She glanced at an upcoming marker for a road that went off to the left, and a sudden thrill pierced her stomach when recognition dawned.

Lake Lucy Road.

Tires squealed as she slammed on brakes and stopped dead on the pavement.

There were no cars coming from either direction so she made a U turn, traveled back the way she had come, and turned onto the side road. A few yards from the intersection, the blacktop road forked. A sign that read *Lake Lucy Recreation Area* pointed to the left fork.

She followed the arrow and soon reached a camping facility, heavily wooded on the left, less so on the right, where there were rental cabins, RV spaces, tent sites, picnic areas and open areas for recreation. Being early June, with kids not long out of school, the park's busy season was just beginning.

There were fairly large parking areas here and there. Through the empty spaces, she could see the shore of the lake. It was long and narrow, not too far across to the opposite shore. Through the trees she caught glimpses of structures on the other side.

She drove on. The public access area ended. Here, the buildings along the shoreline were private vacation cabins and her radar went on. Some of the houses were big and fancy, like beach houses on Tampa Bay. Most were modest by comparison. The underbrush increased and some of the cabins were hidden by thick vegetation, but most of them had small signs beside the road with surnames of the owners or names given to the property—Dawkins, Gill, Kelly, Pine Place, Yaupon Shores.

Creeping along, she saw no other cars or people on the road, but many driveways were occupied with everything from late model Caddys to old pick up trucks, and she kept a sharp lookout for the gray Audi. Now and then she glimpsed people by the shore and boats in the water or caught the aroma of barbecuing meat.

The road began a slow curve to the west and made a large U, turning north. She was headed back toward Highway 87 on the western shore of the lake.

The cabins here were smaller, older, farther apart, their grounds shad-

Southern Man

ed with big trees but not encased in underbrush like the newer ones. She frequently caught glimpses of the lake all the way to the other shore.

She would soon reach the highway again. She was disappointed to realize that the Stevenson cabin must have been one of those hidden by foliage and without an ID sign when, suddenly, she saw it—STEVENSON printed in block letters on a small placard beside a short driveway paved with shells.

She almost slammed on brakes again but realized she couldn't because Troy might see her. He had to be there. His car, with the Shearwater-Ingram parking decal in the lower corner of the back window, sat in the shell driveway under a flat-roofed shelter. She had to take in as much as she could without slowing.

It was a tiny cabin, not much bigger than a two car garage, but cute as a bug, gaily painted in taupe, sage and peach. The small lot was shaded by trees but not obscured by them. She glimpsed firewood stacked as high as a man's shoulder between two trees. There was a deck no more than eight feet wide around three sides of the cabin, and, best she could tell, a large one, almost as big as the cabin itself, on the lake side.

She made a point of noting its neighbors, a small clapboard house painted yellow to the south and to the north a rustic cabin with vertical siding in a redwood stain with white trim.

And then it was behind her. Back at the fork, she turned toward the recreation area again and slowly drove through it. She was barely able to see them in the waning light, but she soon spotted the redwood cabin and the little yellow house, and she pulled into the first available parking lot. There were many vacant spaces, and she went to a spot nearest the shore.

Between the two landmark houses, she saw what she was looking for. From this side, Troy's little cabin was a wall of glass. Lights were glowing inside, but she couldn't see any details at this distance. She barely made out lawn furniture on the deck, a table with an umbrella closed and covered and a black mound of something that had to be a barbecue grill under a cover.

He's over there.

The thought made her tremble.

He's over there. Alone.

Brooke didn't follow the road around the lake, past the Stevenson cabin, again. She left the way she had entered, and turned toward town.

CONNIE CHASTAIN

Nor did she go to the boutique as she'd planned. She had forgotten all about that. Instead, she went to Verona's diminutive mall, to K & J Sporting Goods where she spent forty-five minutes talking with a knowledgeable salesman. She left the store confident about her purchases.

She arrived at her apartment in a tizzy of excitement over the merchandise—binoculars and two stands, one for the ground, the other a tabletop model.

Her roommate hadn't spent much time here the last week or so, preferring to stay with her airman at his rented house near the base. Most of the time, Brooke didn't care for solitude but now she was glad to be alone.

She knew full well her obsession with Troy Stevenson was bound to show now and then, and she really didn't feel like trying to explain it to anyone, not even her friend.

She especially didn't want to hear lectures about the folly of attraction to married men.

And Angie would just freak out over the binoculars.

Brooke played with her purchases a while and found in her closet a padded and zippered cylinder bag in lightweight nylon, perfect to carry them in.

Supper was nuked leftovers she barely saw, let alone tasted, in her anticipation. After a shower, shampoo and her nightly beauty routine, she climbed into bed with Harold Robbins. It was only nine-thirty.

She wasn't certain exactly when the crack of dawn occurred, but she set her bedside clock for five a.m.

By ten, she was asleep with her dreams.

Chapter Twenty-Five

At five-thirty Saturday morning, Brooke stepped out of her apartment into the gray stillness of predawn. She carried in her purse a book, sunglasses, water and snacks. Her gym bag contained towels, socks, an extra pair of tennis shoes and the binoculars and stands.

Residential streets were mostly empty but there was more traffic than she had expected in the commercial areas. She arrived at Jefferson High School in ten minutes and drove around the periphery of the campus, looking over the athletic fields—football, baseball and track—and their parking areas.

Unbelievably, there were already a few cars in the parking lots—none of them a gray Audi—and a few figures hoofing it around the track. Brooke found a place between two other cars close to the track. She parked behind a row of shrubs as high as the hood. Very satisfactory. They would hide the identity of her vehicle without obstructing her view.

Soon it would be light enough to read. She dug her book out of her purse and settled down to resume the story while she waited. She didn't know how long she would have to wait, or whether he would even show, but if anyone tapped on her window, curious about why she was there for so long, she had a ready answer. Wearing Angie's workout suit, she would simply explain she was waiting for her friend for a morning run.

But nobody seemed curious why she was there. Nobody seemed to notice her at all.

Although the sun still wasn't visible above the trees, the day was considerably lighter at six fifteen. That was when Brooke looked up and saw the Audi turn into the parking lot and take a space a few rows away. Her heart skipped a beat.

With icy fingers, she fumbled through her stuff. She pulled the binoculars from the nylon bag, brought them to her eyes and focused them.

CONNIE CHASTAIN

She couldn't use either of the stands inside her vehicle, and what she saw through the lenses jumped wildly until she found that setting the instrument on the steering wheel steadied it considerably. She had to hunch down to get her eyes level with the top of the steering wheel, but it was worth it.

He was out of his car but still next to it when he came into focus through the binoculars. He was dressed in a navy warm-up suit and had white running shoes on his big feet. He was doing stretches. After a few moments of that, he stepped over a low wood rail and onto the track and began to walk.

Like everything else about him, his walk was lust-level sexy. Brooke followed his every step with the binoculars. He walked around the track once. The three or four other runners reached him and he lifted a hand to them as they passed. He started his second revolution at a slow trot.

He trotted around the track twice, then stopped where he had entered and took off the jacket, unzipped the legs of his pants and pulled them off. Beneath the suit, he had on blue gym shorts and a cut-off T-shirt. Brooke's breath caught in her throat.

He left the pants and jacket thrown across the rail and went back onto the asphalt and trotted around the track a couple more times. He upped the speed to a fast trot, then a slow run. Finally, on his next revolution around the track—Brooke had lost count of them by then—he broke into a dead run, turning on the speed and circling the track seemingly in moments. She lowered the binoculars and stared at him in awe.

His form, movement, speed and power combined to mesmerize her. He was utterly incredible.

Twice he went around the track at a dead run. He circled it a few more times, gradually reversing the routine that got him to those fast runs, ending the routine at a trot. He stepped to the rail where his warm ups waited, his body glistening with sweat, his wet clothing clinging to him, his shoulders heaving as he breathed through his mouth. His thick, dark mane was pushed by wind back from his face.

At his car, he tossed the warm-up suit on the hood. He reached inside and withdrew a container of water, took a sip, wallowed it in his mouth a moment and then spit it out. Upending the container, he drained half the contents with great swallows and then poured the rest over his face and head. Drops flew as he shook his hair. He leaned against the fender propped on his elbows, closed his eyes and let his head fall back.

Stunned by his performance on the track and conscious of quaking

Southern Man

desire in midsection, Brooke could not take her eyes off him.

After a while, his respiration returned to normal. Rested, he levered himself upright, stretched and shrugged, retrieved a towel from the front seat, dried his face and slung the towel around his neck to catch drips from his hair. He arranged the warm up suit to protect the car seat before he got in behind the wheel. When he started the car and backed out, Brooke, in a mild frenzy, started hers.

The Audi turned out of the parking lot and rolled down the side street. When it was almost to the next intersection, Brooke pulled out behind it. She didn't know whether she could follow at an undetectable distance without losing him, but she was going to try.

At the end of Mallory Street, the Audi went through a yellow light. The red caught Brooke and she whispered a curse. But he was not driving fast, and no one had turned behind him. When the light changed, Brooke still had him in view several blocks ahead.

He took a left onto tree-shaded Forsythe Street, where another traffic light snagged Brooke, but she could see that he went several blocks east, past a big church, and signaled a right turn before disappearing.

When the light changed, Brooke followed and turned down what she thought was the same road. There was a brick sign reading *Oak Terrace* at the intersection. She spotted the gray car several blocks ahead, again signaling a turn, this time left. At least there were no more traffic lights and no stop signs between them.

Troy's vehicle turned and disappeared. Brooke reached the road it had taken, Live Oak Street, and she turned too—and was gripped by surprise. His car was parked in a driveway in the very first block and he was out of it, walking toward a low, wide house of red brick surrounded by a spacious, well-tended yard.

She drove ahead for a couple of blocks, turned left, and circled around through the neighborhood. The subdivision was not laid out in a conventional grid. To the north, the streets perpendicular to Live Oak, were offset by half a block to those on the south side. The street she was on, Clematis Lane, intersected Live Oak across the street from the Stevenson's side yard.

At the corner, Brooke pulled to the curb and idled a for several minutes. To her right sat another brick house, small compared to its neighbor across the street, but well cared for, its side patio shaded with a jungle of potted plants. In the front yard, behind a chain link fence, an orange Pekingese stared at Brooke's car suspiciously and sniffed the air. Fine, as long as it didn't bark.

CONNIE CHASTAIN

She sat there perhaps ten minutes, studying the house across the street, taking in the details, even as she wondered. This was obviously his home, the one he shared, or presumably used to share, with the wife and kids in the photo in his office. What was he doing here now if they had split up?

Brooke was nervous and disappointed that nothing more happened as the moments passed. She was getting ready to leave when the garage door across the street opened. Electrified, she snatched up the binoculars and steadied them on the steering wheel. She got a good look at him when he emerged from the dark garage pushing a lawn mower.

He wasn't wearing the revealing running clothes or even the warm up suit. He had changed into faded jeans—*My gosh, is that really holes in the knees?*—and had well-worn brogans on his feet. Over a white T-shirt he wore a blue oxford shirt, unbuttoned and untucked, obviously a dress shirt too worn out for the office but not bad enough to throw away.

The most shocking item of his apparel, though, was the billed cap, complete with plastic size adjuster in the back and some sort of insignia in front. A small navy bandanna was attached to the bottom edge of the cap and reached to his collar, protecting his neck and ears from the sun, like some redneck foreign legion hat.

Stifling a giggle, Brooke stared at him through the binoculars, astounded. Even in that ridiculous get-up, he was still the sexiest man she had ever seen.

He reached down for the pull starter on the mower, and Brooke tossed the binoculars to the seat beside her in a sudden tizzy. She put the car in gear, backed down the side street and into a driveway to turn around. A lawn mower roaring this early in the morning would wake the dead, so it would surely wake nearby residents. They didn't need to awaken and notice a strange car parked by the curb, the driver gawking at their neighbor through binoculars.

She drove back to Forsythe Street glancing in the rear view mirror, half expecting to see residents of Oak Terrace stepping to the curb and looking down the street, pointing at her, their mouths wide, like something out of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

But she reached Forsythe Street without seeing another soul and as she turned east into the light traffic, she giggled with relief.

What an incredible weekend she was having, finding his lakeside getaway last night, watching that magnificent body run the track this morning, seeing his redneck, working class persona at his home.

At his former home...she hoped.

Southern Man

If he wasn't living there anymore, why didn't he just pay some teenager to mow the yard? That was easy. He wanted an excuse to come see his kids.

But if he wasn't living at home, why were those ludicrous work clothes there? They had to have been there because he hadn't carried them in.

That wasn't so easy to explain away so she just put it out of her mind.

Betty's eyes narrowed as she watched the little white car back down Clematis Lane and turn around in Phil and Sandy Harwell's driveway. She had a bad feeling about that car and the woman driving it. She'd noticed it several minutes ago when she'd let Gidget out for her morning pee.

Seeing a strange car idling by the curb was enough to evoke suspicion but the rapt scrutiny the driver was giving the Stevenson house roused Betty's fears.

According to the *Verona Beacon*, there had been an increase in burglaries in Yancey County this spring, mostly of small businesses, but recently the burglars had begun to target residential areas. So far, break-ins had been reported only in affluent neighborhoods like Sawgrass Estates and Irongate.

But those neighborhoods weren't far away, and Oak Terrace wasn't a slum. Over half the houses were smaller, like Betty's. But there were still many large homes, like the Stevensons', that bespoke occupants who were well off.

According to the news reports, the authorities suspected the thieves of looking for money, or merchandise they could sell, to buy drugs. Interstate 95 was the primary drug-running artery from South Florida to New York, but I-75, which skirted Verona to the east, was by no means exempt from drug trafficking. Joining Miami and Atlanta and points north where it networked other interstates, it gave drug-runners access to Chicago, St. Louis and the entire heartland of America.

When she first noticed the vehicle, Betty had stepped onto her carport and, spurred by suspicion and fear, sneaked to the end of her driveway. Hidden, she hoped, by an oversized pittosporum next to the fence, she squinted at the vehicle. Some kind of little white Chevrolet. Florida plates.

That cinched it for Betty. Florida was the entry point for drugs from Central and South America; she knew that from magazines and television.

CONNIE CHASTAIN

She scurried back into the house, whispering the plate number over and over until she got a pad and pen from a kitchen cabinet and wrote it all down, along with the time and date.

When she went back to the door to call Gidget into the safety of the house, the car was turning around in the Harwells' driveway. Across the street, Mr. Stevenson had come outside and was fiddling around with his lawnmower. Betty considered telling him about a possible crazed drug-head casing his home, and maybe giving him the information she had written down, but what did she have, really? What if she was unduly frightened by the *Beacon's* reports and it was something completely innocent?

She decided against telling him, but she would keep the information she had jotted down in a safe place. If she heard of any break-ins in the neighborhood, she would give it to her neighbor or the police then.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Troy trotted down the utility stairs, heels clanging on metal, and emerged on the ground floor near the door to the Marketing and Sales Department. The double doors were always open, and he stepped through.

Chin-high partitions separated the large area into work cubicles for the six employees of the department. In an open area at the entrance sat the desk of the secretary-receptionist, Joy Hoffman.

“Hey, Boss. You’ll like what Norm found,” she said cheerfully.

“I’m ready for some good news. How about you?”

“Yes, sir!”

He went to the largest cubicle, located on an outside wall and boasting two windows. Norm Crawford sat behind his desk, his straight-leg chair tilted back against the wall. He was looking at an unbound computer printout.

“So, what you got?” Troy said without ceremony.

The front legs of Norm’s chair hit the floor. “Raw sales data from the first half of the current quarter. I’ve done the adjustments manually so they may be a little bit off, but no more than a half a percent. If it continues like this the rest of the quarter, we’ll be back where we were before last quarter’s fall-off.”

A quick laugh rippled in Troy’s throat. “Yes, that is good news. So do we know what caused the fall-off?”

“Not yet,” Norm conceded. “Still working on it.”

Troy nodded. “Keep digging. We’ve gotta know why.” He pointed to the unbound printout. “Got another one of those for me?”

Norm smiled, took another report from the bookshelf behind his desk and held it out to Troy. “Right here.”

“Thanks. ’Preciate your help on this. I don’t mind telling you I’ve lost sleep over it.”

CONNIE CHASTAIN

Norm nodded. "So've I."

Back upstairs, Troy laid the printout in Dinah's in-tray and said, "Put that in a binder for me, please, ma'am."

"Yes, sir. Ah, sir, I got a call a while ago and I have something to report."

"Ah-ight, let's have it."

"You have a seat on the Falcon's next trip to Charlotte."

Troy's brows raised. "Charlotte? That's perfect. When?"

"Tomorrow. Mr. Ingram is sending the plane down to pick you up at six a.m. It'll stop back by Atlanta to pick up the North Carolina party. Returning Thursday.

"Wow."

"Yeah. Short trip. Short notice." She slanted a look up at him, waiting for his response.

Troy pinched the bridge of his nose. "Do you know of anything I can't leave undone for the next three days?"

"Yes, I do. I've put it all in your in-tray. I estimate it will take you four, five hours, depending on how many phone calls you get this afternoon, and how long you talk."

Troy grinned. "You are da *woman!*"

He went to his office and got to work.

Troy nuked a couple of wieners to make hotdogs for his supper and the pungent aroma of mustard, ketchup and onions lingered slightly in the cabin a good hour later. After supper, he lounged on one of the sofas looking over the report Norm had given him. The room was bathed in mellow light from the table lamp beside him while silver-blue light from the muted television flickered in a corner of the room.

Around eight, he laid the report aside, picked up the phone and dialed a number. The phone rang three times before a familiar and very dear voice answered, "Hello?"

"Mama."

"Troy Randall?" Suzanne Stevenson's voice rang with pleasure and affection. "How *are* you?"

"I'm fine. Everybody down here's fine. I'm calling to see if you and Daddy are going to be home this week. I'm flying up to Charlotte tomorrow, and thought I'd drive up and see you Wednesday."

"Oh, that's wonderful! Are Patty and the children coming?"

"No, just me this trip. How are you, Mama? How's Pop?"

Southern Man

“We’re doing great. Your father’s gone to a city council meeting right now about some zoning thing. Krissa made the honor roll and Jamie seems to be following in his Uncle Troy’s footsteps on the football field.”

Troy grinned. “Is that right?”

“Yes, at spring training, he switched to running back.”

Troy listened to the news of his siblings, nieces and nephews with quiet pleasure.

“Your brother—but we’ll tell you all about that later.”

“Okay.” He paused and cleared his throat. “Mama, I’m coming up to visit with just you and Daddy. I’ll bring Patty and the young’uns up later on this summer and we can get together with everyone else then.”

“That sounds fine. You be careful driving.”

“I will. I’ll see you Wednesday.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Odyssey Falcon lifted off from Yancey County Regional Airport and headed for Atlanta just as the sun cleared the tops of the pine woods around the airport. Troy and the pilot were the only people aboard.

Sleep was impossible on the plane. It was far too loud, far too bumpy, leaving Troy wide awake with his thoughts and no distractions.

Thinking about why he was going to visit his parents filled him with no small amount of trepidation. He was going to disappoint Frank Stevenson, no doubt about it.

Troy's father walked with a marked limp he'd had since boyhood. From their own childhood, Troy and his siblings had heard bits and pieces about the circumstances surrounding Frank's disability from their aunts and uncles. But Frank himself had told Troy the whole story when he was twelve.

"My paw was a coal miner in West Virginia, son. He was eleven when he started as a breaker boy, separating slag from the coal. This was just a few weeks after his own paw was killed in the Credemore mine disaster of 1901. Explosion. Fi'ty-nine men killed. Well, he was terrified, but in that family, every pair of hands that could work had to, if every mouth was to eat. So he suppressed his fear and did what he had to do.

"Eventually he went down into the mine as a door boy, and then a full fledged miner. He married, became a father, but he never got over the fear, even as an adult. Couple of times a year, it would surface as bouts of mindless drunkenness and he'd beat the living daylight out of mama and us young'uns—the people he loved most in the world."

In 1930, during one of his drunken rages, Preston Stevenson had cornered his youngest son, nine-year-old Frankie, on the rickety porch of the four-room mining shack that was the Stevenson home and backhanded him so hard against the flimsy wooden rail that it broke. Frankie had

Southern Man

plummeted eight feet to the rocky ground below and tumbled several yards down a steep hill. The excruciating pain in his hip kept him from walking for weeks, and when he finally did, it was with a limp that would stay with him the rest of his life.

Frank's three brothers—the two oldest already working in the mine—and two sisters, discussed the situation. As Frank related it to Troy, "Your Aunt Rachel come to me and said, 'You ain't agoin' in the mine. We'uns all done studied on it, an' one way or t'other we're agoin' to save you from that.' So I stayed in school long after I shoulda dropped out to start work."

Frank helped his mother raise a garden and chickens and hogs for the hungry family while his siblings set aside a small portion of their earnings year after year, until he graduated from high school in 1938. They had managed to save just enough to send him to vocational school from whence he emerged as an automobile mechanic.

Frank left West Virginia and found work in Aberdeen, a small town near the Tri-Cities area of Tennessee.

"I wanted to serve in World War Two and tried to enlist in the Army," Frank told his children, "but they didn't take cripples, so I went to work at Blackmon's Garage."

The year following VJ Day, he married Suzanne Howell, the daughter of a town merchant. Her family was several rungs on the social ladder above Frank Stevenson, but Suzanne's parents did not protest the courtship or the marriage.

"Troy Randall," Suzanne told him when he was fourteen and hints of the man he would become were showing in his broadening shoulders and deepening voice, "There's something magic about Stevenson men—something beyond the dazzlin' good looks—that makes their women love them to full capacity. Your three uncles have it. Your grandma told me that your grandpa had it. Despite his episodes of brutality, she and the children loved him to death. You and Frankie Junior have it. And of course your daddy has that Stevenson magic in spades. I knew that the first time I saw him."

More than once Troy had heard the story of his parents' meeting.

"Your mother had lost her betrothed in the war in Europe not long after the U.S.A. got involved. She started this gradual decline that frightened her maw and paw. They tried everything to snap her out of it. They put her to work in the dry goods department of Howell Mercantile. They gave her chores, kept her busy. Otherwise, she would've withdrawn totally into her grief."

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“It would have gone on that way forever, probably,” Suzanne said, “but for one thing. One day, they had me walk clear across town, to get Pa’s car from the repair place, which happened to be Blackmon’s Garage, where your daddy was employed.

“I walked in and this handsome, black-haired charmer sauntered over to me. I didn’t even notice his limp then, all I could see was his strength and virility. He had broad shoulders and muscular arms, and he was wiping his big, strong hands with a rag. He said, ‘Are you Miss Howell?’ And I said, ‘Yes, I am.’ He said, ‘Here’s the keys to your paw’s car.’

“Well, I thanked him, and I left the garage thinking there might be some good left to life after all. I couldn’t stop thinking about him. I didn’t even know his name and I was praying at night that he was a single man. A few days later, I couldn’t stand it anymore and I took the car back, on some pretense, I forget what—”

“You said it was shifting rough,” Frank said. He grinned at his son. “The vehicle was shifting just fine, and I knew it was. But I was mighty glad she’d made some excuse to come back.”

They were both vulnerable from past pain and trauma, they recognized it in each other, and they wanted to help each other. They fell in love, they married, and the babies started coming.

“On my salary, we were lucky to be able to afford rent on a trailer but I was too proud to take help from my in-laws. I was raised to be thankful for blessings received, and I wanted to be thankful that we had a roof over our heads, but I was embarrassed that my wife—Julius Howell’s daughter—and our babies had to live in a trailer.”

“But I got rid of that kind of thinking, pronto,” Suzanne told Troy, “when I told your father I’d rather live in a cave with him than in a mansion without him.”

“Your mother has a way with words,” Frank said, a smile crinkling the corners of his black Stevenson eyes. “She’s a very persuasive woman.”

They were still living in the trailer when their youngest, Troy, was born on July 3, 1951, and they would live there until he turned thirteen. By then, Frank was a part-owner of the garage, and while he would never get rich from it, the family was able to move to a little clapboard house set far back from the main highway leading to Aberdeen, the house they were still living in when Troy went off to college.

Except for two particular aspects, Troy’s early life was quite ordinary—church and school, play and chores, a part time job when he was old enough, friends and girlfriends, sports and the outdoors.

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One of the exceptions was the extraordinary level of family love and loyalty in the Stevenson household, which Troy would not come to see as extraordinary until he became an adult. But he would carry the strong sense of family love into adulthood and it would reside in his heart and manifest in his behavior his whole life.

“I knew you were going to be a family man when you were just a little boy,” Suzanne told him when he called from Tuscaloosa to tell her he was engaged. “When you played cowboys and Indians, there was always a pretend-family involved somewhere. If you were a cowboy, there might be a Conestoga wagon nearby sheltering a wife and baby that you protected and provided for. If you were an Indian, back in the Indian village there was a teepee sheltering a squaw and a papoose that you provided for and protected from the fork-tongued white man. You remember that?”

“Yes, ma’am, I do.” On a pay phone in the athletic dorm, Troy had listened to his mother and smiled at his childhood memories.

The other extraordinary aspect was Troy’s phenomenal talent for playing football, first evidenced when he was eight and played in the youth leagues—a talent that would eventually provide him with a college education and help prepare him for a lucrative job afterward.

When Troy was growing up, there were two things his father despised: alcohol and physical punishment of his children. Frank didn’t allow either one in his household, which wasn’t surprising, given his childhood experience with both.

He never struck any of his children in anger, for correction or any other reason, despite some serious provocation through the years from his high-spirited sons. And he instilled in them and his daughter a horror of and disdain for alcohol starting when they were in grade school.

His siblings were never tempted by alcohol, but when Troy was sixteen, a cocksure high school football star, one night after a glorious victory on the gridiron at Valley High School, he had gone out with his friends and got mindlessly drunk—so mindlessly he went home in that condition rather than hanging out at a friend’s house until he sobered up.

Suzanne, Junior and Rachel had driven up to Wheeling for a wedding and were staying with kinfolks. They were coming back Sunday. Frank was alone at home and when he heard the car that dropped Troy off and he stepped outside. He still had on the clothes he had worn to Troy’s football game.

It was cold, the night sky brittle black and Frank was trembling, but not from the temperature.

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“Daddy, whatchu doin’ out here in th’ cold?” Troy said, squinting at his father through bleary eyes.

Frank said nothing but his breathing was rapid and heavy, making a white cloud before his mouth. He stood and stared at his son, too enraged to speak.

“Daddy?”

Frank lunged at him, grabbed his letter jacket by the back of the neck and hauled him to the tiny one-car garage used for storage of nearly everything but the car. He opened the door and shoved his son inside. Troy stumbled and fell to the floor.

Frank flipped a light switch. A bare, dim bulb overhead came to life. In the eerie, orange light, Troy looked at his father and terror filled him. Frank’s anger went beyond anything he had ever seen. His face was almost...demonic.

His dark, shadowed eyes darted about and he picked up a small coil of twine off the floor.

“Come here,” he said. Troy scrambled to his feet and staggered forward.

“Let me see your hands.” Troy held his hands out in front of him, palms up. He slowly turned them over. Alarm went through him when Frank began to wrap the twine loosely around his wrists in a figure eight pattern.

“What’re you doin’?”

Frank had left the twine just slack enough to take hold of it between Troy’s wrists and wrench it tight. Troy tried to pull his hands away but his father held them fast.

“No,” he said. “You may be big, strong, strappin’ boy, but I’ve got you good. You can’t get away and you can’t fight back. Now you answer me some questions. Is this the first time you ever got drunk?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why’d you do it.”

Troy’s mind was a complete blank, but for fear. “I don’t know.”

“That’s not gonna get it, boy. You tell me why you defied me, broke my rules.”

Breathing hard through flared nostrils, Troy stared at his father. No words came to him.

“*Answer me!*” Frank thundered

Troy’s mouth opened but still nothing would come out.

Frank went berserk. He jerked Troy off-balance, half-supine, and dragged him, kicking to gain his feet, along the floor to the back of the garage where he took a length of thin steel cable off a peg on the wall.

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Troy twisted around to look up at him in horror. "Daddy, don't!"

Still holding tightly to the twine, with a loud groan almost like the growl of an enraged animal, Frank swung the cable, hard, and brought it down on the floor within inches of his son's head. It made a loud cracking sound as it hit the concrete floor, gouging a pit in the surface and sending dust and bits of concrete into the air and onto Troy's face.

Troy flinched. "Daddy, stop!"

Frank reared back and with another growl swung the cable again. And again, it missed his son by inches, popping loudly on the floor.

"I'll never do it again, I promise!" Troy sobbed drunkenly as tears coursed down his face.

Over and over the cable came down and hit the floor inches from his face, inches from his shoulder, inches from his legs. A dozen times or more, his father swung the cable down and every time, it hit the floor. Even when enraged to near mindlessness, Frank Stevenson could not bring himself to strike his son.

Finally, he stood still for a moment, blank-faced, his rage dissipated. He looked at the cable in his hand and tossed it to the floor. His eyes went to his fist holding the twine tight enough to cut off the circulation to Troy's hands. At the sight of his son's terrorstricken face, dawning horror came to his.

He lowered himself to the floor in stages, the only way his crippled hip allowed, and sat on the floor next to Troy, facing him. His big hands unwrapped the twine. They were as gentle now as they had been violent moments before. He pushed up the sleeves of Troy's jacket and looked at the red marks on his wrists. At the sight of them, Frank bowed his head and wept, his shoulders shaking with his sobs.

"God forgive me. He's just a boy."

"Daddy...."

Frank raised his head and looked at his son's face. "Troy Randall, I am so sorry."

"You don't owe me no apology. I shouldn't of done what I done and I *knew* it. You didn't hurt me."

Frank took his son in his arms and Troy returned his embrace. They held each other until their weeping stopped and the cold night air began to penetrate through their clothes.

Troy got up and helped his father to his feet. They walked silently through the garage, across the yard and up the steps to the little clapboard house. Suddenly, Frank gasped, hunched over and clutched at his chest.

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“Daddy?”

Frank grimaced and groaned with every breath. “Troy Ran—”

“*Daddy!*” Troy yelled, panic stricken. He knew what was likely happening to his father and he was far more terrified now than he had been in the garage. “I gotta get you to the hospital. Come on!”

He put his arms around his father and walked him to his truck, helped him inside. “Where’s your keys?”

“Right pock—” Frank grunted. Troy pulled the keys from his father’s pocket, slammed the door and ran around the truck. He got behind the wheel stone cold sober, and drove like lightning to the hospital, praying hard all the way.

Please don’t take him! This is my fault! I’ll never drink another drop, I promise, I swear, if You’ll just let my daddy live! Please, God, please don’t let him die!

It was a hour or longer before he could call his brother. He’d had to answer questions—provide his father’s identifying information and medical history, insofar as he knew it. He kept interrupting the questioning to ask about his father, but little was forthcoming until, at last, a doctor came to the ER waiting room and talked with Troy briefly.

“Son,” the doctor said. “I won’t soft-pedal this for you. Your daddy’s had a serious heart attack. But he’s stabilized and it looks like he’ll probably recover. That’s about all I can tell you right now.”

“Can I see him?”

“In a while, after he’s moved to intensive care. In a way, he’s fortunate. This happened when he’s young enough and healthy enough to survive it. If it happened three, five years down the road, he probably wouldn’t.”

When the doctor left, Troy found a pay phone, called his cousin’s home in Wheeling and asked for his mother. Cousin Terrell was still half asleep when he answered but he came awake quickly and accepted the charges impatiently.

“Troy, what is it?”

“Let me speak to Mama and Junior.”

“What’s the matter?”

“*Just git them to the phone!*”

He heard the handset clatter followed by echoing voices. His surroundings seemed unreal in their fluorescent brightness. He felt cold inside, congealed.

“Troy Randall,” his mother said. “Junior and I are here. What is it?”

“Daddy’s in the hospital. He had a heart attack.”

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He heard his mother's faint cry and the sharp gasp of his brother.

"The doctor said he's young and healthy enough that he'll prob'ly recover."

"Oh, thank God!" Suzanne said, sobbing. "Son, listen. We're coming home. We'll wake up Rachel and leave now. Right now."

"Troy," Frankie said. "Just hang on. Take it easy. Tell him we're on the way, and we're praying for him."

Not long after the call, Troy got to visit with his father briefly. After so recently seeing him so fearsome, almost malevolent, to see how ashen and frail he looked now was heartbreaking and frightening.

"Thank you for bringing me here so quick, son," Frank said. His voice was faint and reedy. "They tell me it was a major factor in my survival."

Troy swallowed hard. "There wouldn't of been no need to bring you here if it wasn't for me goin' out...."

"You're feeling guilty and ashamed."

"Yes, sir."

"So am I."

Troy gave him a disconcerted stare.

Frank nodded grimly. "Yes, I am. For mistreating you. I don't know how I coulda done that to you." Frank paused to take several labored breaths. "Rage can be powerfully destructive—as bad as drink. There were other ways I coulda handled it. Shoulda."

For a moment, they looked at each other's dark Stevenson eyes, into each other's soul, where shame and guilt—and love and forgiveness—lived.

"I called Mama and Frankie. They're wakin' Rachel up and all comin' home now. Be here in about five hours."

"Did you tell them what happened tonight, before this?"

"No, sir."

"Can you think of any reason why we need to tell them? Ever?"

Troy looked at his father, his eyes wide as he realized what Frank was proposing. "No, sir."

"Right. Let's keep our sins against each other between us and God."

"Our sins and being sorry." Troy took his father's hand—the one that had held the twine around his wrists in such a powerful grip. Now it was weak, like a little child's hand.

Frank nodded. "Our sins, our repentance, and our forgiveness of each other. Strictly between us and God. Now you go on home, get cleaned up. Get the stench of drink off of you, so your mama won't know."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Troy accelerated the rental car onto Highway 57 headed toward Aberdeen. The new green of spring was gone in the mountains; he was surrounded with the mature but fresh green of early summer.

Five years of living on Georgia's coastal plain had turned him into a flatlander. But whenever he returned to Tennessee and saw the mountains looming up ahead, saw their undulating blue profiles rising up from misty valleys, it never failed to touch his heart, and perhaps his soul. The mystical bond of the mountain man for the hills was in his blood and went back centuries to the Highlands of Scotland, from whence his forebears had come.

The feeling was stronger than ever on this trip, perhaps intensified by his highly emotional reason for coming home.

He stopped the rental car in the driveway of a brick house from the same era as the one he lived in, this one was about two thirds the square footage of his. His parents had purchased it five years before, calling it their retirement home, although neither of them had shown the slightest sign of retiring. Frank had been the sole owner of Blackmon's Garage for years, and Suzanne had shared ownership of Howell Mercantile, and management responsibilities, with her siblings since Julius and his wife had retired in the late Seventies.

Suddenly immersed in family nostalgia, Troy strolled toward the front door. He didn't have to knock. His mother was out of the house before he reached the top step, taking him in a hug only mothers can give.

"Oh, my goodness! It's wonderful to see you!"

Troy returned her embrace and her happy smile. "Hey, Mama!"

Behind her, Frank leaned heavily on his cane and limped toward Troy, who hastily stepped to meet him halfway for an easy, backslapping hug.

Southern Man

“How you doin’, Pop?”

“Can’t think of a thing to complain about.”

Troy looked from one to the other of them, suddenly wanting to put off his reason for coming here for as long as possible.

“Any good new eating places around here? It’ll be my treat.”

“Oh, no,” his mother said. “I’ve been planning all your favorites ever since you called—and cooking all day. You come on in. We’ll have an early supper and then we’ll visit and catch up on everything.”

After supper, they sat in the shadows of the screened porch listening to the chirping and buzzing of the night bugs. Suzanne, as if sensing this was more between her husband and son, took a seat slightly apart.

After a while, Troy said, “Three weeks ago today, I came home drunk after work and I hit Randy. I didn’t intend to, but I hit his face and knocked him off the porch and he fell to the ground, unconscious.”

He heard his mother’s soft gasp, but she said nothing, and he continued.

“Patty took him to the emergency room. I would have followed in a taxi, but I was too drunk to climb the steps and go inside to the phone.”

Frank Stevenson digested that in silence for a few moments. “He must not have been hurt too bad or you would’ve called us long before now.”

“No, sir, he wasn’t. No worse than falling on the playground at school, which he does fairly frequently. He likes to play rough. That sweet boy look can fool people. He’s really a tough kid.”

“Like his daddy.”

“But how tough he is isn’t the point. The point is, I was *drunk*. I *hit* him. I knocked him *off the porch*.”

Troy clamped his jaw. That was the whole story. There was nothing else to say.

“You don’t have to talk down to me,” Frank said. “I understand what you’re saying. It’s not the same, you know.”

“But Daddy, after all you tried to teach me...the example you set for me the whole time I was growing up...after watching you hobble my whole life, and knowing the reason for it...and the night of your heart attack...”

An incredulous look came to Troy’s face. “I don’t know how I could have let this happen. It was a betrayal of you. It was a sin against you. I’ve come here to ask you to forgive me.”

“Seems like Randy’s the one you should be asking for forgiveness.”

“Oh, I did. Practically the minute I sobered up. In fact, I was still hung-over when I apologized to him. He forgave me. He was happy to, eager to.

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I don't know why, but he was."

"Yes, you know why," Frank said impatiently. "He loves you. He knows you love him and didn't mean to hurt him."

In the shadows, Troy took a deep, uneven breath. "I'm talking with Patty's pastor a couple of times a week, trying to figure out how I could have done this. I've been drinking since right after Randy was born. It's work related. A bunch of us eat out together or go to happy hour when somebody gets promoted, or gets married or retires...."

Troy shifted in his chair and glanced at his father. "Most of the time I don't get drunk. Two, three times a year, I do. That's my real sin against you, Daddy. Considering that my one bout of teenage drinking nearly killed you, I don't know how I could have let that first swallow in my mouth. First my father, now my son."

Frank looked at him in mild shock. "Do you mean to tell me that all this time, all these years, you've believed your getting drunk caused my heart attack that night?"

"Yes, sir. Because it did. I almost killed you." Troy's throat constricted as memories of that night flashed through his mind. He stood up and walked to the edge of the porch, looking through the screen to the faint lights of Aberdeen in the distance.

"Oh, dear God, help us," Frank said, and it wasn't an expression, it was a genuine prayer. "Troy Randall, I had no idea you were carrying that guilt in your heart. And for no reason." Pain etched Frank's face. "You didn't almost kill me, son. You saved my life! Don't you remember?"

Troy turned to look at him, bewildered.

Frank met his bewilderment with a steady gaze. "What if you'd come home sober, like normal, eleven-thirty, midnight, and gone to bed? Most of the time, you slept like a rock back then. Do you still?"

"Sometimes."

"And what if I'd had that heart attack at one, two o'clock, alone, in my sleep, instead of out on the steps with you next to me? Your mama was gone and you would've been too deep in sleep to hear me if I called out. I could have died in bed that very night. You haven't ever thought of that, have you?"

"No, sir," Troy whispered.

"Well, I have," Frank said. "Many times. I won't lie to you and say I'm glad you got drunk that night, but I'm glad Providence was able to use those circumstances to save my life. I would've missed so much—your football at Alabama, watching you graduate and get those degrees, seeing

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you marry your sweet wife, knowing my precious grandchildren.... We made a mistake, bargaining to keep quiet about that night. You gave me these seventeen-and-still-counting years, and you've carried around a burden of undeserved guilt that whole time."

Troy heard his mother crying softly in the shadows.

"But that night I...."

"Plaque doesn't build up in the arteries in an hour or two. I know you know that. You didn't cause my heart attack. You saved my life. Tell me you'll think about that."

Troy's throat was so constricted it was several moments before he could speak. "All right."

"You probably want to cling to your guilt. Don't. It pleases the devil." Frank looked at his son, pain, pride and love mingled on his face. "It pains me to think what you've been living with."

"I don't dwell on it, Daddy. I think about it sometimes. I've had a few dreams about it. That's all."

"Nightmares?"

"Yes, sir. But that doesn't mean anything. You know I've had nightmares when I get stressed out ever since I was a kid."

"Like me," Frank said.

Troy nodded. "Like you."

Frank slowly got to his feet and hobbled over to lay his hand on Troy's shoulder.

"Your mother and I are so proud of you and your successes—your education, your work, being a husband and father just like you wanted to be since you were a little boy. It would have broken our hearts if you'd turned out to be ruthless and crooked. But you're a Christian, a man of high morals and ethics and we're so thankful for that. So you've made this mistake. You're working to correct it. We're proud of you for that, too."

Suzanne came to him, embraced him, clung to him, crying. "Yes, we're both so proud of you! Oh, I can't stand to think of you being unhappy!"

"I'm not unhappy, Mama," Troy protested. "I was raised by wonderful parents. I have the best wife a man could have and two great children. I have good friends, a job that means something, I do things for my community. I have faith in God that waxes and wanes but never goes completely away. I'm not unhappy but I've done things...." He looked at his father.

Frank said, "You said you came up here to ask for my forgiveness, because your drinking is a sin against me."

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Troy nodded.

“You’ve got it. But you’ve got to accept it and be willing to forgive yourself and let go of the guilt. You’ve got to do that for me,” Frank glanced at Suzanne, “and your mother.”

He looked at each of them with stinging eyes and, barely audibly, said, “I’ll work on it.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

On the ninth day of June, Troy reached his limit.

He arrived at the little cabin after work, watched the news on television, showered and changed into jeans, T-shirt and tennis shoes and nuked a frozen dinner for supper. The evening stretched long before him.

In the weeks he had been here, he had looked his drinking hard in the face and found he had absolutely no logical reason for doing it. In work-related social situations, it didn't enhance his enjoyment of the events and people; usually it made them too hazy for him to even remember, so it wasn't creating good memories for him to look back on.

Only very recently had he begun to drink to make bad things not so bad, and it didn't really work for that, either.

That day at the Scoreboard Tavern, it had helped him feel better about Hamilton Ingram's unfairly burdening him with the responsibility of financing the new warehouse complex, and about the trouble between the CEO and his son. But it had not lasted, and it had resulted in something far worse—smacking Randy, casting his family into turmoil, and creating in himself feelings of incompetence and doubts about his moral authority to lead and direct his family.

He could probably have dealt with a lot of this at home, but now he began to see why he came out here to the lake alone. He had to find out whether he was just caught up in emotion, and when the emotion ran its course, everything would return to normal—or whether he had really lost it. If he had lost it, could he ever get it back? And if he *could*, shouldn't he stay out here until he *did*, so his family wouldn't lose confidence in him?

It was so important—crucial—that they trust him, that their confidence in him not waver.

For some reason, a memory from his and Patty's courtship days had popped into his mind several times since he'd come to the cabin, clamor-

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ing for his attention—Patty telling her parents she had to marry a man she looked up to, a man better than herself, or she would never be able to submit to him as her faith required. But there had been so many other thoughts, ideas and memories demanding his attention lately, this one seemed lost in the confusion.

Now it surfaced again, and he had a flash of understanding—about himself and his wife, about their relationship and her periodic fear and doubt episodes—he'd never had before.

If he was *better than*, then by definition, she was *not as good as*. And for her, that translated into the fear that she did not have what it took to keep him.

A new ache filled his heart—for her.

Oh, baby, I'm so sorry. Shoulda seen this, shoulda fixed it, a long time ago.

But close on the heels of that insight came another and it was like a punch in the solar plexus.

When he was drunk, he was *not* better than...*not* a man she could look up to. *Not* a man whose authority she could submit her will to.... And that explained, with complete clarity, how and why she would try to sneak the children away from him until he was himself again.

She sometimes still called him perfect—although not when he was drinking—but they both knew he wasn't. It came to him that he didn't have to be perfect to lead his family. All he had to do was...

...go home.

He turned on the TV and switched it to *Father Murphy*, but he was so bored, listless, agitated by his new insights, he fell asleep halfway through, anxious to escape both the boring TV and his emotional unrest. The ten o'clock news was almost over when he woke up.

He stretched out on the couch and went back to a thought he'd had earlier in the evening.

In two weeks, on the twenty-third, he and Patty would mark their tenth wedding anniversary. He wasn't about to celebrate it with her at Jimmie Chandler's and then come back to this wretched little cabin alone.

In fact, he wasn't going to spend another night here.

He had been away from home almost four weeks. His fears about alcohol were gone. Guilt would always be a problem—redemption was something he still could not grasp—but he finally realized he could no longer deprive his children of their father, nor his wife her husband, because of his guilt. He had responsibilities, and they had needs.

Southern Man

No, he was not staying here another night.
He was not staying here another *hour*.

At ten-thirty Tuesday evening, Patty went to bed, a feeling of excitement washing over her. Two weeks from today, she and Troy would celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. The family birthstone ring, beautifully wrapped, waited for the day along with a sentimental card, in her dresser drawer.

Troy had told her to arrange sleepovers for the children, and the two of them would make an evening of it—dinner at Jimmie Chandler’s, perhaps a movie and....

She had just drifted off thinking about that when the phone rang. Wide awake, she brought the handset to her ear.

“Hello.”

There was short silence, but she knew it was Troy. She could tell by the butterflies in her stomach.

After a moment, he said, “I’m coming home. I’m so sorry about Randy, I will always be sorry about that, and there’s still a lot to work through. But I’m coming home. Right now.”

Twenty minutes after they hung up, Patty stood on the porch at the top of the steps, her hand on the wrought iron railing, watching when Troy turned his vehicle into the driveway.

She was still wearing the navy tricot pajamas she’d worn to bed, along with a knee-length robe, with her feet in matching slippers. It was hardly the most romantic nightwear she could have chosen, but what she was wearing wasn’t the important thing. The important thing was that he was coming home. To stay.

He got out of the car and walked toward her, looking so handsome, so virile in a black T-shirt and blue jeans, just like the day she met him. In the glow of the porch light, she could see the quiet gladness of homecoming on his face.

Trembling, she gave a little cry and took off, her feet seeming to skim the concrete beneath them. She streaked down the steps and threw herself into his arms. He swung her around, laughing, his head thrown back, sheer joy glowing from his face.

He set her on the step, putting her at his eye level. Breathing shallowly

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through parted lips, he lost himself in her face, as she was lost in his.

My beautiful, black-eyed man, I love you so much!

His eyes lingered on hers and then fell to her dewy lips, parted for breathing as his were. He leaned toward her and closed his eyes. Their lips met, moved, clung together while soft moans, part pain, part joy, rose from their throats.

Time passed unnoticed. It felt so good to hold him—her arms circled his neck and shoulders and held tightly—and to be held by him, to feel his strong arms around her. As their kiss lingered, his hands, aided by the slick fabric that sheathed her body, roamed her shoulders, her back, her buttocks, and then tightened around her to pull her close.

When the kiss ended, she took his face in her hands, drinking in his beauty and goodness, his love, his essence.

“Welcome home.”

His reply was another long, intense kiss.

They couldn’t turn each other loose until they finally became aware of the thick atmosphere of a sultry Southern night enveloping them. They walked inside where it was cool and wrapped their arms around each other for another long, hungry kiss.

Instantly and unconsciously reassuming the mantle of leader, provider and protector of the household, Troy murmured, “Wait a minute,” and extracted himself from their embrace to lock the door, turn off the porch light and set the alarm system. Then, arm in arm, they walked slowly to the family room, pausing every few steps to press their lips together, like newlyweds or teenagers.

Troy snapped on a lamp and sat on the sofa, their habitual talking place. He stretched his long legs out before him and wearily laid his head against the backrest, closing his eyes.

Patty stepped out of her bedroom slippers and sat sideways next to him, facing him, her feet tucked under her. She could not stop herself from touching him. She stroked his hair, twining her fingers in it.

“Have you had supper?” she asked.

“More or less.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes, but not for food.”

She laughed softly. “That leaves five other things—grill, recliner, television, sports, and sex.”

He opened his eyes a bit and cut them to her, a quizzical smile on his face.

“I’ll tell you later,” she said. She traced his thick, black brows with a fin-

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gertip and caressed his stubbly jawline, and he lay there passively and closed his eyes again.

The tension that had been building for weeks, the sustained stress he had been living under, so much a part of his life he scarcely noticed it anymore, began to drain away under her sweet, loving touch, for the first time in...months? Years?

“You look so tired,” she murmured.

“I am tired. Tired of being an idiot. Tired of missing my family. Tired of sleeping alone.”

“I’m so glad you’re home.” She cuddled up against him and laid her head on his chest. “Sometimes I was afraid we might lose you for good.”

He pulled her onto his lap and locked his arms around her. “I’m not that much of an idiot.”

They held each other quietly for a few moments until they heard an incoherent cry from another part of the house. Patty felt Troy’s body tense. They both sat up and she looked his confused and troubled face.

“He’s having a nightmare,” she explained, getting up to go to Randy’s room.

“Has that happened a lot?” He stood up to go with her.

“Couple of times.”

Troy looked like he had been slapped. “Because of what I did to him. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I told you his sleep was disturbed and he had bad dreams.” She stepped around in front of him to make him look at her. “But it’s not because of his accident. It’s because he doesn’t feel safe without you here. You wait and see. The bad dreams will stop now that you’re home.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said, trying to step around her, but she took hold of his arms.

“Let me make sure he’s good and awake, and over the dream, before you go in there.”

He had to trust that she knew best what to do. “All right.”

Patty turned on the bedside lamp in Randy’s room and sat on the edge of the bed. There was a frown on his face and he tossed restlessly, whimpering.

“Randy, precious, wake up.” She gently stroked his hair back from his face until his eyes fluttered open.

“Mama.”

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“Hey, sweetheart. You had a bad dream.”

“It was dark and there was this montster....”

“Well, it’s gone, now. Monsters disintegrate when you wake up. Can you sit up? I want to tell you something that will make you very happy, and you’ll forget all about that old monster.”

Randy sat up and rubbed his eyes. “What?”

“Your daddy’s home. He’s back home for good.”

He wasn’t quite awake yet, and her words didn’t fully register with him. “Daddy’s home?”

“Yes, he’s home.”

“Here?”

“Yes, right here in the doorway to your room.”

Randy gasped, threw back the covers in a flash and hurled himself out of the bed, circling around her and heading for the door. At the sight of his father walking toward him, he made a sound that was half laugh, half sob. Troy opened his arms and Randy threw himself into his father’s embrace.

“Daddy!”

“Hey, Sport.”

Randy laughed and squealed as his father picked him up and carried him to the bed. Troy sat next to Patty and put Randy on his knee.

Before anyone could speak, there was movement near the door and they looked up to see Melissa, tousled from sleep, padding into the room. Randy’s nightmare cries had awakened her, and the sound of Troy’s voice had got her out of bed to look for him. She squinted in the lamp light and said, “Daddy?”

“Come here, Punkin.” Troy hoisted her to his other knee and kissed her cheek.

He closed his eyes tightly and held his children to him. His brows lowered as the emotion of the moment touched his face but he was smiling. He opened his eyes and looked at Patty. Batting back tears, she was smiling, too.

“Are you really home, every day, not just Saturday?” Randy asked.

“Every day, every night. And God willing, I’m not ever going to leave you again. Not like that.”

The children were back in their beds sleeping soundly when Patty and Troy lay down in their bed together for the first time in weeks. He took

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her in his arms, cradled her against him, kissed her tenderly, once, twice, and passion detonated inside him so powerfully it knocked the breath out of him. His kisses became voracious.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured thickly. “I wanted this to be slow and sweet for you, but I’m too hungry.”

“It’s okay. I’m hungry, too. We can do slow and sweet some other time.”

Patty lay with her head on Troy’s shoulder and basked in the warmth of his arm cradling her back. They floated on love and joy and sheer gratitude to be with one another again, and spoke in soft, low voices.

“Patty. I made mistake on top of mistake, and in my mind I’ve told you and Randy and Missy and Mama and Daddy and everyone over and over how sorry I am. Because it’s true. But, sweetheart, I’m really tired, of being sorry—of having to be sorry.”

“Then stop,” Patty said. “Being sorry has an expiration date, and you’ve passed it. I don’t want perpetual repentance from you. I want my man, my loving husband, the head of this family!”

“And you believe I have the moral authority to lead the family.”

She raised up to look at his profile, silhouetted against the gray night coming through the window. “Of course you do!” She put a hand on his cheek and turned his face toward her. “Your confidence may be a little shaken but deep down inside, you know it, too. After you’ve been back with us a little while, your confidence will return, stronger than ever. When you get the motions right, motive will follow.”

He chuckled softly in the darkness. “I knew you’d be able to cut through the crap and get through to me. There are lots of reasons why I love you. That’s one of ’em.”

He kissed her long and sweetly and they turned to face each other on the bed, looking into each other’s eyes.

“I still feel like a screw up, leaving you and the young’uns, going out to the cabin—it was the wrong thing to do.”

“Troy,” she said softly, but firmly. “I didn’t want you to go, but once I realized why you were doing it—because of your love for us—I wasn’t about to fight you over it. After you got back from Aberdeen and called and told me what your Daddy said, I understood it. You ought to understand it, too. Better than I do.”

“Understand what?”

CONNIE CHASTAIN

“He said he wasn’t glad you got drunk that night, when you were a teenager. But he was very glad Providence was able to use that to save his life.”

“Yeah,” Troy said pensively. “I’d never thought of it that way.”

“That’s how I think of you going out and staying at the lake. These are both examples of that scripture about all things working together for good to those who love the Lord.”

She lay back on the pillow, cut her eyes to him and pressed his hand to her heart. “I agree it was a mistake for you to leave home and go out there. But Providence has used it to bring good things for us. We’ve found wonderful friends in the Jordans and Kincaids. Randy’s developing a special relationship with Shelby and John Mark. There’s probably other benefits we don’t even know about yet.

“But mostly, I know your drinking is a thing of the past, and I’m so grateful. Tro, it’s just like you used to do on the football field. You were up against formidable defensive lines whose mission was to stop you. But you met them head on, broke through. Scored. Won. And you’ve done it again. Only this time, you faced down a dreadful enemy, one that destroys lives and families. You fought it and you *beat it!* That means yes—*Yes!*—you have the moral authority to lead this family. I love you and I trust you and I look up to you, more than ever.”

Chapter Thirty

When Randy started the first grade, Patty occasionally asked him to say grace at the supper table. By now he was comfortable with it and viewed it as his responsibility. There were two rhyming verse prayers he normally chose from, but the night after his father's return home, he recited one Patty had never heard.

Everyone bowed their heads. Randy laced his fingers beneath his chin and in a soft tenor he prayed,

*"For food and friends and happy times,
For families together,
For sun and rain, for woods and plain,
We thank thee, O Our Father. Amen."*

He raised his head and looked at Troy to see if he understood that the second line referred especially to him. Troy did understand, and if the poignant look he gave Randy didn't convey his understanding, the slight, slow incline of his head did.

Randy turned his eyes to his mother, who looked at him and smiled. "That was a beautiful table grace. Where did you learn it?"

"Mrs. Brennan in Sunday School taught it to us."

Talk around the table turned to plans for the rest of the summer. "There's Daddy's birthday and the company picnic in July," Patty said. "The children have day camp in August. Also, I'm thinking it would be nice to have a cookout before school starts and invite the Jordans and Kincaids."

Randy gasped softly and his eyes glowed with excitement.

"Would you like that?" his father said, grinning.

CONNIE CHASTAIN

"Oh, yeah!" Randy said. "I mean, yes sir!"

Patty smiled at the reaction, too. "Latter part of August would be best. It'll be hot, but the kids don't mind that, and we adults can step inside to cool off, if need be."

"Works for me," Troy said. "Punkin, you haven't said anything about it."

"I'm cool with it, Daddy," Melissa said, "as long as Tommy Jordan gets invited."

Troy raised his eyebrows. "Well. I was thinking we'd invite everybody but him."

"Aw, you were not!" She giggled and swiped the air in his direction.

"She's got a crush on Tommy," Patty explained unnecessarily.

"Nine-year-olds get crushes? Who woulda thought it?"

"Well, our nine-year-old does." Patty's eyes cut to Melissa, who looked only slightly embarrassed.

Randy said, "John Mark says Tommy has a crush on Missy, too."

"Oh, he does?" Troy teasing gaze went to Melissa, now blushing furiously but smiling. He looked at Patty with only partially feigned apprehension.

"I just had a premonition of what awaits us in the future. Did I tell you Grady Hanlon's daughter got married in April? Wedding set him back seventeen thousand dollars."

Patty's jaw dropped. "That's insane. Our wedding was very frugal, and it was absolutely beautiful, the prettiest I've ever seen." She stood and started clearing the table.

Troy rose and strolled to the other end of the table and stood behind her. He slid his arms around her and tightened his embrace. Patty leaned against him, closing her eyes and tilting her head to the side. Troy nuzzled her hair and put his lips close to her ear. "Great supper," he said in a provocative undertone, following the compliment with a gentle nip at her earlobe. "You know, your cooking is the real reason I came home."

"I'm so glad you did," she said in a breathless murmur. "I think one of the burners on the grill needs to be replaced."

He let his head fall back, shut his eyes and grunted, "Ah." When he raised his head, he saw his children's faces staring up at him.

Melissa grinned her delight and Randy showed the smug face he sometimes wore when he felt extreme contentment. This wasn't the first time since Troy's return that they had shown relief and happiness when they witnessed their parents' displays of affection.

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"Chaperones," Troy whispered. He put his hands on Patty's shoulders to steady her and took a step back.

Melissa giggled and scurried from the room but Randy stayed where he was.

"Sport," Troy said, walking to the patio doors. "Come with me to check the grill. Bring the battery radio and after we're done, we'll swing in the hammock and listen to the Braves."

On Saturday, two days after Troy's return home, something awakened Patty about five forty-five and she couldn't go back to sleep. In the soft light diffused by the curtains, she could see him on the other side of the bed, lying on his side with his back to her.

His big feather pillow had flattened in the middle and he had created a second pillow of his folded arm. He had flung off the lightweight blanket and only the sheet covered him, pulled up to his chest.

Several times the past two nights, she had awakened and looked at him or heard his soft breathing, which evoked surprise and gratitude. His time away from home had done something to them and it was taking longer to adjust than they had anticipated.

But adjusting did offer its opportunities.

Patty got up, tiptoed to the door, closed it and returned to the bed. She slipped out of her pajamas and slid under the sheet naked. She lay on her back thinking, praying and occasionally stealing a glance at her husband.

About six, he started his languid wake-up routine. She loved to watch him wake up but the opportunity to do so was rare because she habitually got up before he did to fix breakfast. After his time away from home, though, she was determined not to miss this. She turned toward him and propped herself up on an elbow.

In shallow sleep, Troy rolled onto his back. He straightened one long leg, then the other. His body stiffened slightly and his brows lowered with the mild effort it took him to break wind. He relaxed again. Eyes still closed, he turned his face toward her, his breathing grew steady and he fell back into full sleep.

Patty giggled silently, pondering how a bodily function that caused embarrassment under most other circumstances could be endearing, or at least amusing, when a lover did it in sleep.

After a few moments, he moved again. He shrugged his shoulders, stretched his arms, put his left hand in the middle of his chest, fingers

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spread apart. He laid his right arm across the bed between them, elbow bent, hand resting on her pillow.

The room was lighter now and Patty gazed at him. When he was asleep, the effects of his virtue, his faith, and his love showed without distraction on his face. They enhanced his human attractiveness, lifting it to angelic beauty that, paradoxically, ignited strong carnal desire in her. She wanted to see him aroused, with passion on his face and desire in his eyes. She wanted to feel his mouth on hers and his breath on her cheek, to feel his hands on her skin and his body covering hers. She wanted to feel him inside her....

In a few moments, he again stirred lazily. He was very close to waking.

Patty took a package of breath mints from the drawer of her bedside table and put one in her mouth. She waited a few moments, put another mint in her mouth and slid over to him, snuggling against him under the sheet, laying her head on his shoulder and her hand on his chest. She was filled with desire and touching him intensified her craving for him.

His arm curled around her.

She raised her head to see his face. His eyes opened, black and dreamy. He looked at her and smiled. She smiled back, a cartoon smile showing her teeth with the breath mint clamped between them.

He laughed softly. "You brazen hussy."

He lifted his face toward her, lips parted. She put her mouth to his and pushed the mint with her tongue. Resting his head back on the pillow, he wallowed the mint in his mouth for a while and looked at her appraisingly.

"All you want is my body," he accused.

"That's not so. I want your money, too."

He smiled wryly and lifted his head to nuzzle her hair. "Then this better be real good."

He lazily kicked the sheet off of them and rolled onto his side. His eyes roamed her body as his hand stroked and clasped her shoulder to pull her to him for a kiss.

He didn't look angelic anymore. He looked like what he was—a son of Adam driven to sexual union by the God-given nature of his body and by the love in his heart for his wife, lover and soul mate.

Patty got everything she wanted and this time it was slow and sweet and real, real good.

Chapter Thirty-One

Claudia scurried into the Records Department and called to Brooke through the counter window. “Grab your purse and come with me, now. Hurry!”

Brooke peered around her cubicle partition to see the dark-haired pixie motioning impatiently.

“Why?” she asked, but doing as Claudia instructed.

“We have to get to the break room before she does.”

“She who?” Brooke stepped through the door into the reception area and Claudia clasped her wrist to pull her along.

In the corridor, the pixie whispered, “I just went up front to take a FedEx pick-up for Roland, and Patty Stevenson and her two kids came in. They were going upstairs to wait for Troy—I guess he’s not here right now—and the little boy said he wanted something to eat, so they’re going to the vending machines. She used the switchboard phone to call Dinah and asked her to tell Troy to come to the break room when he gets here. They’re still at the reception desk chitchatting with Vonda so that gives us time to get there first.”

The two women scurried through the cafeteria to the vending machine alcove. The dining room was empty except for a couple of people in the far corner, conversing over chips and Cokes.

“Sit near the middle of the room so we won’t be more than half the room away no matter where they go,” Claudia said.

Brooke fumbled with her change and got a Dr. Pepper and potato chips while Claudia chose a Sprite and Fritos. They sat at a table not far from the snack machines and talked as if they were just there on an ordinary break. Brooke kept watching the door, but she heard Troy’s children before she saw them. Their voices echoed down the hall moments before they burst into the room.

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Dressed in summer play clothes, they looked very much like they did in the portrait upstairs, despite being older now. No longer frozen in time by the camera, excited and animated, they ran to the candy machines, giggling and talking. They stopped near the table where Brooke and Claudia sat.

“Hi, Randy,” Claudia said. “Hi, Melissa.”

The laughing, twitching and talking stopped and the children looked at her.

“You probably don’t remember me,” Claudia said. “I met you at the company Christmas party.”

“Oh, yeah,” Melissa said. “You were uh elf and you gave out presents.”

“That’s right. I’m Claudia. And this is Miss Brooke. She’s new here.”

Brooke gave them a cheery smile. “Hi, Melissa. How are you, Randy?”

“Fine,” Randy said in a low tone, looking directly at her without expression, but Melissa told her excitedly, “We’re gonna get treats.”

They turned back to the candy machine, the women behind them forgotten.

Moments later, their mother entered the room. Brooke was disappointed to discover that the photographs did not do Patty Stevenson justice. She wasn’t really any prettier in person, but, like Troy, she had a presence that didn’t fully come through in a still portrait.

A couple of people had mentioned her femininity, as a counterpoint to Troy’s manliness, and her being four years younger than him, as if it was significant, creating in Brooke the expectation of seeing a child-woman, a still-forming teenager in ruffles and ribbons, when they finally came face to face. What she saw now was nothing like that.

Patty’s hair was pulled back from her face into a barrette at her crown and fell behind her shoulders. Her eye shadow and mascara were a bit heavy but very tastefully done, her foundation and blush flawless. She wore an A-line dress with short sleeves in a chocolate brown linen. Her jewelry was understated sterling silver. The rectangular handbag slung over her shoulder by a thin strap matched her brown patent leather pumps.

She was feminine in the mode of classic-chic, not the ruffles-and-bows style Brooke had anticipated. There was a deliberateness to the way she carried herself and a reserve to her demeanor that annoyed Brooke. It was observable in her interactions with the children. They had temporarily abandoned the candy machine and were concentrating their attention on her. It soon became evident why. They wanted money from her.

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Brooke kept glancing sideways at Patty, who had gone to the table nearest the door. Her children were hovering around her but drawn toward the machines too. Patty got out her billfold and looked in it.

Brooke heard her say to the little girl, "Sweetheart, you'll have to wait till your daddy gets here. All I have is a couple of twenties, and you can't put those in the machines."

Randy raised an inquisitive face to her and said, "You ain't got no quarters?"

"No, sir, I don't. But your daddy probably does and he'll be here soon."

In addition to her purse, Patty had brought a file folder and laid it on the table. She set her purse on it while Randy tugged at her hand to lead her to the machines. She walked with him and Melissa followed. Since they were partially turned away from her, Brooke could watch them without being caught staring.

Randy pointed to a Baby Ruth bar on the other side of the glass. "Can I have that?"

"Yes, you may."

"Can I have that?" He pointed to a package of cheese crackers.

"You can have one or the other, but not both."

"Aw, Mama!"

"You'll have to decide which one you want the most."

"I know what I want," Melissa said. "I want those." She pointed to a package of M&Ms.

That was the moment Troy stepped through the door. Brooke saw him before his family did and the sight of him jolted her, as always. He was halfway to the snack machines when Melissa saw him and called, "Daddy! Do you have any quarters?"

Patty turned to watch Troy approach and Randy skipped toward him. "Daddy, can I have candy *and* crackers?"

"Ask your mother."

"Aw! She won't let me!"

Brooke waited to see what kind of greeting would transpire between these two supposedly in-love people who, for some unknown reason, were living apart. Troy stopped next to the machine where his children were bouncing and twitching, looked at his wife and said, "Hey."

"Hey."

Patty's back was to the tables and Brooke couldn't see the expression on her face, but every few seconds she chanced a nonchalant glance at Troy's.

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"You want anything?" he asked his wife.

"Just a Coke."

He looked at her in mild perplexity. "Why can't he have both?"

"It's after three. I don't want him spoiling his supper."

Troy nodded while he considered that. "What if he ate one now and the other later, after supper or tomorrow?"

If Patty said anything, Brooke couldn't hear it. She saw the long brown hair sway as Patty shook her head but evidently it wasn't a denial because as Troy looked at her, a smile came to his face. He turned to Randy and said, "Sport, let's negotiate a compromise. You can get both—"

Randy grinned and said, "All *right!*"

"—but you can only eat one of them now. You'll have to save the other one until later, so you won't spoil your supper."

Randy thought about that a moment and said, "What if I eat half the candy now and half the crackers now and the other halves later?"

Troy turned to look at Patty again, his brows raised. Patty laughed softly and Troy told Randy, "I think that's a yes."

Troy fed coins into the machine and punched buttons based on the instructions of his children and smiled as they excitedly retrieved the snacks and headed for the table.

"Hey, hold on," he called to them. "You want something to drink, don't you?"

"Yeah!" they said. "Co-colas!"

He got four bottled Cokes and a small package of salted peanuts and carried them to the table where Patty had left her purse and the file folder. Once they were seated, he took a few decent-sized swallows from his Coke, made a funnel of his left hand around the neck of the bottle, and poured the peanuts into his drink.

Brooke's eyes widened and she looked an unspoken question at her companion.

"It's a Southern thang," Claudia mouthed.

"It's bizarre," Brooke whispered.

The family was close enough for Brooke to make out most of their conversation and she listened intently.

"So are y'all done shopping?" Troy asked. "What'd you get me for Father's Day?"

"Oh, no!" Melissa teased him. "We're not telling, or it won't be a surprise."

As the family enjoyed their treats, the children talking intermittently

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between bites of candy, and their parents talking softly, Troy got the file folder from under Patty's purse and they began looking at the papers inside it. He took a silver pen from his inside breast pocket, read over a paper and then signed it. He did that with two or three other papers.

"You don't suppose those are divorce papers, do you?" Brooke whispered to Claudia only half in jest. All this *they're so in love* crap just did not fit with what she was seeing.

That is, until moments after Troy stood and told his children, "Hey, let's go upstairs and see Miss Dinah. You can bring your treats."

They got up and took candy and drinks in hand. Troy stepped to Patty's side of the table and pulled back her chair. When she stood up, he leaned toward her and whispered something to her. She picked up her purse and the file folder and stepped away from the table, turning toward him. They exchanged words too low for Brook and Claudia to hear. Troy looked at his wife intently when she was speaking. When she stopped he blinked lazily, tilted his head and leaned over to give her a swift kiss on the lips.

Jealousy shot through Brooke like a knife, like a drug. She and her companion watched the family leave the room.

"That was so sweet," Claudia said.

"Pretty tame for people who are supposed to be sooooo in love."

"Well, this is a workplace. And they are living apart. So who knows? If their marriage really is in trouble, it looks like it'll be one of those amiable split-ups."

"Just as long as it splits...."

Brooke returned to the library tormented by Stevensons' kiss. What if they were working out their problems? What if he decided to go back to her? If they were kissing in public in the middle of a marital separation, what had their relationship been like before the trouble—and what would it be like again, after it?

What if he's thinking about going back home?

Something *had* to happen to stop him from thinking that way....

Chapter Thirty-Two

At five ten, Dinah left for the day, and solitude descended on Troy's suite. A few minutes later, he punched a button on the speaker phone. Immediately, the buzz of a dial tone hummed in the air and he speed-dialed his home. Patty answered after two rings.

"Hey, chick. I can't get home early, after all. I thought I could, but I've got to finish something, so I probably won't be home for another hour. Hope it doesn't mess up supper."

Patty's voice came through the speaker and filled the quiet room. "It won't mess anything up. Supper'll keep and the children will enjoy playing a little longer."

"Okay. I'll be in my office if you need to call me. See you soon." He punched a button that broke the connection.

He'd called Patty at midafternoon to tell her he would try to get away at five today but it hadn't worked out. He had to stay to dictate several letters for Dinah to transcribe first thing in the morning. They had to go out in the ten o'clock mail pickup.

He reached into a drawer for a new cassette tape, removed the wrapper and put it into a hand-held Dictaphone on his desk, annoyed at having to use the portable recorder. His console Dictaphone had conked out and a new one was on order, but wouldn't get here for days.

He turned the machine to record and dictated a test message. It played back satisfactorily, so he rewound the tape, started recording again and set the machine on the blotter.

"Dinah, this is to Harold Edwards at Battison, Floyd and Simpkins Corporation. Today's date is June twentieth. Use Harold's address that's in your Rolodex, not corporate headquarters. The usual greeting, then, here are the figures you asked about by phone Friday on the Garibaldi two thirty-four transponder. I have verified them."

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He had long since ceased to dictate routine punctuation. Dinah knew as well as he where to put commas, periods and paragraph breaks.

“Uh, Dinah, refer to the sales figures from the March 1982 report on the Model two-thirty-four transponder manufactured by Garibaldi, Incorporated. I’ll put a photocopy of the page with the figures in your inbox. Use the ones I’ve circled in red—”

He interrupted himself to look through the scattering of papers on his desk. Where was that photocopy? He had it a minute ago....

There was a knock on the door and he glanced up from his search. It was the girl from the library—he couldn’t remember her name—with a haphazard stack of file folders in her arms. She stood in the doorway and looked at him, awaiting instructions.

“You can put those over there,” he said, glancing toward the credenza. As she walked toward it, he abandoned the search for the photocopy and gave in to an annoyance he’d been suppressing for an hour.

“I requested that those files get here by four,” he said testily. “I needed them for a last-minute conference call at four-fifteen. Did anyone in your department tell you that?”

Her back was to him as she laid the files down. “I’m sorry they’re late. I’d love to make it up to you.”

Provocative words spoken in a sultry voice, and they instantly evoked in Troy a pervasive unease.

She turned toward him. She was dressed in a tan summer-weight suit—a short, straight skirt topped with a matching blazer. The blazer was unbuttoned and gapped open a few inches and she had on nothing beneath it. The gap revealed the inner third of her breasts centered with a shadow of shallow cleavage.

Troy felt a mild shock and his brows lowered for a moment before his face went expressionless.

“I’m Brooke Emerson. When I see you around, I can’t take my eyes off of you.”

He stood up. “You need to leave here.”

“I don’t want to leave. I want to be where you are.”

“But you *need* to *leave*.” His face was stony. Tense and suspicious, he nevertheless kept his voice neutral.

She didn’t. “I know about you. You’re not living with your wife. You’re all alone.”

Troy’s eyes narrowed until they were completely black. Some part of his mind wanted to laugh because this had to be a joke.

CONNIE CHASTAIN

“Max put you up to this.”

“Nobody put me up to it. You must be awfully lonely, living by yourself out there at the lake. I’ll take care of your loneliness, right here, right now. On the couch, on the carpet, wherever you say.”

She shrugged slightly, opening the gap wider, and began a slow walk toward him.

Troy’s brows knit together as his discomfort began to break through the neutrality on his face, but his voice remained dispassionate. “If you walk out of here right now, nobody ever has to know about this. I won’t tell. But you have to go, right now.”

She was within arm’s length of his desk. “I’ll do anything. Whatever you want.”

“Get out of my office. That’s what I want.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Another step and she’d be behind the desk. Troy glanced down to press a button on the speakerphone. A dialtone filled the air and he instantly pressed another button.

Brooke looked down at the phone, startled, as a man’s voice came out of the speaker. “Security, Craddock here.”

Before Troy could speak, she picked up the handset and dropped it in its cradle, breaking the connection.

Suddenly furious, Troy said, “Alright, then I’ll leave.” He stepped around the computer extension and walked toward Dinah’s office, tightly controlling his fury.

“No!” Brooke hurried back the way she came and caught up with him halfway across the room. She threw her arms around him. Her blazer gapped apart, her breasts pressed against him and she kissed him hard on the mouth.

Troy jerked his head back and turned his face aside with a grimace while he reached up to take her forearms in his hands. He wanted nothing more than to pull her off him, but through the haze of rage, a thought broke.

Don’t touch her.

His hands balled into fists that he dropped to his sides and he took a step back, then another. In a mad, bizarre imitation of dance, Brooke stepped forward to keep her body pressed against him.

At that moment, a knock sounded from the direction of Dinah’s office. He froze and so did Brooke.

“Any mail to go out?” It was Robin from the mailroom standing in the

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doorway holding a cardboard mail crate. She was looking at them without a twinge of surprise on her face, as if she encountered co-workers in compromising positions all the time.

Troy stepped back again, freeing himself from Brooke's stranglehold. Trembling from head to toe and breathing unevenly through his mouth, his fists white-knuckled, his eyes glittering with fury, he looked more like a party in a fistfight than the object of an attempted seduction.

His would-be temptress looked at him, then Robin, and tears of humiliation sprang to her eyes. She clutched the lapels of her blazer together and hurried from the room sobbing, nearly knocking the mail crate out of Robin's hands in her haste.

When she was gone, Troy cut his eyes toward Robin. They were the only thing mobile in his glacial expression.

"Mr. Stevenson, I know that wasn't your doing. I was out here the whole time. I heard everything and saw some of it."

Robin glanced behind her toward the door to the corridor. "She's been obsessing over you for weeks. The whole place knows about it. Now she's a woman scorned and might be dangerous, so you watch your back."

She disappeared without further talk, her warning hanging in the air.

Troy's anger dissipated as quickly as it had hit, leaving him both physically and emotionally wrung out. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped it across his mouth and looked at it. There were smudges of coral colored lipstick on it that gave him a touch of nausea.

He would come in early tomorrow to finish dictating the letters. He didn't want to stay here another minute.

He left the office as it was—lights on, papers scattered, briefcase open, files everywhere. With trembling hands, he locked his door, then Dinah's, and walked down the corridor to the utility stairwell. Downstairs, he detoured by Security and told Jeff Craddock to disregard his call.

"Thanks for letting me know," Jeff said, taking in Troy's unsettled expression. "The call disconnected so quick, I didn't notice where it came from and had to check the computer log. I called back just now, got no answer. I was just about to come check on you."

"It's all right. I locked up. I'm going home."

Brooke left Troy's office at a run and kept it up until she reached the elevator. Some part of her mind was thankful that the elevator was empty, the hallways vacant as she made her way back to her cubicle in the library.

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She buttoned her blazer and fought to keep her emotions from showing, wiping the wetness from her eyes and holding her breath.

In her cubicle, she pulled her car keys from her purse and hurried outside, forgetting to lock the file cabinets, forgetting to clock out.

She drove out of the gravel parking area to a large paved lot for the employees of Triton Fiber Optics Company, where there were no cars and weren't likely to be, since everyone had left for the day. She laid her forehead against the steering wheel and let the tears come.

At first her sobs were silent, but then she began to wail softly as she went over the memory of what had just happened. Louder her sobs grew until she was finally yelling, screaming with the pain and humiliation.

Nothing had worked out like she thought it would. By all accounts, Troy had been separated from his wife for four or five weeks. He should have jumped at the chance for willing female companionship—for solace and comfort...and pleasure and release.

So many times, she had seen his reaction in her imagination. Initial puzzlement giving way to surprise and delight, bringing that dazzling smile to his face and desire to his eyes. He would abandon his work, his desk, and they would sit together on the couch and talk, gazing into each other's eyes, and then the talk would cease. Then they would sit closer, and their faces would move toward each other, and they would close their eyes for a kiss. That's when the passion would start. It would end with torrid lovemaking that would make the sex scenes in her novels pale by comparison.

She had seen it over and over in her mind so many times it was more like a memory than a fantasy. But it hadn't worked like that *at all*. He had been stonefaced and resistant from the beginning. Brooke had brushed that off as part of his surprise and not quite knowing what to do. But it didn't get better as the encounter progressed; it got worse.

By the end of it, he was breathing hard and trembling but not from passion. Not only had he *not* been turned on—he was turned *off*. He had not merely rejected her. He had rejected her *with anger*.

Her humiliation came from more than his active rejection, though. There was also the matter of having the rejection witnessed by that smart leek chick from the mailroom, Robin what's-her-name. It would probably /be all over the building by lunch tomorrow. She could just hear the bitches at the Gossip Table....

And a frightening new thought occurred to her: This had to have something to do with that kiss in the cafeteria. That wife-bitch was luring him

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back to her lair....

Fresh tears welled up and Brooke lay down across the car seat. Rejection, humiliation and jealousy were gnawing at her, devouring her inside, and she couldn't remember ever hurting so bad.

Troy arrived home no more than twenty minutes after he called to say he'd be working for another hour. He entered through the back door and stepped to Patty in the family room, where she was doing needlework. His face looked like thunder.

She looked at him, her curiosity turning to concern. "What's wrong?"

"Dale was right. My being away from home led to something no good happening."

"What?"

He didn't say anything for a moment. "Where are the young'uns?"

"Missy's next door. Randy's at John Mark's house. They'll be home at six-thirty."

He took his handkerchief out of his pocket and showed her the lipstick smudges. "That came off my mouth."

Astonished, Patty glanced at the handkerchief and back to his face.

He sat down next to her on the couch, their customary talking place, and stared into space for a moment. "A woman came on to me today. Right after I called you."

"What woman?"

"Her name is Brooke Anderson, I think she said. She's sort of new. Works in record storage. She's brought us files before, but Dinah always took them so I just glimpsed her in the outer office. I may have seen her a couple of times in the lunchroom or some place, too."

"You haven't met her, though?"

"Not to my recollection. If we've spoken, it was just in passing, so this was a total surprise. I can't think of a thing I've done, even something she could misconstrue, that would lead her to do what she did."

"What'd she do?"

He gave her a brief run-down of the events in his office after their phone conversation. "She had on a blazer. It was unbuttoned and she wasn't wearing anything underneath it."

Patty frowned said under her breath, "Premeditated."

"Yeah. I asked her to leave my office but she ignored that and said she knew I wasn't living at home and she wanted to keep me from being lonely."

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He gave her an incredulous look and a mirthless laugh. “She evidently came upstairs expecting me to have sex with her in my office.”

His lips compressed into a grim line. “Of course, if you’re a man, you can’t physically do anything to defend yourself in a situation like that. You could hurt somebody, so you have to deal with it some other way.”

He told her about calling security and Brooke’s breaking the connection.

“Something just flew all over me when she did that. I took off like Joseph fleeing Potiphar’s wife. The onliest difference is that Joseph was afraid. I was furious. Anyway, she caught up with me and put her arms around me and kissed me.”

He stopped talking for a moment to summon control and hold emotion at bay. Patty couldn’t tell whether it was anger he was trying to control, or a sick feeling.

“That just made me madder and I knew I had to be real careful. I wanted to get her off me and push her away from me—I wanted to push her, to shake her, hard.”

Patty’s eyes widened and she blinked. “You didn’t, though, did you?”

“No. I didn’t touch her. I reached up to pull her arms off my shoulders but thought better of it. And then there was a knock on the door in Dinah’s office. It was Robin from the mailroom, doing the last pickup of the day. That seemed to shock Anderson. She started crying and ran out of the room.”

A ghost of his earlier anger snapped in his eyes. “Robin said she has been obsessed with me for weeks and everybody knows. That was a little creepy. I had no idea. And it’s real peculiar that Max didn’t tell me. If everybody knows, he surely does, and that’s exactly the kind of information he enjoys passing along.”

“It sounds like you handled it the best way anyone could.” Patty leaned closer to him to examine his face. “She kept kissing you after you turned away. That same lipstick is smeared on your cheek.”

Troy reached for a box of tissues on the end table, handed it to Patty and said, “Get it off.”

“It’s on your other cheek. Look this way.” Patty gently rubbed his cheek with a tissue until the offending smears were gone and tossed the tissue on the table.

“Thank you.”

She snuggled up to him, nestling her head under his chin, and he resumed his story.

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“When I was alone again, I just stood there for a moment, thinking about different things, and I got this sick feeling. Then I came home.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“Wondering how she knew that I had stayed out at the lake. I guess she thought I was still out there. I didn’t tell anyone but Dinah and Max, and they both knew not to talk about it.”

“Well, it got out somehow. I told you my Ex-Wives committee knew about it, although I didn’t ask who they heard it from. You know Dinah wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Yes, I know. I don’t understand what’s got into Max.” Troy shook his head, bewildered and saddened. “He had to be the one who told her, and I still wonder if he put her up to it, as some kind of joke.”

“If he did, it’s a sick joke and there’s something wrong with him.”

“But if he didn’t.... I swear I can’t think of thing I’ve done to invite that.”

“For some women, all it would take is seeing you walk across a room. That’s all it takes for me, sometimes.”

He laughed softly. “You’re my wife. I’m supposed to turn you on.”

Patty lay still and listened to his heart beat a moment and felt a deep and intense possessiveness overtake her. She sat up to look at his face. “She needs to get her own man. You’re mine. You...are...*mine*.”

“I think she understands that, now.”

“And you be very careful. Remember what Potiphar’s wife did when Joseph resisted her. She cried rape and Joseph got thrown in prison.”

“I know,” he murmured. “I’m well aware.”

His restless, agitated eyes roamed her face, settled on her eyes and found something in their depths that he had not seen much in their marriage—fury even stronger, more intense than his mingled with a protectiveness that reached to an almost savage level. It warmed his heart and simultaneously took him aback.

He stroked her hair back from her forehead, tucked it behind her ears, took her face in his hands and kissed her, felt love and fury mingled make her tremble.

Raising his head, he stroked her cheeks with his thumbs. “She better hope she never has to tangle with you...”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Troy's rejection notwithstanding, Brooke still felt a powerful lust for him—so powerful that by the time the ten o'clock news splashed onto her television screen, it was beginning to change her memory of the incident.

He hadn't actually been *rejecting* her. He had been surprised, perhaps even shocked, that someone as young and pretty as she wanted him, and he just didn't know how to respond. After all, Brooke was far more beautiful than the cutesy little wife he wasn't living with.

Before the week was out, the incident had been totally transformed in her mind, at least with respect to Troy's motivation and behavior. She had come on a little too strong, and he wasn't expecting it, that was all. Given the opportunity, she wouldn't blow her chance again.

But she feared the opportunity would never come.

Max was scribbling a note on a legal pad when movement in his peripheral vision got his attention. He looked up to see Brooke Emerson standing in the doorway.

"Hey, Brooke, thanks for getting up here so quick. Shut the door, come on in."

She did so and lowered herself into a black leather side chair in front of his desk.

"I called you here," he said, "because several people have said things to me, hinted that I need to do something...talk to you...."

"About what?"

"About your obsession with Troy Stevenson."

She gave him a wide-eyed look that somehow managed to convey both surprised innocence and calculated suspicion.

"I'm not obsessed with him, but if I was, it's none of your business or

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anybody else's. It's not affecting my work; it's not affecting anybody's work. I haven't jeopardized the company or its products or sales. I have violated no personnel policies. The people who have come tattling to you are company gossips. They just want to get somebody in trouble."

Max slowly oscillated his chair a few inches and gazed at her. "You're very articulate. You've thought this out, haven't you?"

"Is my job in trouble?"

"No. But I want to set you straight about one thing. The people who came to me didn't mention work or the company. They were concerned about Troy and concerned about you, personally. Now I'm concerned, too. Troy's been my closest friend since college. I wouldn't want to see trouble come on him, but I don't think it will. He'll make certain of that. You're a different matter. You're the one at risk. I think you could be setting yourself up for a world of hurt, considering the facts."

"What facts? Here are the only facts I know. His marriage is going down the tubes and I'm attracted to him."

Max gave a quick laugh and shook his head. "His marriage isn't going down the tubes. There's not the slightest danger of that happening."

"He's not even living with his wife! They're breaking up. Why would he leave her if everything was so great between them?"

"Well, he hasn't left her. He is living with her at their home in Oak Terrace. Oh, he stayed out at their cabin at the lake for a while, working on something, but he's been back home for about two weeks."

Brooke blinked at him, stunned.

Max returned her stare with a wry grin. "I guess the Gossip Tablers have been a little tardy getting that information to you, huh."

"How could he do that?"

"Do what? Go back home?" Max shrugged. "He owns it. He lives there."

"How could he go back to her? I've seen her, she's just nothing compared to him."

"I wouldn't ever let him hear you say that, if I was you. He is immensely pleased with her. May not make sense to you and me. She's nothing extraordinary, she's reserved, she doesn't reveal much of herself. Oh, she breaks out of her shell now and then, which I suspect is the result of living for ten years under Troy's influence, but she's not a sparkly attention-getter, you know? Despite which, Troy's attention has been pretty much riveted on her since the moment they met."

"I—I just don't understand that."

"I don't either. Maybe it's one of those things you have to experience

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personally to understand. I'm sure you've heard they have a storybook marriage. It's true. They fell in love at first sight—I was there, I saw it happen—but they spent nearly a year getting to know each other before they got married. The more they knew, the deeper they fell in love. And it's still happening. Beneath the day-to-day, the kids, the bills, the job, the chores, they're still in love, still falling in deeper. Beats all you ever saw."

"I don't believe that."

"Well, it's true. It's one of those facts you don't want to accept but it's still a fact. Here's another one. They didn't expect to stay in love, and keep falling in love, all this time with no effort. They put enormous amounts of work into it. They're committed to it."

"Oh, that is just so old fashioned."

"He's an old fashioned guy. In fact, I don't think you'd really like him much if you got to know him."

"Who cares? You just don't get it. He looks like a dream and I just know he'd be..."

"What?"

She stared at him, lips clamped, eyes gleaming.

Max gave her a calculating look. "He'd be what? Good in bed?"

Brooke nodded.

"I see. So you're not a good girl and it's not about love and romance and sympathy for a man losing his family. It's about sex. What you feel for him isn't care or concern; it's lust."

"That's not true. I'm interested in the whole person, but he is this incredibly sexy man. And even if his marriage is not breaking up, this is the Eighties. We aren't living in the Dark Ages anymore. He's got to be...needy. You're married that long, it's bound to get ordinary even if it was great at first."

Max threw his head back for a hearty laugh. He couldn't help it. "And you're gonna make it all better for him."

"I could."

"No. You couldn't."

"How do you know? Does he talk to you about his sex life?"

"Beyond letting something slip now and then when he's been drinking, hardly ever. He's very private about that. He'll talk about sex in the abstract, the way men do, but not as much as most men do. Mr. Goody Two Shoes will even laugh at an off-color joke, if it's genuinely funny. But he is very close-mouthed about his own sex life. He'll tell you all day how much he loves Patty, how great she is, how proud he is of her, but discussing their sex life—that's off limits."

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“Maybe it’s awful. Maybe he doesn’t talk about it because he’s miserable. Did you ever think of that?”

“You’re dreaming, girl. You don’t have to be around him long to know he’s a happily married man. Very happily. I’ve been around him about fourteen years. He may not talk about his sex life, specifically, but he talks about his wife and kids, his marriage and family life. She waits on him hand and foot. Does whatever he tells her to. There’s almost nothing he can do wrong, in her view. She nearabout worships him, and that’s constant nourishment for his ego.”

“My gosh....”

“Yeah. Just as an example, when they’d been married about three, four months, she tore herself away from him for a week, went and stayed with his parents in Tennessee so his mother could teach her to cook what he liked, the way he liked it.

“But it’s not a one-way street. He treasures her. Works damn hard to provide food, shelter and financial security for her and the kids. He gives her everything she wants that he possibly can. And loves doing it.”

Max narrowed his eyes, taking in the skeptical look on Brooke’s face.

“You still don’t want to face facts? He’d kill me if he knew I was telling you this, but the things I’ve seen.... One time I was at their house and I spilled water on my shirt. Patty put it in the dryer. Ten, fifteen minutes later I went to the laundry room to get it. The garment rack next to the dryer looked like a Frederick’s of Hollywood display. Half a dozen padded satin clothes hangers and the little things dangling from them were so raunchy they almost made me blush.” Max grinned at the memory.

“When they lived in Atlanta, couple of times a week he would go home at lunchtime for a quickie. They’re not newlyweds anymore but he still does that from time to time.”

Brooke’s jaw dropped and she goggled. “But—but you said he doesn’t talk about....”

“Oh, he never says anything about it, but I’ve known him a long time and I can tell. Dinah can, too, probably.” He took a deep breath and grew serious again. “So you have to assume that their sexual bond is extremely powerful. Probably something people like you and I can’t begin to understand. But I do understand this. Troy has a lot of time, effort, money and emotion invested in his wife and marriage, and he’s not going to let anything jeopardize it. Certainly not you.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

“I got bad news for you,” Claudia said to Brooke. “Troy Stevenson moved back home.”

“You brought me out here in this heat to tell me that?”

They were seated at a picnic table farthest from the doors to the cafeteria in the outdoor break area. Claudia had picked this table for privacy, but it was a useless precaution. Nobody else was coming outside to eat in the sweltering June weather.

“I thought you ought to know. He moved back home a week ago, maybe before that. And apparently he didn’t move out because of problems between him and Patty, because there aren’t any, never have been. There was some reason he went to stay at the lake but it wasn’t that.”

Claudia was a little surprised that Brooke was taking it so well. She was sour, but not deeply disappointed, as Claudia was expecting. “You don’t seem very shocked.”

Brooke shrugged. “Married men go back home to their wives all the time. Just out of curiosity, how do you know about all this?”

“I guess Troy told somebody at the youth leagues where he’s a volunteer coach and whoever it was told his wife and so on until it got back to Roland’s wife and she told him and he told me. Also, those papers he signed when she came here? They weren’t divorce papers—not even close. They were the same ones he signs every year to be a volunteer coach with the youth leagues.”

Brooke clamped a nail between her teeth and looked at Claudia mutely.

“Also, at lunch yesterday, I overheard Dinah talking to Joy,” Claudia said. “She was going to a meeting downtown with Troy and was transferring the phones to Joy. Dinah told her somebody from Jimmie Chandler’s was supposed to call and confirm Troy and Patty’s reservation for their anniversary dinner on Thursday.”

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Claudia took in Brooke's stonefaced expression.

"I'm really sorry, hon. I shouldn't have encouraged your interest in him. It was hopeless from the beginning. Everybody who knows him for a while finds out two things about him—he's straight as an arrow and he's crazy about his wife."

Brooke steered the Chevelle into the parking lot at Jimmie Chandler's and looked around. Pretty fancy place for a little hick town like Verona.

She went inside and told the maitre d', "I'd like to make a reservation for two for Thursday, but I've never been here before. Would it be possible for me to take a look?"

"Yes ma'am, of course."

Brooke looked over the spacious dining room with a hardwood dance floor, ringed about with white linen-clad tables. It was just after work and the place was not busy. At one end of the dining room, arched openings led to an outdoor balcony with concrete railings. Steps descended from the balcony to a wooden boardwalk that ran beside the Oostachula River.

"I would like something a bit private, but not a private room," she said.

The maitre d' had a staff person show her a small balcony with three tables beside the rail overlooking the dining room. Plants and sheer draperies afforded privacy, but allowed a good view below.

"May I reserve a specific table?"

"Certainly."

"I want this one," she said, indicating the last table on the balcony.

That night, she called Angie at her boyfriend's house. "I need a date Thursday night. Just an escort. Preferably somebody decent looking, who owns a suit."

They were seated at a table for two in the dining room at Jimmie Chandler's. Being Thursday, it was not crowded as weekend evenings, but busy nonetheless.

Patty had been ecstatic since Troy returned home from his self-imposed exile, but tonight she wondered if she wasn't getting a little foretaste of Heaven itself. She was as in love, as happy, as excited as she had been on her wedding day ten years before.

She would not have thought it possible but Troy was more beautiful tonight than he'd been as a groom. Resplendent in a crisp white shirt that

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contrasted starkly with his deep navy suit and silver four-in-hand tie, he he had been turning women's heads since he walked in the door.

His mood and behavior were as delicious as his looks. He was funny, sweet and attentive. He was also frisky and horny, exactly like the dazzling football player she fell in love with a little more than a decade ago. Now and then she caught the glow of love light in his eyes and butterflies in her stomach fluttered frantically.

Patty had dressed in a knee-length sheath of fluid white knit that was at once modest and alluringly feminine. Her hair fell loosely to her shoulders from a side part. She had taken great pains with her manicure and make up and she knew by the look on her husband's face that she was as pleasing to him as he was to her.

Even dinner was perfect, Georgia cuisine done up gourmet—a full-bodied seafood bisque, pecan-cruste free-range chicken, fried green tomatoes topped with herbed cream cheese, turnip greens stewed with onions and hot pepper sauce, cornmeal muffins with sweet cream butter and dessert of sweet potato pie with black walnut crust topped with ice cream and pineapple syrup. In the background, the band played romantic music, Troy's kind of music, sexy smooth jazz.

After dinner, he watched her take a tiny gift wrapped box from her beaded bag, and hand it across the table to him. He took it and studied it for a moment, held it near his ear and shook it. "No tickin'. No rattlin'."

"Hey, now. Don't play around. Open it."

He made short work of the ribbon and wrapping paper, finding a black leather ring box inside. He opened it and looked down at the signet ring beneath lowered eyelids. He looked across the table to Patty, unable to speak for a moment. "Thank you, sweetheart. It's perfect."

"You really like it?"

"Oh, yeah. I really like it. I can't think of anything I'd rather have than this—and what it symbolizes."

He slipped it on his finger and watched light glint off the four birthstones.

"I knew it was perfect for you as soon as I saw it."

"Exactly what I thought when I saw this."

He reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a his gift for her, a package a bit smaller than a paperback book wrapped in glossy white and tied with a white ribbon.

Patty knew immediately she was getting jewelry too. She removed the ribbon and paper and opened the flat hinged case, gasping softly when

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she saw what was inside—a delicate necklace of tiny seed pearls not much bigger around than a pencil lead. The matching earrings were small clusters of seed pearls half the size of her pinky nail.

“Oh, my,” she said softly. “Troy, these are beautiful!”

“They’ll be even more beautiful on you. Give them back to me right now, though.”

She handed the case back to him and he put it the coat pocket the had taken it from. He laid his arm on the table, palm up and she put her hand in his. He gently squeezed her hand and looked at her, at last saying, “Wanna dance?”

She gave him a quizzical look. “The music stopped.”

“It’s going to start again any second now.” He raised his eyebrows, as if he knew something was up. At that moment, the music started again. The band wasn’t playing—this was recorded music, and at the sound of it Patty caught her breath.

It was *Love’s Theme* by the Love Unlimited Orchestra, which they had danced to, and made love to, countless times as newlyweds in their little apartment in Atlanta.

Memories filled them both as Troy led her to the dance floor—memories of passion and promise and young love, new love, so deep and powerful it was sometimes excruciating. He looked at her as they danced and she looked up at him and each saw the same memories mirrored in the other’s eyes.

As embarrassing as it was, Patty couldn’t hold back tears. Twice, she took a breath as if to speak, but she exhaled, the words unspoken.

He smiled at her. “I heard you.”

She didn’t try to talk after that. They both knew that sometimes their hearts spoke to each other without their mouths having to say a word. She rested her forehead against his shoulder and followed his lead in the dance.

When the song ended, they stepped outside to the balcony where the sultry summer night wrapped around them. Bright moonlight showered them and glinted off the river. No one else was around.

Troy took out the jewelry case and opened it, and Patty fastened the tiny earrings to her earlobes. She handed him the necklace and held her hair out of the way while he stepped behind her. He kissed her neck before fastening the necklace.

His hands rested on her shoulders a moment before he slid them down her upper arms, enveloped her and pulled her against him. She leaned

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her head back, felt his breath caress her hair.

“Happy anniversary, Patty.”

“Happy anniversary, Tro.”

His hold loosened so she could turn to face him and he could look into her eyes.

“Ten years ago,” he murmured, “right about now, we were looking out the glass walls of the revolving restaurant at Atlanta’s skyline. It was a spectacular view, but I only wanted to look at you. And you only wanted to look at me.

“We went home to our little apartment and made love for the first time. Gave each other pleasure neither of us had ever known before. We joined together. Bonded. And when our bodies became one, our hearts joined together, too. We’re still joined at the heart. Always will be. And that’s made it an awesome first ten years.”

“Oh, I love you! So much!” Her arms lifted, circled his neck and they held each other closely to kiss in the moonlight, a wedding kiss, a lovers’ kiss. It was as if the moon was showering them not just with light but with love and passion.

“I love you, too, sweetheart.” His breath caught as desire for her flooded his face and leaped like flames into his eyes. “Let’s go home. ”

From her table at the rail of the dining room balcony, Brooke watched the Stevensons exchange gifts, do their anniversary dance, and step outside and kiss romantically in the moonlight. She burned with jealousy and excruciating pain and her date knew it. Every emotion she felt showed on her face because she had no interest in hiding them.

Jonathan was a programmer in the IT department at Merchants and Planters Bank, an acquaintance of Angie’s beau. At first he had been mildly curious about Brooke’s interest in the couple down below—was she an ex-wife or ex-lover of the hunk in the navy suit?—but by now, he was just bored. He was beginning to regret making this date.

It had sounded good at first. Blonde chick, a looker, would pay for the date—food, gas, everything. She just needed an escort. There had even been hints of a different kind of payoff back at her apartment at the end of the evening, which would give him the status of a genuine gigolo. He hoped that worked out, and turned out to be good; otherwise, the entire evening would be a waste.

He didn’t know the man and woman down below but he had rather

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enjoyed watching them, probably as much as Brooke hated it. They were obviously celebrating an event of some sort—a wedding anniversary, judging by the gift exchange and their demeanor with each other. Despite the sweetness of their evening, it also seemed quite likely, to anyone who had observed them as closely as he and Brooke, that the couple was in for one bodacious night of lovemaking after leaving the restaurant.

Brooke must have realized that because when they left, her anger and envy disappeared abruptly, and she looked betrayed, lost and hurt.

“Would you like to order dessert?” he asked her. “I’ll signal a waiter.”

She looked at him as if seeing him for the first time and her demeanor changed again.

“Dessert?” she said, breathlessly. “Oh, yes. I really want dessert.”

He read her signals and deciphered her code instantly. Lust flared in him. “Your place or mine?”

“What difference does it make?”

He signaled a waiter, not to order dessert but to bring the check.

Every month around the middle of the calendar, employees at Shearwater Ingram celebrated those having birthdays. The celebrants shared a cake supplied by Human Resources and each received a card signed by their co-workers.

Employees who could leave their work for a few minutes at two p.m. came to the break room for the cake-cutting and Happy Birthday-singing. Thoughtful colleagues usually took a piece of cake back to their compatriots who were chained to their desks.

In July, there were four people with birthdays, but for the life of her, Brooke couldn’t remember who any of them were except Troy and she intended to go to the cake cutting whether anyone was left in her department or not.

She had seen him only twice since her failed seduction attempt, once during a company wide-staff meeting held in the cafeteria, another time walking down the back hallway with Max. Both times, he looked through her like she wasn’t there.

She knew he would do the same thing again at the birthday party and she had no plans to speak to him and give him an opportunity to embarrass her. She just wanted to lurk at the back of the crowd and look at him.

That’s where she was when he walked in and joined his fellow celebrants, Clint Shearwater, some woman from accounting and a guy from

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security. The trio was standing around the table centered with a chocolate sheet cake, waiting for Troy to join them and looking foolish in pointed party hats.

When Troy walked in Polly handed him his card and Max approached with a hat in his hand. He put the thin elastic strap beneath Troy's chin, held the hat a couple of inches above Troy's head a second or two and then spread his fingers, haw-hawing when the hat snapped down against Troy's hair.

The birthday boy grinned and left the hat on for a full second before he pulled it off, handed it to Dugan and ran his fingers through his hair. Pointy party hats were evidently among the things that were not compatible with his sense of dignity.

After the singing and cake cutting, he meandered through the crowd greeting people and headed for a couple of tables where most of his staff had gathered with their little plates of cake.

The crowd began to thin but Brooke wasn't going to leave as long as he was present. She chatted with Claudia until the pixie headed back to her office and had just struck up a conversatin with Polly when she felt someone bump her. She turned to see who it was and that familiar jolt went through her. Troy. He was talking to Norm and not watching where he was going.

He said, "Scuse me," and took her arm to steady her before he realized who she was. The instant recognition dawned, his face went completely blank, his eyes opaque, no emotion showing there at all, and he dropped his hand to his side. He turned back to Norm, resumed the conversation and walked away.

Thrilled by the unexpected physical contact, devastated by his cold and abrupt withdrawal, Brooke turned back to Polly and was suddenly unable to endure her prattling. She interrupted and said, "Oh, I almost forgot. I need to get a piece of cake to take to David."

"David?" Polly said. "He's standing right over there, stuffing his face."

"Oh. Well, if he's here, I need to get back to the library. One of us is supposed to be there."

She scurried from the room, eyes stinging.

Despite these setbacks—Troy's emphatic rejection of her, his return home and, to hear Max tell it, the powerful bond he shared with his wife—Brooke wasn't ready to give up on her hope of a relationship with him. Or

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an affair. Or even a one-night stand.

She held out hope because it was a fact that he had moved away from home, a fact that had become pretty widely known at Shearwater-Ingram. Brooke herself had seen his car at the lake cabin more than once. Add to that Max's admission that Troy didn't talk about his sex life. It could very well be because he was miserable, despite Max's conclusions to the contrary.

The anniversary dinner would have been the clincher to anyone else, but not Brooke. It had been a sweet, beautiful night...but a couple whose relationship was deteriorating might throw great effort into such an event as a last-ditch attempt to salvage what they once had. It wasn't necessarily representative of their relationship now.

But the upcoming company picnic would give her the opportunity to see them as they really were—to see if the presumed reconciliation was genuine, or just the last gasp of a dying marriage.

Chapter Thirty-Five

There had been so many complaints over the years about holding the picnic in the July heat, there was talk now of changing it to May or September. Starting next year. It was too late to change it this year. People would have to swelter again in the mid-summer weather, but they'd at least have an opportunity to spend part of the day in comfort.

The location had been changed from the Leonidas Farmer Recreation Area, a rural facility with rudimentary amenities, to the exhibition hall at the Yancey County Fairgrounds, a large, metal building well-lighted with two walls of plate glass and, most importantly, air conditioned.

A grassy parking area adjacent to the hall would serve very well for outdoor games. There was no swimming pool at the fairgrounds but most employees considered that an equitable trade off for the air conditioning.

On the day of the picnic, committee members began arriving at eight to set up tables and chairs, although the event itself wasn't set to begin until ten-thirty. The meal was scheduled for noon.

Brooke arrived at eleven and was relieved to see that a sizeable crowd had already gathered. Long tables with company-provided food—fried chicken & fixings, sub-sandwiches, baked beans, potato salad, and coleslaw, along with canned soft drinks and beer in tubs of ice—had been set up in the exhibition hall.

But the real attraction on the food tables was the pot luck dishes brought by employees; tray after tray of cheeses and crackers, big bowls of chips and dip including that staple of Southern parties, crab dip, cocktail wieners in barbecue sauce, several plates of deviled eggs, a dozen tempting casserole standards, a few unidentifiable ones, and a whole table full of homemade desserts.

Brooke found Claudia, David and Karen spreading red checkered tablecloths, setting out plastic cups and flatware, putting stacks of napkins and

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rolls of paper towels on the tables. She hung around with them for a while, nominally helping. She was glad they were here but she had come to the picnic to see Troy, and she constantly scanned the growing crowd for him.

She thought she heard his name mentioned a couple of times, but he was nowhere to be seen. Surely he was coming. He attended every year. His image showed up throughout picnic photo albums in the library all the way back to his first year in Verona.

At eleven fifteen, she overheard someone say that the Stevensons' vehicle had just driven in. With her midsection fluttering, she moseyed outside. To one side of the exhibition hall stretched a large gravel parking area; the forty or fifty vehicles of Shearwater employees didn't begin to fill it. To the right spread the secondary parking lot covered with grass and dotted with occasional trees. An area near the exhibition hall had been mowed recently for outdoor activities.

There were as many people out here in the heat as there were inside. Brooke noted that the edge of the grassy area was dotted with clumps of folding chairs, coolers, beach umbrellas, blankets and quilts spread on the grass, but her attention was on the parking lot. Trying not to be obvious about it, she scanned the vehicles and the people getting out of their cars. She didn't see the Audi anywhere.

Then she spotted him and his family getting out of a white station wagon. They walked to the back of the wagon and Troy took things out and handed them around. He hoisted a mid-size cooler to his right shoulder and took something in his other hand and they headed for the exhibition hall.

Once they emerged from between parked cars, Brooke saw that his left hand grasped the handle of a cake carrier. The wife carried a large tray under a white linen cloth and the little girl swung from both hands wicker baskets covered with paper doilies. Adorable Randy pulled a toy wagon to which folded lawn chairs and other paraphernalia were strapped with shock cord.

They talked as they crossed the distance to the building, Troy keeping an eye on Randy and his burden, which the kid seemed to be handling with ease. As they neared the entrance to the hall, greetings and short conversations with others slowed their progress and gave Brooke an opportunity to look them over.

As always, seeing Troy took her breath away. Above khaki bermuda shorts, he wore an unbuttoned white shirt with short sleeves in light-

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weight cotton over a brown T-shirt with some sort of writing on the front. She couldn't tell what it said at this distance, but she was a bit surprised. She'd heard that he wasn't enthusiastic about wearing clothing with logos and slogans, the exception being insignias from the University of Alabama. His sockless feet were encased in bulky white tennis shoes. Dark sunglasses and a cap with a curved bill shaded his face but did nothing hide his extreme handsomeness.

The whole family was dressed for summer fun. The children were clad in shorts sets and tennis shoes. Patty sported short white coulottes and a white shirt over a brown T-shirt similar to Troy's and with perhaps the same slogan. Her hair was pulled back from her face and topped with a white canvas eyeshade. Clunky sandals of brown leather were strapped to her feet.

A sullen look briefly touched Brooke's face. *Matching his-and-hers T-shirts, oh, how cute.*

As a family, they were truly striking and Brooke could not look at them without sad and aching envy joining her sulkiness. It didn't help her mood to notice Troy's aura of pride and satisfaction as he walked beside his wife and children to join the gathering of friends and colleagues.

They were getting closer, close enough to notice her, so she shot back inside to wait. She located her friends and pretended to socialize but her concentration was on the door, waiting for Troy to step inside.

It opened and the children followed their mother inside but the door closed behind them without admitting Troy. Randy, minus the wagon, held the cake carrier now. They took their food containers to a table and set them down. Dinah, Dugan and Joy converged on the trio and with hugs and greetings.

"Where's the boss?" Dinah asked.

"He's outside setting up chairs and the shade maker for the softball game, but he'll be in here pretty quick," Patty said, adding with a smile, "This is where the food is."

An hour after the meal, when the digestive stupor began to wear off, a four-inning softball game cleared out the exhibition hall except for a handful who couldn't take the heat.

"Let's go watch the ball game," Brooke told Claudia.

"I'll be out in a minute. Got to finish up here. You take a couple of chairs, try to find us a shady spot."

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Brooke took folding chairs outside and looked around. The ballgame was underway. On another part of the grassy area, someone had set up sprinklers and a waterslide for the kids. It didn't make up for the absence of a swimming pool, but was still a lot of fun, judging by the shrieks and laughter from that quarter. She spotted Troy's kids—Randy in red trunks and Melissa in a pink swimsuit—playing with others in the sprinkler spray.

In front of her, every bit of natural shade appeared to be occupied, and she had not brought an umbrella or canvas shelter like others had. She walked into the crowd and was amazed to find a patch of unoccupied shade under a small tree. Someone must have just vacated it.

She unfolded the chairs and sat, adjusted her large, very dark sunglasses, and turned her face toward the game, although her eyes were actually scanning the crowd spread out in clumps on the grass.

Slightly to the right and in front of her, she spotted Troy and his wife, along with Max and his children, but neither ex-wife, under a blue canvas shelter.

Brian and Kathy Ingram, tow-headed half-siblings who lived with different mothers, were dressed to play in the water, but seemed reluctant to leave their father who was teasing them, playing with them, making them laugh, while he cooled off with a beer in a longneck bottle. Brooke knew from office gossip that they did not get to spend a lot of time with him.

In the middle of the shelter, Troy relaxed in a webbed lawn chair, ankle on knee. He was capless now, and the heat had persuaded him to remove the white shirt; the brown T-shirt showcased his broad shoulders and strong neck. He was talking with Max and the two Ingram kids as much as watching softball. Patty was in a chaise lounge beside him, leafing through a magazine.

As Brooke watched, he drained the contents of a red plastic cup and shook ice into his mouth. Patty said something and he turned to look at her. She reached a hand toward him and he handed her his cup. She got up, took the cup to the cooler and refilled it with cola and ice.

It came to Brooke that Patty was waiting on him—doing for him something he was perfectly capable of doing for himself—and that she probably did that all the time, waited on him hand and foot, just like Max said.

Patty took the refill back to Troy. He took a sip and set the cup on the little table next to a portable radio. Patty stepped behind his chair, put her hands on those wide, strong shoulders and slid them down to meet above

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his breastbone. He covered her hands with his, tilted his head back to look up at her with a lazy, summer smile. He said something and she ruffled his hair before going back to the chaise.

It was perhaps ten minutes later that Troy stood up and left the shelter, his dark glasses hiding his eyes. As he navigated his way through the clumps of spectators, Brooke got a clear look at the slogan printed in white on his T-shirt, and it was like a hard slap across the face.

Made for Monogamy.

One end of the cavernous exhibition hall had been left empty to serve as a dance floor. Enormous speakers stood on pedestals in the corners. Throughout the day country music, classic rock and rhythm and blues had played in the background. But after the ball game, when people migrated inside to cool off, the disk jockey ensconced on a platform between the speakers began to take requests for dancing.

Brooke took a chair at the periphery of the dance floor to keep watch on the Stevensons, glad that the bright afternoon light admitted by the huge skylights and plateglass walls justified her wearing dark glasses. By turning her head toward the DJ, she could cut her eyes slightly and observe them with no one being the wiser.

They had come in shortly after she did and stood at the edge of the dance floor talking with a visitor from Atlanta. But five minutes into the dancing the DJ started a song that had an instant and visible effect on them.

Their faces turned toward each other simultaneously and communication, silent and significant, passed between them. Troy's eyes narrowed and one side of his mouth quirked up. Patty's lips parted slightly and her eyes gleamed as they fastened on his.

He said a quick word to their companion, raised his hand in a leave-taking gesture and took a few steps onto the dance floor with Patty beside him. They turned toward each other and began to dance.

Brooke didn't recognize the tune, but she recognized its effect. Jazz with a touch soul, it featured punchy brass orchestration in the background and an alluring saxophone lead that was sensual, seductive. Music for lovers to make out by, spine-tingling in its sexiness.

At first, Troy did little more than shift his weight from foot to foot, and barely tilt his shoulders. Except for the fingertips of his right hand resting against Patty's waist, they weren't even touching. As their bodies

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moved slightly to the compelling rhythm, they spoke to each other too softly for anyone else to hear.

At last, Patty reached up to rest her hand on his shoulder. They took each other's free hand, loosely laced their fingers and Troy began to lead. Patty followed him perfectly.

There was nothing extraordinary about their dancing. They weren't pressed together as were a few couples sharing the dancefloor with them, or showing off their bodies with gyrations and undulations like some of the younger folks. What was extraordinary was their absorption with each other and aura intimacy that permeated it.

This was more than just sexy, more than physical, Brooke realized with a painful jolt. Their behavior bespoke intimacy not just of their bodies, but of their minds and hearts, perhaps even their souls.

Max was right. They weren't breaking up. They were still falling in love. This realization, growing and trying to force itself on her throughout the day, had turned the picnic into an episode of near torture for Brooke, and though watching Troy so deeply focused on his wife tormented her with pain and jealousy, she couldn't take her eyes off them.

"Lovely couple, aren't they?"

Brooke nearly jumped off the chair. She looked up to see Dinah Langley standing next to her. "You scared the crap outta me."

She wondered how much the Dobie knew. That Brooke was interested in her boss? Surely. That he had rejected and humiliated her? Fifty-fifty.

Dinah made herself comfortable, uninvited, on the adjacent chair, crossed her legs, and watched the Stevensons dance. "Did you know they don't dance with anyone but each other? Troy says dancing is pre-fore-play, and he won't do that with anyone but his wife."

The redhead's lips curved into a smug smile.

"That's one of their favorite songs, by the way. It's an old Earth, Wind and Fire tune, *Can't Hide Love*, originally released when they'd been married, oh, maybe two years or so. Even done up by a jazz ensemble, it sounds so mid-Seventies, don't you think? And no doubt carries some exquisite memories for them."

Dinah clasped her hands around her knee and gave Brooke one of her infuriating know-it-all looks. "They fell hard in love at first sight. I didn't know them then, but they've told me about it. Patty was sixteen. She was only seventeen when they got married. She was a beautiful June bride. They had both just graduated, him from college, her from high school. And they're still very much in love."

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“So?”

Why do people keep telling me this ancient history?

“I’ve been watching you watching them—watching him—today. Those dark glasses you’re wearing don’t really hide it, you know? I’ve heard all the gossip around the office, too. He won’t say, of course, but I strongly suspect you’ve tried to hit on him.”

Brook looked at her sharply. “Has that mail girl been talking to you? She doesn’t know anything. She’s a liar, too.”

“A liar who doesn’t know anything, huh?” Dinah chuckled. She glanced toward the Stevensons and back to the dark glasses. Her face exuded the intense protectiveness Brooke had heard so much about.

“He’s a good, honorable man. If I were you, I’d find somebody else to obsess over. I know you’ve got the hots for him but you may a well forget it. You don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of getting in his britches.”

“So what you’re saying,” Brooke said to Max across his desk, “is I don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell with him.”

Brooke had come straight to his office the moment she arrived at work Monday after the picnic, so early that bright morning sunrays streaming through the eastern window threw Max into silhouette. She had taken a seat in front of his desk without waiting to be invited. She sought reassurance, wanted some glimmer of hope that Troy was not as firmly attached to his wife and as embedded in his family as his behavior indicated.

Max had offered none. “I thought I made that clear the first time we talked.” He looked annoyed, as if she were wasting his time.

“Then I’m going to have to find another job. I can’t stand being around him, seeing him, and not having him.”

Max rocked his chair slightly and gave her an appraising look. “How would you like to live in Atlanta? There’s always something coming open at Commander. I could arrange it. And there are lots more available men in Atlanta than Verona.”

Brooke blinked.

“All right, do that. Get me out of here as quick as you can.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

The summer after Troy's return from his self-imposed exile was almost a repeat of his and Patty's first summer of marriage. They were like newlyweds again—in love so hard and deep it almost hurt, giddy with excitement, their renewal punctuated with delight as they made discoveries about themselves and each other all over again.

He would always feel a ghost of guilt, a spectre of shame, over what he had done to Randy and it would affect their relationship for the rest of their lives, as similar incidents had affected the relationships of Stevenson fathers and sons who had gone before them.

But that summer of reunion and renewal was filled with such happiness, it was almost worth the valley of sorrow that had gone before it.

Even matters at work gradually resolved.

The EFO proved to be far less troublesome than Troy had expected, holding its first seminar for company women that summer about the importance of personal financial security. Dinah had shown him the workshop handouts and he'd been hard pressed to find anything to object to. It was exactly the sort of thing he had taught Patty, and continued to teach her, so she would be knowledgeable and prepared should the unthinkable happen to him.

The reason for the drop in sales remained a mystery, but it also appeared to be an isolated incident, not a sales trend. Dealing with it had taught Troy and his department new skills and approaches to sales that would stand them in good stead in the future.

Two weeks after the employee picnic, Troy came home from work and told Patty, "Brooke Emerson has left the company. And Verona. Max said she asked him to help her get on at Commander. Said she's a city girl and was tired of living in this little hick town."

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"That's wonderful news!" Patty said with a breathless laugh. "Good ride-dance!"

The Stevensons' friendship with the Jordans and Kincaids deepened and brought a new richness to their lives, as Randy's friendship with Shelby and John Mark grew stronger. In early August, Patty called the other families to invite them to a barbecue at the Stevenson home two weeks hence.

On the patio, the three fathers watched their sons playing in the back yard while Melissa and Tommy concentrated on a game of *Sorry!* at the glass-topped table nearby. Ainsley was in Kurt's lap, about to fall asleep after an exhausting session of trying to keep up with Shelby and his friends.

Clouds were gathering, cooling the air somewhat, but so far there was no rain to force the party indoors.

Now and then, Troy stood and poked at the sizzling meat with an implement from the impressive collection of outdoor cooking utensils hanging from a rack above the grill. A table stood nearby covered with a white cloth and laid out, buffet style, with plates, flatware, glasses and linens.

Inside, platters and bowls of summer cookout foods were waiting on the kitchen counters. The women would take them out to the serving table as soon as the entrees—ribs and steaks for the adults, hamburger patties and wieners for the kids—were ready.

"These younger boys are all seven, now, I think," Troy said, taking his seat and propping ankle on knee. "And how old is Tommy, Dale?"

"He'll turn ten in October."

"They're growing up so fast," Kurt observed. "Shelby wants to go hunting with me this fall, and he's asking for a BB gun for Christmas."

"Isn't that young for hunting?" the pastor asked

"Depends on the kid. It's too young for him. Oh, I'll take him, at least once, but I'm certain I won't have an opportunity to shoot anything. He can't be still and quiet long enough. He needs another year or two on him."

Troy's eyes narrowed and he looked off in the distance at a memory. "I guess I was sixteen the last time I went hunting. My pop loved it but he didn't have a lot of time for it, so me and my friends in high school would hunt together."

"I was in a hunting club in high school. Remember those? Dale smiled

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from a touch of nostalgia. "We actually brought our rifles to school on club days. Some fellows who were lucky enough to have their own trucks brought their guns to school every day, in a rack against the back window. Hard to believe now."

Kurt said, "I hunt several times during deer season. I'd enjoy having y'all join me."

"That is very tempting," Troy said.

"Yes, it is," Dale added. "I'd need to see about getting a rifle, though."

"Same here." Troy stepped to the grill. "All I have is handguns for security."

"Y'all don't need to buy guns unless you're going to make a habit of huntin'. I've got a gun cabinet full of deer rifles. Mine, my brother's, my daddy's, and I keep them in tip-top shape. Y'all are welcome to use them."

"Appreciate that," Dale said.

"I'm thinking the next year or two, I'll get Shelby a youth rifle. Meanwhile, I can at least take him to the gun range and teach him how to shoot, and we'll continue other outdoor stuff—fishing and camping, mainly."

Troy tilted his head thoughtfully as he forked sizzling patties and wieners onto a platter. "They can be prepared ahead of time for things they aren't quite old enough to do. I'm doing the same thing with Randy for team sports. He wants to play 'the big three,' he calls them. Football, basketball and baseball."

"John Mark does, too," Dale said.

"So does Shelby. He's chomping at the bit to play football."

Troy gave the steaks remaining on the grill a final flip. "I'm going to teach Randy as much as I can ahead of time, and then he can play in the youth leagues next year. If your boys want to join us for some headstart training, they're welcome to."

"Sounds like a plan," Kurt said. "And I'll be glad to take the boys hunting and camping. Shelby'd be excited to have them come along."

"Since we're sharing fatherhood duties here," Dale said, "both your boys have an invitation to join John Mark and Tommy in some training and activities I'm putting together for community and church leadership."

"You don't know how much I'd appreciate Shelby coming under that kind of influence," Kurt drawled. "I can see early signs of leadership ability in him, but he'll need guidance, bigtime. He's impulsive."

Troy concurred. "Likewise, for Randy. He's not impulsive, more like the opposite, but what boy doesn't benefit from leadership training? And you're just the man for the job, Preacher."

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In the coolness of the family room, the women sat and sipped iced tea. The food was ready to take outside for serving the moment the ribs and steaks were done. Meanwhile, there was a lull that allowed them a few moments to relax.

“Patty, this is most enjoyable,” Gina said. “You are an exceptional hostess. The food looks great. I snuck a bite of the coleslaw—mmmmm—and if everything else is that good, well, you've outdone yourself.”

“Thank you. You know, it helps when your guests are also good friends.”

“Know what would be nice?” Gina said. “If we three families made a get-together like this an annual thing while our kids are growing up. We could rotate every year.”

“Gina, what a great idea!” Carol said. “We can have it at our place next year. Let's plan on it.”

Patty said, “I can't thank y'all enough for helping me with Randy this summer. You were wonderful with him through a really difficult time.”

“I think a lot of the credit goes to our boys,” Carol said. “They love Randy and the three of them are working on a rather remarkable friendship. Look at them out there.”

They gazed out the wall of windows along the back to see the boys playing in the combination swing set and elevated fort that Troy had built for Randy's fifth birthday.

“It is something to see, isn't it?” Patty mused. “But they're very young. What if they grow out of it?”

Carol said, “Y'all know how Dale sees it. He thinks their friendship a gift from God. He thinks there's some purpose in it, in addition to blessing them with the usual benefits of friendship like acceptance, support and learning....”

“What purpose, do you think?” Patty asked.

“I don't know, but we've already seen what it has done for Randy when had a tough time to deal with.”

“Even if they don't stay best friends,” Gina said, “I have a feeling they'll stay good friends and I know we will. We can have our cookouts every year for us as much as for them.”

“Sounds wonderful to me,” Patty said. “You two were such a blessing to me this summer, just the way your sons were to Randy, and I am so grateful.”

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She glanced outside and saw Troy taking the steaks off the grill. “I think it's time to take the rest of the food outside.”

With gratitude, and frequently with amazement, Troy watched Randy's friendship with Shelby and John Mark grow as the boys grew.

Sometimes their interests diverged. John Mark remained devoted to skateboarding, the other two only peripherally interested in it. He also collected coins and stamps and loved to design and built kites.

Shelby asked for, and received, enrollment in karate classes but he was equally drawn to video games and collecting arrowheads and birds' nests, neither of which were as easy to find as John Mark's coins, so Shelby's collections stayed smaller. One of his deepest and most steadfast interests was his sister Ainsley.

Randy showed less interest in the martial arts or skateboarding and more in playing golf with his father—and learning football and T-ball. But he was also fascinated with the heavens, gazing at stars and planets through telescopes Troy bought him and not only rattling off the names of the constellations like a pro, but pointing them out in the night sky.

Despite their divergent interests, the three boys also held many interests in common and had more than a little sway over one another. They influenced each other's taste in everything from the best sports equipment to music—down to the singing of it.

When John Mark auditioned for the Citywide Children's Choir, which performed every year at Verona's Christmas Festival, the other two thought they might like to do that, too. So they auditioned, as well, and all three made it, despite having no formal training in music and no experience beyond singing at church.

A few times during the months that followed the cookout, Troy was tempted to think over his mistakes, to wallow in the memory of the wrong he had done to Randy—to his whole family—and wrestle with the guilt such meditation brought down on him.

But he soon discovered that one of the best antidotes to guilt and shame could be found in watching Randy and his friends continue their smalltown boyhood, filled with the hot, hazy weeks of summer and the dusty days of school—filled, too with play and learning, with church and faith, with mamas and daddys and siblings...and with each other.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Brooke hated Atlanta. It took only a few days for her to realize she had made a big mistake coming here, and it didn't get any better with time. The bustle, the excitement, the night life held no attraction for her. The men she dated were complete bores.

The only redeeming aspect of her new situation was that the job paid well enough for her to travel to Verona one or two weekends a month. Ostensibly, she made the five-hour drive to visit Angie, but most weekends she spent nearly every waking moment roaming the town hoping to catch glimpses of Troy.

Most visits were washouts. She saw him running at the track only once that summer, which quickly turned to fall. She thought sure she would spot him and his family at their lakeside cabin on Labor Day, but it was in use probably by friends or renters, an older couple with teenage boys that Brooke didn't know.

School started and although Troy's children were too young for high school she went to the football stadium on Friday nights, driving through the parking lot, eyes peeled for the Audi or the white station wagon, because football had been Troy's game. She never saw either vehicle there.

It was shaping up to be a very disappointing autumn.

The one time she saw him that fall was totally by accident. After an unsuccessful visit to the football stadium she had gone to the mall to shop her sorrows away when she spotted him in the food court. He carried a tray full of New Orleans po'boys from Bridget's to a table where his family waited.

Being high school football game night, the mall was sparsely patronized. Brooke bought a Coke and eggroll, found a table behind an oversized planter thick with foliage and watched the Stevensons between the leaves.

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Troy was even more beautiful than she remembered—and comfortable tonight in jeans and tennis shoes with a form-fitting black T-shirt that took Brooke's breath away. The brats were dressed in shorts and T-shirts and sandals. Even the mousy-haired bitch was sporty in khaki slacks and a beige ribbed knit pullover.

Casual family night at the mall, she thought acidly.

As always, Troy's interaction with his family—tonight it was indulgent teasing with his children and candid attentiveness to his wife—somehow intensified his good looks and took his male magnetism to an even greater level. Watching them connect ignited Brooke's deepest jealousy and created a pain in her chest like heartburn.

She stayed in her spy-seat the entire time they dined and was taken by surprise when they abruptly finished and got up. Troy took their table trash on a tray to a nearby waste receptacle and dumped it and the family began a leisurely stroll back to the shopping area.

Brooke followed at a discreet distance, pretending to be engrossed in the stores on the other side of the corridor. Her interest shot up when they stopped to look at the displays in a women's clothing store.

Patty studied a camel colored blazer with a tan tattersall checked shirt and a brown skirt, perfect for her unsparkly persona, as Max had put it. Troy looked at the outfit with passive interest and walked beyond it to the area where lingerie was on display, gazing through the glass until his wife joined him. He pointed to a tiny, see-through red thing on an armless, headless mannequin, whispered into Patty's ear, then straightened with a sexy grin on his face.

He was facing the way they'd come and he had but to cut his eyes slightly to the side and he would see Brooke standing across the corridor, staring. She scurried into the first refuge she saw, the Smoke and Pipe Shop, and peered around the carved wooden Indian by the entrance.

From there she watched Troy go into the store while the wife-bitch walked with the kids to the adjacent toy store where the brats looked hungrily at the displays. In a few moments, he rejoined them carrying a smallish shopping bag, much too small to hold a blazer or skirt. He held the bag out to his wife, its handles draped across his forefinger. Patty took the bag and gave him coquettish looked that made Brooke curse under her breath.

The family moseyed down the corridor. Troy put his arm casually across his wife's shoulders and Patty's hand went behind him to stroke and pat his buttocks before her arm settled around his waist. He respond-

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ed with a quick squeeze of her shoulders that momentarily jostled her against his side.

To anyone who had seen the it—and probably nobody had but Brooke—Patty’s gesture and Troy’s response made an unmistakable statement about the sexual intimacy that characterized their relationship. But it went beyond sex, beyond intimacy to *belongingness*—to the possessiveness they felt toward each other...and the willingness and desire each felt to be possessed, to be *owned*, by the other.

With the dagger-blade of envy lancing her heart, Brooke watched them stroll down the corridor toward the multiple glass doors of the exit. It came to her that they were headed home. There, the wife-bitch would put the brats to bed and then she would get herself clean and sweet-smelling, get all fixed up for him, and put on the little see-through red thing and go to him. And he would slowly peel it off her and put his hands and his mouth on her, put them all over her and make her whimper. And he would get naked and breathless and hot and...hard...for *her*.

“May I help you ma’am?”

Brooke jumped and turned startled eyes toward the store clerk, her lust and jealousy so great they had become physical, draining the color from her face and making her body shake.

“No.” She averted her face and hurried from the store.

Troy and his family had disappeared while she was lost in her fantasy. She streaked outside to her car and circled the mall, looking from one corner of the parking lot to the other, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She didn’t see him again for three long months.

It was a rare Christmas in Verona that required people to dress warmly, and the winter of 1983 was not rare. At the Christmas Festival in City Park, Brooke needed little more than a lightweight cardigan to keep the mild chill off her arms. She had come to the festival with Angie, whose airman boyfriend was home in Tulsa on holiday leave.

She had made the trip to Verona with little hope for a Troy sighting this weekend, remembering from her research at Shearwater-Ingram that the Stevensons sometimes spent the holidays with family in Alabama and Tennessee. However, she’d driven through Oak Terrace at dusk and found their house decorated for the season, a tree with multi-colored lights showing through the picture window, a traditional wreath on the door and tiny points of light in each window mimicking candles.

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She might see him, after all. Or she might run into Claudia Tully or someone else from the company who could tell her anything new going on with him...another period away from home, maybe...so she was in a pretty good mood as she parked the Chevelle and walked with Angie to City Park.

The festival turned the park into a scene of excitement and wonder. A tall Christmas tree sparkling with colored lights centered and anchored the festival area, with a nearby platform showcasing a live Santa for the kids. Not far away, a nativity tableau reminded festivalgoers of the “reason for the season.”

Strings of colored lights illuminated booths serving traditional Southern Christmas food and craft booths selling an amazing variety of wares. Several booths offered giftwrapping to buyers who wanted to give their purchases as Christmas presents.

Brooke and Angie visited the food and craft booths, bought fudge and divinity to indulge in themselves, purchased gifts for friends and family and headed for a giftwrap booth. That was when Brooke saw members of the children’s chorus in their maroon choir robes file past, headed toward a platform set with portable risers. One of the little singers was Randy Stevenson.

Alert as a cat, Brooke looked around and found someone handing out programs. The Citywide Children’s Choir, made up of kids ages five through seventeen from about six churches in the city, would perform carols starting at seven-thirty. Fifteen minutes from now.

If adorable Randy was singing in the program, his parents would surely be in attendance.

“Let’s go listen to the choir,” she told Angie.

“Okie-dokie. I heard them last year. They’re really good for just a bunch of nonprofessional town kids. And the songs will bring back your childhood—*Carol of the Bells, Little Drummer Boy...*”

They followed the choir to an area where chairs were set up for the audience. The seating was almost full but they found vacant chairs in the last row and Brooke began to skim the gathering.

It was hard to tell much looking at the backs of people’s heads, but she spotted Melissa Stevenson walking the center aisle carrying a popcorn ball on a stick. Halfway up the aisle, she sidestepped into a row of chairs and took a seat beside her parents.

Quivering with her unexpected turn of luck, Brooke forgot the singing children and fixed her gaze on Troy’s thick, dark mane. She could barely

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see the side of his face from this angle.

When the program ended and the audience disbursed she remained seated until the Stevensons came her way. She got the best look at Troy she'd had since she left Verona.

He was casually dressed in Dockers and white knit shirt open at the throat and topped with a ordinary tan windbreaker that somehow managed to showcase his masculinity as if that were its primary purpose. His sexual attractiveness was exactly as she remembered, constant and intense, and overlaid with unassailable virtue that, inexplicably, made him all the more desirable.

As they left the seating area, his daughter tugged at his sleeve and he stooped down beside her. She put a Santa hat on his head and kissed his face. He returned the kiss, added a wink and adjusted the hat to a rakish angle. One hand lightly on Melissa's shoulder and the other at his wife's waist, Troy ushered his family toward the main festival area.

In a few moments, the three were joined by Randy, sans choir robe. With a delighted smile, his mother bent to say something to him and kiss his forehead and Randy looked up to exchange proud grins with his father. Troy tousled his son's hair affectionately as the family meandered into the crowd.

For Brooke, sudden and deep sadness blanketed the Christmas Festival. Nothing had ever made her as sorrowful as the happiness and love that enveloped the Stevenson family and kept Troy so willingly, joyously chained to his wife and daughter and son.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

In mid-February, Brooke reached the limits of her endurance for her exile in Atlanta. She called Shearwater and asked for Max.

“I’m sick of Atlanta,” she told him. “I hate it here. I want to come back to Verona.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? The reason you had to leave is still here.”

“You mean Troy Stevenson. I don’t care about him. I just hate this town.”

“There’s nothing open right now. A secretary position in my department is coming open fairly soon. It’s Polly’s job. She retiring. It pays quite a bit less than you’re making now.”

“It costs less to live in Verona,” Brooke snapped. “I want it. Put me down for it and tell me what day to start.”

The employees of Shearwater-Ingram were having a company-wide staff meeting. The moment the breakfast bar shut down, tables in the cafeteria were folded up and rolled to the outdoor dining area, and the indoor space filled with rows of folding chairs.

The meetings took place very other month. They usually started at nine-thirty and ended at eleven, to give workers time to set the cafeteria back up for dining by noon.

Executives and managers sat at tables up front to report to the workforce on achievements and insufficiencies of the past two months and preview what was in store for the next. The first row of seats was for their assistants.

At five minutes till nine, the chairs were nearly all taken. A few people were milling around, a few others scurrying through the entrance. The

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buzz of low-toned conversation filled the room. That was when Troy Stevenson and Dinah Langley strolled through the entrance side by side, chatting softly with an air of familiarity and projecting a mein of authority and importance that was neither feigned nor offensive. She carried a black leather portfolio that she laid at his place on the table.

Other executives and managers arrived about the same time and took their seats. At ten on the dot, Hal Thompson, CEO, stood up at the middle of the table, called the meeting to order and made his usual inane opening remarks.

“Now, for our departmental reports. Per usual, we’ll start with Max Ingram, who will bring us up to date on personnel issues.”

Max stood at his place.

“First, I want to welcome our new employees. Y’all stand up when you’re introduced and remember to stay around for a little while after the meeting so everyone can meet you. First, we have Rick Duffy, new to Research and Development. Rick comes to us from Bolton Corporation in North Carolina. He’s married and he and his wife are expecting their first baby in September.”

A young fellow in a plaid shirt near the back of the room stood briefly and held up a hand. There was twittering and a smattering of applause.

“Congratulation, Rick. Next we want to welcome back a former employee who has spent the last few months at Commander, and has had about all of Atlanta that she can take. Brooke Emerson is back with us starting today. She’ll be taking the receptionist job in HR, recently vacated by our world-hopping retiree, Polly Vinson.”

There were a few tiny squeals and giggles from some of Brooke’s old cronies.

In the front row, Dinah’s shock showed on her face. This was the first she had heard of Brooke’s return, and she was certain Troy didn’t know any thing about it until now, either, but his face wasn’t shocked. He showed no surprise, no emotion at all.

After the meeting, Dinah huffed into Troy’s office. “Did you know Max was bringing her back here?”

“No.”

“I can’t believe he did that. Has he gone plumb crazy?”

“Max has been crazy a long time. It’ll be all right, though.”

“Troy, you don’t know what went on when she worked here before. She

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talked about you all the time. She had a terrible crush on you....”

“Hey,” he grinned. “I’m irresistible. My mama says so.”

“This is no funning matter, sir. I got a bad feeling about that girl. Same feeling I had when she was here before.”

“But we don’t have much business with H.R. We’ll hardly ever see her.”

Dinah folded her arms and doubt settled on her face. “I hope you’re right.”

Troy carried his gym bag and headed toward the company gym, but veered off at the last minute and stepped into Max’s suite. He wasn’t as unperturbed about Brooke’s return as he had let on to Dinah. Now, entering the anteroom, he was mildly shocked to see her seated behind the secretary’s desk that had been vacant for so long.

The last words he had said to her had occurred the day of her come-on to him—“Then I’ll leave.” He didn’t want to acknowledge that incident, didn’t want to acknowledge *her*, in any manner. It was rude and unprofessional but he barely nodded to her and stepped into Max’s office without a word.

Max looked up. “Troyster.”

“You gonna work out?”

“Come in, shut the door.”

“No. I’m on my way to the gym.”

“Hey, I just wanna—”

Troy turned and walked out.

Max got up, grabbed his gym bag off the floor and followed.

He caught up with his friend just as Troy pushed his way through the double doors to the gym.

In the small locker room, they changed into workout clothes, Max yammering and Troy stonefaced and silent.

“She’s not up here permanently. She just gonna help me out one day a week. The rest of the time, she’ll be downstairs in HR.”

“Your department. Your employee. You can do whatever you want.”

“She told me what happened last summer,” Max said.

“She told you she came up to my office and hit on me?”

Max nodded

Troy shook his head in disgust and turned to go.

“She’s not going to try anything like that again,” Max called after him, but there was no reply.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Daddy, who is this?” Randy said, showing Troy a photograph.

They were in the family room by themselves. Patty and Melissa had gone to a Mother-Daughter event at church. Randy had taken the pictures out of a storage box while his father looked over his homework.

Troy glanced at the picture. It was from the company picnic last July.

“That’s Miss Joy. You know her. She works for me. That’s her husband with her.”

“No, not her. This one,” Randy said pointing to a slightly out of focus figure among several in the background.

“Her name’s Brooke,” Troy said, feeling a tiny bit of suspicion creep up on him. “Why are you asking about her?”

Randy looked up at his father. “She comes to my ballgames. She talks to me.”

For a moment unreasoning anger swept through Troy but he quickly brought it under control. He wanted to learn everything he could, and alarming Randy might frighten him into forgetting something important.

“You talking about the ballgames Miss Gina takes you to?”

“Yeah, on Saturday.”

Troy nodded. “At Cloverdale. How’s that going? You like baseball as much as tee-ball?”

“Yeah, but I like football better’n both of ’em.”

“You’re a man after my own heart,” Troy said, grinning and tousling Randy’s hair. “So what does Brooke say to you?”

“Just hi, how are you, like that.”

“Does she know who you are?”

“Yeah, she calls me Randy.”

Troy felt his hackles rise again, and he forcefully brought his emotions under control.

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“Do you know how she knows your name?”

“Yeah, a lady at your office told her when Mama brought us out there and we got candy. You remember?”

“Mmhmm, that was last summer. It wasn’t Dinah, was it?”

“No, Daddy, I know Miss Dinah! It was in the snack room. It was Miss—” Randy grimaced with the effort to remember. “Missy said she was uh elf at Christmas.”

Recognition dawned on Troy’s face. “Claudia Tully.”

“Yeah,” Randy nodded. “She told Miss Brooke our names. She told us Miss Brooke’s name, too, but I forgot it.”

“How many ballgames has she been to?”

“I dunno. Maybe four. Maybe five.”

“She’s been doing this for a month or more?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know if she has a son or little brother or somebody on the team that she comes to see?”

“I don’t know.”

Alarmed, Troy sat unmoving with his mind racing.

“Daddy?”

“What, son?”

“Is she a bad woman?”

That got Troy’s attention and his thoughts halted their mad tumult. “What makes you think that?”

“I don’t like her. She scares me.”

“Has she ever done anything to you? Said anything that scared you?”

“No. She just gives me a bad feeling.”

The conversation troubled Randy as much as it did his father. Troy laid his arm across Randy’s shoulders in a sheltering embrace.

“Listen, Sport. I’m going to take care of the problem. Legally, there may be no way to stop her from coming to the games, but I’m going to be there with you from now on. Should’ve been there from the start.”

Troy didn’t arrive at work until almost eight the next morning. He was furious, and he knew it showed by the way Dinah looked at him.

“Sir, what’s wrong?”

“Gimme a minute,” he said, striding into his office. It was all he could do to keep from throwing his briefcase across the room.

His fury had been ebbing and flowing since his talk with Randy last night. It had calmed while he sheltered Randy and comforted him. It had

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risen again after the children had gone to bed, and he related the conversation to Patty, who was as alarmed and furious as he.

“Talk to Missy tomorrow,” Troy said. “See if that woman’s been stalking her. And you be careful, too. Keep an eye out for her.”

Patty blinked. “Do you really think she’s dangerous?”

“I don’t know.” Foreboding and fury burned in his eyes. “But it’s not hard for me to see her taking Randy to get me to come wherever she wants me.”

Far into the night, they had lain awake in each others arms, trying to deal with the threat, talking together, praying silently.

He had awakened fairly calm, considering, and remained so throughout breakfast, but on the way to work his anger rose. Now he sat at his desk, his fist bumping his lips as he brought himself under control. When he was as calm as he was going to get, he dialed Max’s extension.

“Ingram.”

“Come to my office. Now.”

In less than a minute, Max walked into Dinah’s office from the corridor, as Troy stepped through the opposite door. Max looked at the cold fury on Troy’s face and said, “What’s going on?”

“Where is Brooke Emerson working today?”

“Downstairs.”

“Both of you come with me.”

Troy strode between them, turned right in the hallway and led them down the utility stairwell. They had to scurry to keep up with him as he cut across the reception area and into the back hallway.

He opened the door to HR without ceremony, stepped in and went to the desk where Brooke was seated. She looked up, startled. As Max and Dinah hovered nearby, Troy fixed glaring eyes on her.

“Stay away from my son. Don’t ever talk to him again. Don’t come near him, or my daughter, or my wife. Have you got that?”

She stared up at him, shocked silent.

In the passageway to the back, Dugan and Arlene appeared, their faces anxious. Troy didn’t look up. He leaned forward slightly, his eyes boring into Brooke.

“Have. You. Got. That.”

She nodded almost imperceptibly.

Troy straightened, glanced grimly at the witnesses to his warning and left the room.

“What was that about?” Arlene said. She walked to the reception desk

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but Dugan stayed put, looking curiously at the door still slightly ajar from Troy's departure. Her gaze went back to the reception desk.

Brooke looked up at Arlene with tear-filled eyes and wailed, "I don't know! He said for me to stay away from his little boy and don't talk to him, but I haven't been around his little boy! I don't know what he's talking about!"

"We'll find out what his problem is," Arlene assured her, "though I can't imagine anything that would justify making a scene like that."

"I don't understand. I've probably only seen his little boy four or five times, ever."

"It doesn't make sense," Arlene agreed.

Dugan folded her arms and observed the exchange with a hint of skepticism. She felt sympathy for Brooke's upset, which appeared genuine. Anyone on the receiving end of the Stevenson anger Dugan had just witnessed would probably be as devastated as Brooke. But Dugan also had enormous loyalty to Troy. He would not have behaved thus without believing there was a very good reason for it.

"Where have you seen Randy?" she asked.

"Is that the little boy's name?" Brooke sniffed and looked thoughtful. "Well...here, in the break room once. And at the picnic last summer. But that was before I went to Atlanta. Since I've been back, I've seen him a couple of times at the community center where I volunteer on Saturday mornings. That's all."

"Have you talked to him?"

"No. I mean, I say hi, but we say that to everybody. They tell us to be friendly with the kids. I don't understand why he'd get mad about that!"

Her sobs escalated. "He just doesn't like me. He's just looking for some excuse to bully me. He was so mean! It was like *hate* in his eyes when he looked at me! I haven't done anything!"

"Calm down, now," Arlene said. "Come on. Let's go fix your face."

The trio from upstairs had returned there without a word. Back in his chair, Troy rested white-knuckled fists on the desk blotter. His face was thunderous as he watched Dinah and Max tread cautiously into his office.

"Max, I wanted you to hear what I said to her because you're her boss."

"What'd she do?"

"Randy said she's been coming to his ballgames on Saturday, talking to him."

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“Talking to him? That’s all?” Max said.

“Something about her behavior makes him uncomfortable. He told me it gives him a bad feeling. But not any more. I’m going to his ballgames from now on.”

“I think you’re overreacting,” Max said.

“If it was Brian or Kathy, you’d do exactly the same thing.”

Apparently unable to argue with that, Max left the office without another word.

Dinah watched him go and, disquieted, turned back to Troy. “You’re not overreacting. That girl’s trouble. Some of us have known it ever since she started working here last year.”

In the women’s room, Arlene watched Brooke repair her makeup and tried to frame her questions in such a manner that they wouldn’t set the younger woman off again. She wanted to discuss the matter while they were out of Dugan’s earshot. Everybody knew how loyal to Stevenson she was.

“I don’t mean to upset you more, but you’re having quite a reaction here. I mean, if it was me, I’d have told him, ‘I haven’t bothered your son, go jump in a lake.’”

Brooke looked at Arlene’s reflection in the mirror. “Really? You’d say that to a vice president?”

“He wasn’t a vice president back there. He was a bully. You were right about that. He—” Arlene looked at Brooke as suspicion crept in. “Has the vice president bullied you like this before?”

Brooke looked up, her lips clamped.

“Has he bothered you?”

Fear flashed across Brooke’s face. She shook her head and her eyes fell.

“Oh, my,” Arlene said, her voice low. “What did he do?”

“Nothing,” Brooke whispered as fresh tears leaked from beneath her lowered eyelids.

“You can tell me.”

“No!”

“All right. All right. But if you ever feel like talking about it, come to me. You hear?”

“Okay.”



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The last rays of the day's sunshine slanted through the plate glass window of the Howe Street Cafe and gilded the hair and faces of diners sitting nearby. The light flowed in behind Arlene, throwing her into silhouette to Jessica, who sat across from her.

"Looks like you were right about Troy Stevenson," Arlene told her. She gave the WAG director a detailed account of the incident in HR and her conversation with Brooke afterward.

"That's a classic reaction to sexual harassment on the job," Jessica said. "She's a powerless, low-echelon worker. He's a vice president with the power to not only fire her, but keep her from getting a job somewhere else. She won't talk partly because of that fear, but also because sexual harassment can make a woman feel...dirty. Men are real good at making the women they mistreat feel like it's their fault."

"Can anything be done? I mean, she won't tell what happened, and unless she does, the department polices are useless."

"Let me chat with her," Jessica said. "I know how to get her to talk without too much pain. Then we'll bring that bastard down."

Two days later, they were back in the same booth, joined by an oddly introspective Brook Emerson. They were so engrossed in their conversation about her experience, it was almost a bother to stop and order their meals.

"Now, are you sure you want to do this?" Jessica asked after the waiter left them. Brooke hesitated a moment before nodding.

"I need you to answer verbally. But before you do, understand something. You can't get scared and quit in the middle of it. Once I get involved, there's, no turning back. When this is over, he'll be a ruined man. I *will* destroy him. Now, do you want to go through with the complaint and investigation or not?"

Brooke swallowed hard. "Yes, I want to go through with it." Her expression said she wasn't sure at all, but Jessica was willing to ignore that in view of her verbal affirmation.

With Brooke's spoken commitment, something unleashed itself within the WAG director, allowing her anger and hatred to surface heedless of witnesses.

"Good. Because I *really* want to see that bastard brought down. Shut out. Unable to get a job at any decent firm in the Southeast. I want to see him in a job that gets him dirty—puts black under his fingernails and pays

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a floorsweeper's pittance. I want to see degradation and humiliation that takes the heart out of him, so he can't work at all."

She laid trembling fists on the table, her face thundrous.

"I want his wife to have to support the family scrubbing floors. I want to see her hands red and raw and callused. I want to see her lose her teeth and I want to see hopelessness in her eyes. I want to see those smug, snobbish children in rags, living in a hovel, eating scraps. I want to see that whole damn family turn back into the kind of sorry, lowlife, mountain trash he came from."

She glanced at the unsettled expressions on the faces of her companions, seemed to come to herself and gasped a little laugh.

"Pardon me. I didn't mean to sound so over the top. It's just that I've seen women mistreated so much, for so long, it makes me a little crazy sometimes."

Chapter Forty

Dinah looked up from her keyboard to see Arlene Roper appear from the corridor and halt a step into the office. The EFO director carried a large envelope.

“This is for Mr. Stevenson.”

Dinah nodded toward a wooden tray at the end of her credenza, near the door. “That’s his in-box.”

Arlene dropped the envelope into the box. “Thanks. Would you see that he gets that right away?”

Dinah smiled. “Sure.”

She waited until Arlene left before resuming her typing, and she finished the document she was working on before getting up and taking a couple of strides to the credenza.

The envelope had a Shearwater-Ingram letterhead logo in the upper right corner, and beneath it was rubber-stamped *Equality and Fairness Office—Human Resources*. In the middle of the envelope was a typewritten addressee: *Troy Stevenson, Vice President, Marketing and Sales* and handwritten in red beside that, *Confidential. To be opened by addressee only.*

Dinah took the envelope to Troy’s office and laid it on his desk. “Arlene Roper just dropped this off. Wanted me to get it to you ‘right away.’”

Ten minutes later, Troy reached the end of a report on automated teller machines written by Clint Shearwater and dropped it atop a stack of papers for Dinah to file. With a smattering of annoyance tugging at him, he took the envelope she’d brought him, slit it open, removed the contents and started reading. Within seconds, he was seething.

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MEMO

To: Troy Stevenson, Vice President
Marketing and Sales
From: Arlene Roper, Director
Equality and Fairness Office
Date: April 5, 1984
Re: Sexual Harassment Complaint

The Equality and Fairness Office has received a complaint of sexual harassment against you. The complainant has requested resolution of the matter through an informal, internal complaint process.

You have the right to know the identity of your accuser and what misconduct you are accused of. You have the right to respond to the allegations. Your rights in this matter are equivalent with those accorded to the complainant.

In accordance with the EFO policies manual, you will be provided with a written description of the allegations made against you. An investigation of the matter will follow. The investigation is an internal process, not a legal proceeding, although you may seek legal counsel at any time.

The information gathered during the investigation is for internal use only at this time. As long as the investigation remains informal and internal, knowledge of the complaint against you will be limited. Certain executives, managers and department heads may be notified if they have administrative responsibilities for the parties involved in the complaint.

If the investigation results in discipline, you have a right to appeal the decision through the company's standard grievance procedures.

Retaliation against the complainant or anyone involved in the complaint or investigation is strictly prohibited. Retaliation may result in further complaints against you even if the initial complaint is dismissed.

Enclosed you will find a complaint summary that includes the identity of the complainant and an overview of the allegations. Also enclosed is a response form for your use. We ask that you respond within ten (10) days so that the investigation may commence in a timely manner. Up to twenty (20) days will be allocated for the investigation, after which an informal meeting will be called to address the findings of the investigation and reach a resolution of the complaint.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me.

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cc: Hamilton Ingram, President and CEO
Commander Industries
Hal Thompson, Chief Executive Officer
Shearwater-Ingram Company
Max Ingram, Director, Human Resources
Shearwater-Ingram Company
Encl: EFO Policies Manual
Complaint summary
Response form

Shaking with rage, Troy tossed the memo, the policies manual and the response form on his desk and skimmed the complaint summary.

Complainant: Brooke Emerson, Receptionist, Human Resources
Type of Complaint: Quid Pro Quo Sexual Harassment
Accused: Troy Stevenson, Vice President, Marketing and Sales
Date of alleged incident: June 20, 1983
Place of alleged incident: Office of the Vice President of Marketing,
Shearwater-Ingram, Mirabel Office Park, Verona, Georgia

The complainant was a clerk in the Record Storage Department at the time of the incident. Complainant's summary statement:

On June 20, 1983 I received a request to deliver some archived files to the office of Mr. Stevenson. He specified a delivery time of five-fifteen. I did not want to do this because I would have to stay late without being paid because all overtime pay has to be authorized in advance.

I took the files to his office and he asked me to sit down on the couch. He mentioned that I was a new employee and he was so busy he didn't always get to meet new people right away. He said he liked knowing about new employees. He said, "Especially when they are as beautiful as you are." He asked my name and where I went to school and how I got hired at Shearwater and what were my career ambitions. I told him I had not decided yet.

He kissed me aggressively and I asked him to stop. He said, "A smart, beautiful girl like you will go far if you have a mentor upstairs." He kissed me harder and he fondled me and I started crying. I pushed him away and ran out of the office. I was terrified I would lose my job and I avoided

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him after that. In a few weeks, I had a chance to transfer to Commander in Atlanta, and I took it.

Troy stood for a long time bringing his emotions under control. When he finally stopped shaking and his respiration reached a semblance of normal, he picked up the papers and strode out of his office.

"Gonna talk to Max," he said tersely to Dinah on the way out.

He didn't know or care whether this was Brooke's day to play secretary upstairs, but it turned out that the anteroom was unoccupied. He stepped into Max's office.

Max looked up to see Troy march to the desk, his face like thunder. He slammed the papers down in the middle of the blotter.

"I told you it was asking for trouble."

Max picked up the papers and skimmed them, now and then shaking his head, now and then going "Mmm" under his breath. He finished and looked up at Troy with narrowed eyes.

Troy stabbed the air pointing at the papers. "I want that stopped."

"I can't stop it."

"The hell you can't. That is a pack of lies and I want it stopped."

"I don't have the authority."

"The hell you don't. You're the Director of Human Resources."

"You haven't ever read the EFO policies manual, have you?"

"No."

"I suggest you read it. The board gave me no authority whatever to affect the outcome of that process. I can't do a thing about it."

"Can't? Or won't?"

Max didn't answer.

"You son of a bitch." Troy snatched up the papers and left the office.

"These letters are ready to sign," Dinah said to Troy from her doorway. She held a manila folder in one hand.

"Ah-ight," Troy said absently. "Bring 'em here."

Dinah laid the folder on his desk. He opened it and skimmed the first letter. He never signed anything without reading it first, even documents he had dictated and Dinah had typed. The silver Condor pen in his hand glinted in the late afternoon light filtering through the mini blinds.

"Sir." Dinah sat down across from him.

"Hmmm?"

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"What's going on?"

He looked at her and raised his brows.

"That." She pointed to the envelope Arlene had dropped off shortly after lunch now tossed carelessly on the corner of his desk. "I mean, if you don't mind telling me."

"Just a minute." Troy skimmed and signed the rest of the letters and handed the folder back to her. He swiveled his chair back and forth slightly, pulled in a deep breath and said, "That envelope contains official notice that a sexual harassment complaint has been made against me."

Dinah's brows buckled and her jaw dropped. "What! By who?"

"By Brooke Emerson."

"Oh. My. Goodness." Her eyes snapped and she pointed at Troy. "I told you that girl was trouble. Didn't I?"

"Yes, you did."

She shot up from the chair and began to pace in front of his desk. "You've got to stop this. Stop it before it starts. You go to Max right this minute—" The look on his face halted her words and her pacing. "You did go to Max."

"Yeah."

"He wouldn't stop it?"

"No."

Disgust won out over all the other emotions fighting for expression on Dinah's face. "That son of a bitch."

"That's what I said."

Dinah dropped into the chair again and forced sedateness on herself. "Well, then, *you* have to do something to stop it."

"I can't. The procedure for handling this kind of grievance is specified here." He tapped the EFO policies manual lying on the blotter.

"You're one of the company's top executive officers. You should not have to jump through hoops like that on other people's whims."

"It's official policy of this company. I have no choice but to follow it."

Dinah's self-imposed calm shattered. "It's outrageous! You'd never do anything like that! She's lyin' her head off, that crazy, bottle-blond floozy! She's just jealous because you're a happily married man with a beautiful family, so she's trying to smear you at your workplace. I ought to go down there right now and—" She was stopped by the slight smile on his face. "What?"

"You." He tapped his chest with a forefinger and his smile widened to an affectionate grin. "You're warmin' the cockles of my heart, lady. I do

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appreciate you.”

“Well.” Her face softened and a smile tugged at her red lips. “Thank you. But, sir, this is serious.”

“I know. But the process is confidential. Only the people involved will know about it, and that’s just a handful.”

“If you say so,” she said grimly. “But this has a bad feel to it, so you be real careful.”

At home that night, after the children had been in bed a good half hour, Troy told Patty, “I want to show you something that came to my office today.”

He brought a side chair to his desk and when they were seated he handed Patty the white envelope. She looked at the return address, the addressee and the notes on the front and glanced at him curiously while she reached inside and withdrew the papers.

She was relaxed when she started reading, but in moments he saw her brow wrinkle and her breathing become uneven. When she read the complaint summary, her mouth dropped open. “Why is she doing this?”

“I think she was put up to it.”

“By who?”

“Partly by Arlene Roper in the EFO, but mostly Jessica Grant. She’s part of that radical feminist group out at the university.”

“Why?”

“I guess to make an example out of somebody.”

“But why you? You would never do anything like this!” Her voice thinned and rose. “Why you?”

“Come on, calm down.” He squeezed her upper arm and gave it a pat. “Try not to be too upset.”

“Why not! It’s upsetting. Aren’t you upset?”

“Yes.” Anger flitted across his face.

“Well, then, you’ve got to stop this! Isn’t this office part of Max’s department? Tell him to make them stop!”

“I did. He won’t.”

Patty was stunned into silence. She understood perfectly what this meant—the end of a close friendship that had been a joy and blessing to Troy for going on fifteen years. Love and empathy for her husband combined to create a bubble of intense heartache in her breast.

“But don’t worry, sweetheart.” He stroked her cheek with his knuck-

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les. "I've made up my mind to beat this, but good. I was so mad at first, I wasn't going to participate or cooperate one bit." He smiled slightly. "That idiotic response form in the package? I'm not going to use it. I'm going to write a short letter, instead, which is permitted. But look at the form. It'll give you an idea of my mindset earlier today."

Patty fumbled through the papers and found the response form. In big block letters, Troy had written diagonally across the page, with a thick red marker, SCREW YOU.

Despite her emotional state, Patty couldn't keep a smile from tugging at her lips. That was so like Troy when his defiance and mountaineer stubbornness surfaced.

A corner of his mouth curved upward. "The letter taking shape in my mind will be several sentences long, but it's gonna say basically the same thing. Aside from the fact that company policy leaves me no choice, I've decided to go along with it, up to a point, for my own purposes. It probably won't be too bad. It's internal, so nobody but the people involved will know about it. That's me, Emerson and Roper. And the officers cc'd on the memo. Three monitors for the meeting chosen from a pool of employees who volunteered for this kind of task when the department was created. And Dinah because I told her. That's only ten out of sixty, seventy people."

Patty shook her head, still visibly distressed. "There's always a chance it'll get out. You hear and read about innocent people being falsely accused of things and their reputation is ruined, their life is ruined, for no good reason, because everybody knows.... What are your purposes?"

"There are two things I want to see at the end of it. I want Brooke Emerson to be shown as a false accuser, and I want the EFO to be known as the enabler of false accusers and, hopefully, shut down."

"You sure you can beat this? I mean, if that WAG group is involved? They probably have a pack of bloodthirsty lawyers ready to pounce on you. Maybe you need to see an attorney."

"I called Bill Hamner today. An associate in his office is familiar with this kind of complaint. He's going to advise me, but I don't need actual representation. Oh, I'll have to be careful and watch my back and be on the lookout for anything underhanded they might try. And they would—after all, the complaint itself is a lie. But I'll be careful and it'll turn out all right."

He gave her a secretive smile, and in his dark eyes his anger gave way just enough for a touch of smugness to show through. "You'll see."

Chapter Forty-One

Troy looked across his desk at Norm Crawford and said, “Those price changes ought to go out to the sales force no later than next Wednesday.”

“Yep,” the sales manager replied. “That’s not a problem.”

“Getting many complaints about smaller bonuses?”

Norm spread his fingers and rocked his hand in the air. “Eh. About what you’d expect. They all understand it’s temporary.”

They both looked at their writing pads.

“That’s all I got,” Troy said.

“That does it for me, too,” Norm said, but he didn’t rise to leave. He looked at his boss, his face carefully neutral.

“What is it?” Troy said.

“Arlene Roper’s been meeting with people in the department. She told us these meetings were confidential and we weren’t to discuss them with anyone, but we thought that was a load of bullcrap, so we’ve been talking to each other. It sounds ridiculous, but we’ve pieced together the information that she’s investigating a sexual harassment complaint against you.”

Troy’s lips compressed slightly and his eyes snapped as he gave Norm a quick nod. “Yes. Made by Brooke Emerson.”

Norm shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

“When did she first start talking to y’all?”

“She talked to Adrian and I yesterday. She talked to Joy and Clancy the day before.”

Troy screwed his mouth to one side and gave his head a slight shake. “That was the day after she notified me of the complaint. I was supposed to have ten days to respond before her so-called investigation started.”

Norm made a wry face. “I guess the EFO is exempt from following its own policies.”

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"Appears that way." Troy looked at Norm for several moments in silence, his expression carefully unemotional. "For the record, the complaint is a total fabrication. With malice."

"Of course it is. Nobody believes it. Still, something like this can really drag you through the mud so want to help with your...defense."

Troy's brows went up. "Tell me."

"We want to do our own investigation on your behalf. I've read the EFO policies. There's nothing that prohibits it. Judging by the time frame Arlene was asking about, we know enough about Brooke Emerson to blow her complaint out of the water and we haven't even started investigating yet. This is just what we all remember going on at the time."

"Who all's going to do this?"

"Everybody in the department. I'm sure Dugan and Dinah will join us."

"Patty will, too."

"Great." Norm glanced at his writing pad and back at Troy. "You're a straight arrow fellow, always open and above board, but we're going to keep this...activity...well, not secret, exactly. Low-key. Beneath the radar. When it's over, she'll be very sorry she did this."

"You know she was put up to it."

Norm shook his head. "No, I didn't know that."

"By now," Troy explained, "the EFO is probably a branch office for the Women's Assistance Group, a far-left feminist organization out at Verona State. Very likely, they're getting help from the savviest civil rights lawyers in the South."

"Yeah, well, but you have truth on your side. That makes all the difference."

Thirty minutes after Norm left, Troy picked up the EFO policies manual on his blotter and the white envelope with its offensive contents and strode out of his room. "Be right back," he said sideways to Dinah.

His heels clanged on the diamond-plate stairs and in moments he was stepping purposely across the reception area to the back hallway and through the open door of the Human Resources Department.

At the reception desk, Brooke looked up and her face froze with fear, as if she expected another verbal onslaught from him, but he barely acknowledged her. "I want to talk to Arlene Roper. I'll find her desk."

He stepped through the opening between the partitions. The first cubicle was Dugan's. She had heard his comment and was looking up, waiting

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for him to walk by. "Hello, sir."

He lifted a hand in acknowledgement of her greeting and walked on. The next cubicle was Arlene's. There were several stacks of books on her desk and she was copying a passage out of one of them onto lined paper. She evidently had not heard him and she was startled when he stepped in.

"There's a place in this office where people can talk privately, correct?" His voice was civil with only a hint of anger.

"Yes."

"Let's go there."

"Well, I—" she glanced around her desk with pique.

"Yes. We both have work to do. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can get back to it."

Without further conversation, they walked together to a small room at the back of the department furnished with two chairs and a writing table. Troy closed the door behind them, relieved to see something he wouldn't have noticed before this trouble; the door had a large window so what happened here could be witnessed visibly if not audibly.

He didn't sit and didn't wait for her to. "According to this manual and your memo, I have ten days to respond to this pack of—this allegation, before your 'investigation' begins. But my sales manager tells me you've already talked to the people in my department about it."

Arlene's face hardened. "He wasn't supposed to tell you. They were all under strict instructions to not discuss the matter with anyone."

"They may have disobeyed your arbitrary instructions but they didn't violate any EFO policies. You did. You realize this discredits your investigation."

"No. It wasn't intentional. I just got ahead of myself a little."

"You broke your own rules."

"I said it was unintentional."

"Who else have you talked to?"

"Nobody. And it won't happen again."

Troy looked at her with disgust and shook his head. "I don't believe you. I want your written account of your conversations with my staff and the names of anyone else you've talked to. I want it in my in-box in Dinah's office before I go home today."

He stepped out of the room and headed for the reception area, pausing at Dugan's cubicle to crook his finger at her. Without comment, she left her desk and followed him out of the office, neither one of them giving Brooke so much as a glance, and down the corridor to the cafeteria. It was

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an hour until lunch breaks started and the caterers were rolling in the tall containers of food for the serving line.

The pair sat at a table in the corner where Troy told her about the complaint. Her reaction was almost a repeat of Dinah's, disbelief and indignation mingled. It turned to outrage when he told her about Arlene's violation of the policies.

"And she told you nobody else knows? Don't you believe it."

"I don't."

"You need to be aware of something else. Arlene is a puppet. Her strings are pulled by Jessica Grant at the Women's Assistance Group."

"I know. I'm not completely isolated my corner upstairs. Grant was heavily involved in the startup of the EFO, and instrumental in formulating its policies, so she'd want to keep an eye on her 'baby'."

"A very close eye. She talked Arlene into joining WAG last year."

Troy shook his head. "Explains a lot."

Dugan looked at him and fear showed in her eyes. "Sir, this is scary. If it's your word against hers, you've already lost. I don't know if you realize the influence feminism has had on the workplace, on the family, the economy, education, whole swathes of our culture. And it's not all good, not by a long shot. In fact, some of it's very bad."

She took a shaking breath. "And when it comes to this kind of complaint, guilt or innocence doesn't enter into it. You *have* to keep this quiet, known by as few people as possible, because the accusation alone is enough to ruin you."

"You've heard them talk about this?"

"Gracious, no. I would have warned you if I had. Arlene shares next to nothing with me. But I know enough about feminism and its goals to know what they have in mind for the likes of you. The outcome of the meeting is not the point. The point is to bring you down in the eyes of your community. To ruin you."

Troy shook his head, incredulous. "I haven't done anything. This is still America, Doog. Innocent until proven guilty, remember?"

"Sir, this is not the eighteenth century, it's 1984. And Big Sister is watching you."

Chapter Forty-Two

“Have you seen this?” Dinah asked, laying on Troy’s desk a small tabloid newspaper with a Post-It Note sticking out the top edge.

It was a week to the day after Arlene had delivered the complaint memo, with its claim of the confidential, internal nature of the investigation.

“What is it?”

“You’ve never seen the *Verona Progressive*?”

“I may have, and just didn’t pay attention. What is it?”

“It’s a freebie tabloid weekly newspaper for the so-called progressive community in Verona.” She turned to the page marked with the sticky note. “Read this.”

She pointed to an editorial, and Troy picked it up and read:

Sexual Harassers No Longer Have a Free Ride in Verona

For the conservative minded citizens of this community who claim that sexual harassment is a left-wing fantasy, we beg to differ. For proof, we need look no further than Mirabel Office Park here in Verona. A certain executive vice president, the head of marketing and sales at his firm, which is one of Verona’s most prestigious, is currently under internal investigation for sexual harassment of a young clerical worker.

Feminist and attorney Margaret Huelbocher has profiled the most common adult male harasser as married with children, a churchgoer and someone who is highly esteemed in the community. That profile fits the Mirabel vice-president to a T. He’s a husband and the father of elementary school age son and daughter, who lives with his family in an affluent neighborhood in south Verona. He is a church-goer and involved in the community serving on boards of various civic and charitable organizations, and coaching

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youth sports. On the surface, he appears to be an admirable man. But appearances can be deceiving.

Sources at Mirabel tell us this man has become a vice president in fairly recent years, which gives us the first clue to explain the behavior. Experts who study this problem are near unanimous in their opinion that sexual harassment is about power, not sex. And at the Mirabel firm, out-of-control testosterone levels mean that men rule. Not a single executive or mid-level manager position at this company is held by a woman. In that red-brick, multi-windowed edifice shaded with tall oaks, the glass ceiling for women is no more than five feet off the ground.

Jessica Grant, a consultant with the Women's Assistance Group, says that the Mirabel company is typical. "The good thing is that this company, along with several others in Verona, has instituted an equality office in the past few years, and now women have a resource they can turn to in these situations."

Grant, who is familiar with the Mirabel case, says that a quid pro quo sexual harassment complaint has been filed against the vice president, and an investigation is underway.

Sometimes progress is slow, but with regard to women's issues, things are changing for the better all the time. We wish the young woman victimized by the vice-president at Mirabel the best of luck.

*Editorial Staff
The Verona Progressive*

Troy looked at Dinah, incredulous. "Why didn't they just put my name and run a picture of me?"

"Sir, I am so sorry. I think you should seriously consider a lawsuit against this publication when this ridiculous mess is over. I'll help you every way I can."

He had known all along he was working against unscrupulous people, people for whom the truth, for whom contracts, agreements, and sheer decency meant nothing. But somehow, it always startled him when they lived down to their unscrupulousness.

"Right now you can help me by getting this garbage off my desk. But keep it."

"Yes, sir." Dina snatched up the paper and headed for her office.

Troy sat very still for a moment. A whirlwind of emotion had suddenly blown up within, refusing suppression. He had been unable to even think about Max the past week, let alone deal with the destruction of their

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friendship but now bewilderment and loss attacked him like wild beasts.

Moreover, Dugan's warnings haunted him—*Guilt or innocence doesn't enter into it. The accusation alone is enough to ruin you*—though he had tried to keep her comments in some kind of perspective, tried to maintain confidence in the defense he was putting together.

But what bothered him most was the effect his predicament could have on his family.

He had told the children nothing. They were old enough to understand the concept of false accusation, but the idea of explaining to them the nature of this particular false accusation filled him with dread, and he was going to put it off as long as he could.

Patty was a different matter. She understood all too well the nature of the allegation and she knew it did bad things to him inside. He suppressed and covered up his internal distress to the extent he could, but Patty knew him well, knew the complaint and investigation would grow unbearable before it was resolved.

Her distress was for him, his was for all of them.

He would have to show her the editorial after work tonight and what it would do to her weighed heavy on his heart.

But...what if someone told her about it before then?

"Dinah," he called. "When did that paper come out?"

"Got yesterday's date on it."

He picked up the telephone and speed-dialed his home.

"Hey," he said when she answered. "What are you doing?"

"Same ol' same ol'."

"I need you to come up here, soon as you can get here."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I mean, it's not an emergency or anything. I just want to talk to you and I can't get away right now."

"I'll be right there."

The first meeting of the Troy Stevenson Defense Group was impromptu, occasioned by Patty's visit to the office in response to Troy's summons.

She read the editorial in his office shortly after her arrival and it had affected her about the way he expected.

She was devastated for him, furious at whoever had leaked the information. Her fists clenched so tightly her nails made little red crescents on her palms. Troy gently uncurled her fingers, the way he frequently had to

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do after sex, when they were tightly clenched from a different cause, and put his arms around her. "I hate what this is doing to you. I wish there was some way I could shield you from it."

Tears stung her eyes and she blinked them away. "I'm not the primary target. I wouldn't be hurting so much if you weren't hurting worse!"

"But you don't deserve this turmoil."

"Neither do you!"

"Yes, but in a way, I brought it on myself. Dale warned me. Staying out at the lake last year gave people the wrong impression—"

"*What!*" She pulled back and looked up at him, aghast. "*No! Don't you dare!*" She reached up to clamp her hands around his upper arms and tried to shake him. "Don't you dare take responsibility for this! You didn't do *anything* wrong! It's them, it's *all them!*"

She buried her face against him and stifled a sobbed. "You cannot let them win, especially not now, not after they've tried to smear your good name in front of the whole town!"

"Patty," he said softly. "When the time comes, I'm going to beat this. The challenge now is handling the crap they're going to throw at me in the meantime, like this editorial. It's hard and I hate it, I won't pretend I don't. But at least we don't have to handle it alone. You should talk to Norm while you're here."

That talk had led to the impromptu lunchtime meeting held in the small conference room downstairs. The eight people around the table brought their lunches from home or plates from the cafeteria and brainstormed while they dined. By the time the food was gone, the overall approach had been hammered out and every person at the table understood his or her personal tasks. They would meet again once more before the EFO meeting, off premises.

For days after the editorial appeared, everyone waited with foreboding to see what responses it would produce. But all was quiet and the members of Troy's defense group left Shearwater's offices Friday evening with a figurative sigh of relief.

The Halcyon Restaurant in downtown Verona was the city's only sidewalk cafe. Four small metal tables and eight chairs, shaded by a striped awning, hugged the facade of brick and plateglass. Lush ferns overflowed their clay pots, which dangled from the awning by macrame hangers.

The chairs were vacant and Patty was surprised. It was a beautiful

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Saturday morning with silver-gold sunshine streaking through puffy clouds ornamenting a pale blue sky. Being the weekend, downtown was lazily stirring to life and traffic was sparse on Main Street.

The only human sounds she heard were the shouts and laughter of her own children playing a block away, in a narrow vacant lot where a building once stood that several downtown merchants had turned into a pocket park, complete with trees, flowers and benches.

She sat at one of the tables, pulled a pen and her savings account booklet from her purse and recorded her latest transaction. She had just deposited a check from the Star Bright Shoppe at the after-hours depository of Verona Bank's downtown branch and the new total in her record—her personal version of a savings passbook—brought a smile to her eyes.

There was more than enough in her account to cover Troy's upcoming gift season. Though she hadn't decided on the specific gifts yet, she had settled on the category for each—a power tool for Father's Day, leather goods for their anniversary and jewelry for his birthday.

She returned pen and booklet to her purse and found her mind drifting to Troy's trouble at work. She wondered about the quiet that had fallen since the editorial appeared Tuesday. Perhaps the *Progressive* didn't have as great a readership in conservative, religious Verona as they'd feared.

"Well, well, well, look who's here," said a voice nearby that Patty recognized instantly, a voice that sent a mild cringe through her, like fingernails scraping on a blackboard. She looked up to see Kendra House from the Executive Wives Club strolling across the sidewalk. Jackie Talbot and a young woman Patty didn't recognize were with her.

"Hello," Patty said, aloof.

"How've you been, Patty?" Kendra asked.

Patty had the distinct feeling that Kendra didn't really give a flip how she'd been. Still, she went along because it was the polite, and easy, thing to do. "Fine. You?"

"Oh, great! We're all just great! Hey, you haven't met our newest member, have you? This is Yolanda Blaylock. Her husband is a production manager at Trowbridge Enterprises. In Mirabel, not far from Shearwater. Been in Verona a couple of months, right?"

The newcomer, a pretty readhead, who looked much too nice to be hanging around a couple of cats likely to claw, spit and hiss without warning, said "Since February."

Before Patty could offer a word of welcome, Kendra leaned toward

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Yolanda and said chattily, “It was about this time last year that Patty kicked me and Jackie and—who else was it, Jackie?—out of her house?”

“It was Nelda Worley.”

“Oh, yeah. Nelda.” Kendra turned back to Yolanda. “Well, anyway, we were talking about her husband, Troy? About how he had walked out on her and the kids? He was living out at their weekend cabin. But she didn’t like us telling the truth that way, and she kicked us out of her house. Just like that. And she up and quit the club a week later. Upset Madame President to no end.”

Kendra glanced at Patty, as if she expected a retort, but Patty had gone silent, her expression passive and detached. The older woman gave her attention back to the newcomer.

“Said she wouldn’t have us trash him in his own home. Made a point of calling it *his* home—and he wasn’t even living there! Of course, he went home a few weeks later. Pretty typical behavior for married men to beg their way back into the lives of the women they’ve just dumped on.”

In a single moment, blistering rage flared up inside Patty but in the next, it was completely diffused by what she saw in front of her.

Part of it was poor Yolanda. Her embarrassment and discomfort at being put on the spot by her new friends was obvious. The other part was what—no, who—Patty glimpsed behind the women trying so hard to shame and hurt her.

Troy’s soft-soled tennis shoes had masked his approach and they were unaware of his arrival. His stride slowed as he neared the group, and halted when their words reached his ears.

Kendra bulldozed on unaware, shooting Patty a saccharine smile accompanied by a malicious gleam in her eyes. “And now, we’re finding out what he was doing those weeks he wasn’t living at home, aren’t we?”

“Yes, indeedy,” said Jackie. “It’s all over town. Chasing after a sweet, young thing at work. A *blonde* sweet, young thing....”

“It’s really sick,” Kendra quavered, turning a sullen face to Jackie. “Sexual harassment. That’s worse than anything our sorry husbands ever *thought* about doing. She really owes us an apology, you know. But I’m not holding my breath.”

“Patty,” Troy said.

Kendra and Jackie went rigid and their eyes bugged out, as if daggers had been plunged into their backs, and they whirled around to turn shocked faces to him. But his eyes were on Patty, and he stepped around the suddenly silent visitors to go to her.

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“Hey,” she said. It took all her strength of will to keep her smile from turning into an unladylike guffaw.

“Hey.”

“You remember Jackie and Kendra, don’t you?”

“Sure.” He lifted his chin slightly and looked at them with narrowed eyes, his expression of careful neutrality doing little to mask the anger and disgust he felt.

“And this is Yolanda. She’s new in town. Her husband works at Trowbridge.”

“That’s a good company. Welcome to Verona.” He extended a hand to the newcomer, who shook it a bit self-consciously.

“Thank you.”

Patty lifted her eyes to him. “You’re empty handed. Didn’t they have the part?”

“Nope. Had to order it. It won’t be in till Thursday.” He gave her a grin and a wink. “So it looks like I won’t be able to mow the yard today, after all. Awww....”

“Awww,” Patty echoed with mock sympathy. “I know you’re disappointed. But I’m sure I can find something to keep you busy.” She stood and hitched her purse strap across her shoulder, looked at her two former club friends and nodded to Yolanda. “Nice meeting you.”

She and Troy headed down the sidewalk toward the park where Randy and Melissa were playing. He laid his arm casually across her shoulders and hers snaked around his waist. She couldn’t resist moving her hand down to stroke and pat his shapely, jeans-clad buttocks. She hooked a thumb over the rim of his back pocket to let her fingers dangle against his cheek, and tilted her head back to slant a gaze up to his face.

The sun glinted off his black hair in silvery highlights and threw his dark eyes into deep shadow. His exquisite lips were parted in a tantalizing little half-smile, barely revealing the tips of his teeth. He cut his eyes down to her. “You shameless...brazen—”

“I can’t help it.” Her heart nearly burst with a surge of love for him, and of possessiveness and joy.

“Wait a minute. Do you mean you can’t resist my sexy, manly body, or you can’t help being a smartaleck to your ex-friends back there?”

“Both.” She emphasized the word with squeeze of his backside. A sweet giggle bubbled up in her throat and pulled a chuckle from his.

It was the last time they would be able to laugh about anything connected to his predicament for years to come.

Chapter Forty-Three

On the following Monday, the first of the hate mail arrived at the office in the form of an anonymous letter that threw Dinah into shock. She carried it to Troy, sat across the desk from him and said, "I wish I didn't have to give you this, but I know you need to see it."

The letter was written on plain typing paper with a ballpoint pen in an adult handscript that slanted upward slightly. Reading it brought a touch of nausea to Troy's face.

He raised his eyes to her and said grimly, "I'm sorry you saw that. Don't screen my mail anymore. Just slit the envelopes and put them in my inbox."

"What about date stamping?"

"I'll give you back what needs to be date stamped."

He called Patty with similar instructions. "Don't open the mail. Don't even take it out of the mailbox. I'll bring it in when I come home."

From that Monday onward, cracks in Troy's world gradually increased to a roar as events started tumbling toward him, building in volume and velocity, like an avalanche. That night, just after he finished working on family finances at his desk in the den, there was a call that jolted him worse than the anonymous hate letter

The caller was an apologetic Red Billingsley, executive director of the Verona Youth Leagues, relieving Troy of his coaching duties the coming summer, "...until we get a better idea of the outcome of your current...situation."

Troy's knuckles turned white as his fist clamped the handset at his ear. "Red, I didn't do anything. My teams, my players...you know what they mean to me. Don't do this."

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“It’s not up to me, Stevenson. I’m just the one the board saddled with the job of telling you.”

“Then call a meeting and let me talk to the board.”

“I can’t.”

Troy’s temper snapped. “What is this *I can’t* I’m hearing from everybody? You’re the executive director of the organization, don’t tell me you can’t!”

“Maybe, when this is over, depending on the outcome, we’ll see what we can do then.”

“What are you gonna tell my boys? And their mamas and daddies?”

“I don’t know. So far as I know, that hasn’t been discussed.”

There was silence at both ends of the conversation for several moments as sudden and deep despondency settled over Troy like a blanket.

Without another word exchanged, he dropped the phone into the cradle and stared at it, unseeing, for a long time. He felt as much as heard Patty’s quiet, loving presence move up behind him.

“You hear that?” he murmured.

“Yes.” She stepped to his side, stroked and patted his arm. “They’re going to be very sorry they did that.”

It was not a threat, merely a prediction.

He looked up at her, pain, humiliation and bewilderment showing plainly on his face.

“Maybe I’m stupid for not knowing, but Patty, I really had no idea things like this were going to happen.” He reached for her, pulled her onto his lap, buried his face in her hair. As her arms circled his shoulders, he could feel love and support emanating from her heart as surely as he felt warmth and vitality radiating from her body.

“If you didn’t believe in me, I don’t know what I would do.”

Two days later, arriving at work by Highway 87, he noticed a group of people clustered in front of the building, most of them his employees, and he walked toward them.

“What’s going on?” he asked Norm as he approached.

His sales manager glanced at him grimly and then looked up between the two mid-sized oaks at the corners of the facade. “It probably took a bucket truck to get it up there, and that’s probably what it’ll take to get it down.”

Troy followed his gaze upward and saw a banner stretched between the

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trees, obviously homemade out of unbleached muslin, about three yards long and a yard wide, fastened to the trees with twine. The square black lettering had been spray painted, and it read, "A sexual predator works here."

Troy expelled a quick, mirthless laugh and followed it with a shake of his head. Rage and disgust prevented speech and his eyes traveled to the faces of his employees. The emotions showing there mirrored his.

"I'll see to it that this comes down," Norm said.

"Thanks."

"My inclination is to make a bonfire out of it, but something tells me it could be evidence." Norm shrugged. "Or something."

"I agree. Find something to put it in and bring it up to my office."

Norm bobbed his head once. "Will do."

The Troy Stevenson Defense Group met again the a week before the EFO's scheduled meeting, at the cabin at Lake Lucy straight after work.

As hostess and the Wife of the Accused, Patty had prepared well for the meeting, supplying simple refreshments, plenty of seating, photocopies of information already gathered, spiral notebooks and ballpoint pens.

The atmosphere was mixed. Several people had items to report that they suspected could be blow-Brooke-out-of-the-water material. At the same time, everyone remained stunned and furious.

The "limited knowledge" complaint had shown up in letters to the editor in the *Verona Beacon*. Worse, it been discussed on local talk radio where callers had all but identified Shearwater, and Troy, by name. It was infuriating to hear people yammer on about a matter they knew nothing about and savage an innocent man they'd never met and wouldn't recognize if they passed him on the sidewalk.

"I thank he done it...." "That woman two callers ago taking up for this guy probably doesn't work, doesn't know how men really are at the workplace...." "...just another rich, white man. What do you expect?"

One caller said, "We don't have to know who the accused is to know with near certainty that he did what he's accused of, because that's what men do. They just can't help themselves." Patty thought she recognized Nelda Worley's voice.

Now, though, as the group shared their discoveries and helped plan strategy for Troy, their spirits rose again.

Patty told them, "Our neighbor, Mrs. Gray, heard the ugly rumors, and

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came across the street to see me. She's never done that before, but she wanted me to have some information she's kept in her kitchen drawer since last summer. That was when she saw a blonde woman in a white car beside the curb at her house one morning, staring at our house through binoculars. She thought the woman might be some crazed addict casing homes to rob for drug money. She wrote down the make and model of the car and license plate number, in case she heard of break-ins around the neighborhood. Florida plates. It was Emerson's car."

The story was met with murmurs around the room. With a shake of her head, Dinah said, "Stalking him at his home, with binoculars."

"Nutzoid," Norm muttered.

"I gotta tell you this," Dugan said. "Troy's suspicion that she was stalking his children, too, has turned out to be right. At least, in Randy's case. He was upset about her going to Randy's ball games and talking to him.

"She told me and Arlene she volunteered at Cloverdale Rec Center on Saturdays and had only seen Randy there a couple of times. Well, the center's manager told me they don't use volunteers, never have. And one of the team mothers, Gina Kincaid, who was Randy's carpool mom, saw Brooke talking to Randy four different times, just like he said. "

"So the long string of lies continues," Dinah observed. "Based on what we're finding out, she won't have a shred of credibility when this is over."

After the discussion and more planning, Patty took her refreshments and notebook to the picnic table on the deck and began to scribble notes. In moments, Dugan and Dinah stepped through the sliding door looking for her.

"Hey, y'all come have a seat."

"Thanks," Dugan set her plate on the table and dropped into a chair. "That was a good meeting. But I have a question. I don't see Troy very much at work and I just wondered how he's handling everything."

Patty set her pen aside and her face grew pensive. "It bothers him a whole lot more than he lets on."

"I agree," Dinah said. "He tries to be calm, keep his head, but he has a lot of different feelings about it. Sometimes you can see the emotions flash across his face, one right after another. Hurt. Disbelief. Fear. But it's not the fearfulness of a coward. It's the alarm of a man who senses danger."

"That's a perfect description," Patty said, "but there's even more to it than that."

Her eyes fastened on the tabletop and she replayed something he'd said

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to her last night after they'd gone to bed.

"Patty. The devil's really done a number on mankind. There's so much terrible stuff in the world. That little boy in Florida, kidnapped and murdered two or three years ago. He was about Randy's age. What anguish his parents must suffer...."

"James Ferragamo's brother is dying of brain cancer. He'll be dead before he's forty, and leave behind a wife and three children...."

"School bus went into a ravine in Arkansas a few weeks ago, killed the entire senior class of a little school up there. Whole town's severely wounded and in shock."

He'd raised his head and looked at her with eyes glittering in the nightlight.

"What's happening to me is nothing compared to that kind of tragedy."

She broke out of her reverie and focused on her companions.

"He thinks, because there are people who suffer things that are so much worse, what he's going through doesn't really matter, by comparison."

"Oh, but it does matter," Dinah said. "What if it was Norm that was wrongly accused, or Clancy? Or your husband, Dugan, or mine? He wouldn't try to minimize it, then."

"No, he wouldn't," Patty said. "Why he won't show himself the same consideration I just don't understand."

"It just keeps piling on him," Dinah said somberly. "He may not have mention this, but he's also disturbed by what's happening at the office. Most people are honoring what's supposed to be the confidential nature of the process and keeping their mouths shut, but the place is being polarized by a handful of angry and vocal supporters on each side. I think it tears him apart inside to see that happening to his company, and feeling like he's responsible."

"But he's *not* responsible! Why does he feel like he is?"

"I don't know," Dinah said.

Patty shook her head. "At least it's almost over. Only one more week. And it should be pretty quiet. I mean, they've already trashed him on radio and in print, removed him from his community service positions and taken his sports teams away from him. What else can they do to him?"



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The answer to that question came in a particularly ugly way later that week. Wednesday afternoon there was a rally at Verona State in support of Shearwater-Ingram's "anonymous sexual harassment victim." Sponsored by the Women's Assistance Group and held on The Commons, it was a small gathering, no more than twenty people, but nevertheless a vocal, loud and angry event.

It had been hastily organized at noon, and the Stevensons didn't find out until someone at church told them. They saw the probable fallout from it as soon as they got home.

Troy had steered the station wagon into the garage and the family had emerged just as several cars rolled down Live Oak Street, slowing dramatically as they reached the red brick rambler. Male and female voices screamed slurs that echoed through the night—Patty easily made out "*Sick bastard!*" and "*Sex predator!*"—and she looked at her husband in alarm.

Walking toward the driveway, he nodded toward the children and ordered, "Take them and get in the house."

"Where're you going?" she said shrilly.

In the faint orange glow of the street lamp, he turned a face like thunder toward her and barked, "I'm gonna shut the g'rage door, *now do what I tell ye, git'n the house!*"

Patty herded the children indoors. Two steps into the kitchen, she heard the rumble of the garage door closing followed by several loud, sharp pops that cracked the night and tore into her soul. Terror such as she'd never known ripped through her and she screamed, "*TROEEEE!*"

She streaked back into the now darkened garage. By the light of the kitchen slanting into the shadows, she saw him walking to her.

"Oh!" She ran to him and slammed herself against him, flinging her arms around him, burying her face against him and crying hysterically in great, gulping sobs. "I thought...you'd been...shot!"

His arms went around her and held her as tightly as she held him. He was trembling violently, whether from fright or rage, Patty couldn't tell.

"Hey, now, I'm all right. Calm down. Bastards threw firecrackers in the driveway." He shushed her and kissed her forehead. "Let's get inside."

The terrified children were huddled together in the kitchen when their parents stepped through the back door. They ran to their father wailing, "Daddy!" and he knelt down to hold them a moment, murmuring words of comfort. "I'm okay. Don't worry."

He stood, nodded toward the family room and told Patty grimly, "Take

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them in there and stay with them.”

He went through the house turning off lights except the night lights in the kitchen and hallway, then disappeared into the shadows of the hall and emerged moments later carrying a box. He sat on the coffee table, put the box beside him and looked at his children through the dimness.

“You know what's in here?” He tapped the box.

Their heads bobbed and Randy said, “A gun.”

“That's right.” He gazed at them with such intensity his eyes seemed to burn. “I can't lock it back up. I've got to get to it quick if I need to, so I've got to leave it out. Now listen to me. I've never hit either one of you.” He focused on Randy and a flash of pain and regret crossed his face. “Not on purpose. But if I ever see you even touch this gun, I will wear you out. Do you understand me? I will wear...you...out.”

Round-eyed and open-mouthed, they whispered, “Yes, sir.”

“I bought your mama a gun, taught her to shoot for self-defense and I'll teach you when the time comes. But right now this is dangerous for you. It could kill you. And if that happened, your mama and I might as well die, too.”

In the silence that followed Troy's admonition, the faint sound of a car engine revving up and yelling voices came to them, though they couldn't make out the words.

“Should we call the police?” Inspired by the calm and courage that had settled over Troy after his initial fright, Patty tried hard to control her alarm, but she was still caught in the trauma of terror and it came through in her trembling voice.

“If it don't stop soon, or if any cars pull up in the driveway or people we don't know come up in the yard, we'll call.”

He left them, walked through the darkness to the foyer and flipped light switches beside the intercom. The front porch light came on, along with rarely used corner floodlights that bathed the driveway and front lawn with light. He opened the front door and stood quietly in the shadows of the darkened foyer, scanning the yard and street.

After ten minutes passed with no further disturbances, he closed the door, set the alarm and secured the house for the night. Returning to the family room, he snapped on a table lamp.

“Guess they got it out of their system. You young'uns go on and get ready for bed.”

Two hours later, the revolver lay atop Troy's bedside table and he and Patty cuddled in bed, conversing in murmurs now and then because nei-

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ther could sleep.

“When I thought somebody had shot you, I was terrified. I didn't know I had the capacity to be that scared.”

“It jolted me, too. As soon as I realized what it was, it just made me mad.”

“I wish I could be brave, like you, but I'm still so scared.”

His easy embrace, warm and comforting, strengthened.

“Patty, it's not so much bravery as it's me trying to look at things realistically. I'm concerned or I wouldn't have taken the gun out. If what happened was caused by that silliness out at the university today, it was probably just a bunch of stupid college kids acting out. But there's always the chance that the publicity, and the ugliness, could set off some lunatic. So we need to be ready for anything, and just hope nothing happens.”

Chapter Forty-Four

“Sir.” With somberness that seemed permanent lately, Dinah stepped to the door of Troy’s office and said, “Call for you from Mrs. Kerns in the principal’s office at Cloverdale Elementary.”

Troy glanced up to say, “Thank you, ma’am,” and brought the handset to his ear. “Troy Stevenson.”

“Mr. Stevenson, I’m sorry to bother you at work.”

“It’s all right, what’s the matter?”

“Well, it’s your children. They’re here in the office with me, very upset. They want you to come take them home.”

Discomfort started up at the edges of Troy’s mind. “What happened?”

“We’re not sure. They’re not hurt, I mean, not physically injured. There were no scuffles or anything. There was just some sort of incident after second recess, when the children had come back inside, and it upset them both very badly. We’ve asked them what happened to bother them so much—Melissa was nearly hysterical—but they won’t tell us. They just say they want you.”

“They’re with you now?”

“Yes.”

“Let me speak to my daughter.”

He heard background snuffling grow louder and Melissa’s quavering voice said, “Daddy?”

“Punkin, what’s the matter? What happened?”

“Daddy, come and get me! I don’t want to be here! Please, come get me!”

Troy’s discomfort ratched up several notches. “All right, I’ll leave right now. Let me speak to Randy first.”

There was another short delay before heard Randy’s voice, deep, soft, shaking. “Daddy.”

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“Son, are you all right?”

“I wanna go home.”

“Okay, but tell me what happened.”

“Please, just come and get us!”

Troy’s uneasiness collapsed and conscious concern took its place. “All right, I’m on the way. Calm down, now, you hear? Do that for me.”

“Okay.”

“Take care of Missy.”

“Okay.”

Calm but for the disquiet on his face, he broke the connection and pressed a speed dial button. Patty answered on the third ring.

“Principal’s office just called. Something happened right after recess that has upset the children pretty bad. They’re crying for me to come get them.”

He heard her soft gasp. “They’re not hurt....”

“Alice Kerns says they’re not injured, no fights or anything. Something has just upset them, they won’t say what. I’m leaving the office now and I’ll swing by and pick you up.”

“Where are they?”

“They’re with Kerns in the principal’s office. I talked to them a little. All they would say is ‘Come get us.’ So I’m leaving right now.”

“I’ll be waiting out front.”

When the children saw their parents step through the door, they lost what little control they had mustered and ran to Troy, sobbing. He knelt down to put an arm around each of them and murmured, “It’s okay. It’s okay.” He held them several moments before standing and stepping aside to give them to Patty for the comfort only mothers can give.

“Poor babies,” she whispered, pressing them to her sides. “Let’s go home.”

As Troy ushered his family toward the exit, Randy stopped and looked up, his face wet, his eyes red, and said. “I want my book bag.”

“Where is it?” Troy asked.

“My room. In my desk.”

Alice Kerns, who’d been somewhat a bystander until now said, “I’ll get it. Do you want anything from your room, sweetheart?” she asked Melissa, who shook her head.

They stepped through the exit and waited while Kerns sped down the

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corridor. She returned in a few moments with the faded, camo-print book bag. Randy took it from her and clutched it under his arm as Troy nodded to her and said, "Thank you."

The Stevenson family headed for the door to the parking lot.

The ride home was quiet and morose. The children's crying had stopped but they were unnaturally silent and that worried Patty. After they'd spent an hour at home, in the comforting familiarity of their rooms, Troy brought them to the family room and sat with them on the couch where Patty waited. They sat between their parents, Melissa next to Troy, Randy beside his mother.

"Do you think we could talk about what happened today?" Patty asked them.

They sat very still, their eyes fastened on the coffee table. At last, Melissa's breath quaked and she said, barely audibly, "There was a picture in my chair when I came in from second recess."

"What kind of picture?" Patty said.

"Like a comic book picture somebody drew and then colored with crayons."

Troy studied her face for a moment. "What was the picture of, Punkin?"

Melissa raised her eyes to his and twice opened her mouth to speak but a look of such pain and shame came to her face, he said, "It's okay sweetheart. You don't have to talk about it. It's okay." He looked at Patty, whose bewilderment mirrored his.

Randy said, "There was one in my chair, too." His brows drew together as if he didn't really want to do what he was about to do, but he resolutely scooted off the sofa, went the foyer and disappeared down the hallway. He returned moments later with his book bag, set it on the coffee table and crawled back onto the couch between his parents.

Cradling Melissa with one arm, Troy leaned forward to open the book bag, pulled out a sheet of paper, straightened and froze. His brows buckled and beneath them, his eyes widened and his nostrils flared, though he was scarcely breathing. Color drained from his face and his lipline went stark white.

"Troy?"

He showed Patty the picture. Jolted by shock, she clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle a whimper.

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The product of a talented amateur comic-book artist, it was drawn with a black felt-tipped pen and colored with Crayolas. It depicted a dark-haired man wearing a suit and tie who bore a discernable resemblance to Troy. He was standing beside a desk and a woman with yellow hair was on her knees in front of him, performing oral sex on him. Block letters captioned the drawing: RANDY'S DADDY. BAD MAN.

Troy laid the picture face down on the coffee table and sat for long moments, as if in shock. At last, he looked at Melissa, his face raw with pain. "Was yours like that?"

She nodded. "But it said 'Melissa's daddy.'"

He grimaced from the mental image of her finding the repulsive thing at school, with her classmates around, but quickly brought himself under control. External control, at least. "Do either of you know if anybody else saw these? Or if there were more of them?"

"I don't know," Melissa said.

"Me, neither," Randy murmured. He crawled into his mother's lap and snuggled against her. Patty squeezed him gently and looked over his head to Troy with growing horror and revulsion in her eyes.

"Missy, sweetheart," Patty said, "What happened to the one that was in your chair?"

"I put it in my notebook." Melissa's voice was thin and high, but at least she had stopped sobbing. "I didn't want nobody else to see it. And I started cryin' and I couldn't stop and Miss Gilbert took me to the office. I said I wanted Randy and Miss Kerns went and got him and I whispered and told him somebody drew a bad picture of Daddy, and he said he got one, too, and then we both couldn't stop crying."

Frowning, Randy looked up at his father and shook his head. "I didn't cry. 'Cept for maybe a minute. Not even a minute."

"It's all right," Troy said, still whitefaced. He reached out to tousle Randy's hair. "Don't worry about it."

Patty's eyes wandered to the abomination lying face down on the coffee table. "Do either of you have any idea who could have done this?"

Her question was met with silent headshakes, and she looked at her husband, anguished. "What kind of sicko gives such filth to children?"

"Well, no child drew or lettered that," Troy observed, "so an adult sicko, or at least a teenager. Somebody who wants my children, and you, to be ashamed of me and have doubts about me."

Patty reached over, took his hand, squeezed it and shook her head. "Won't work. We adore you. It would take an absolute lunatic to believe

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that drawing some sick picture could change that.”

“Yes, we love you, Daddy,” Melissa said, laying her head against his chest, and Randy nodded emphatically.

Sudden moisture glinted in Troy’s eyes. He blinked hard to clear it away as a beautiful smile lit his face and a laugh that was mostly a gasp sounded in his throat. “That’s really what matters.”

Silence fell over the room, bringing a measure of peace. After a few moments, Troy’s roused himself from detached melancholy to give his wife and children tender but somewhat distracted kisses.

“I’m going up to the school before they lock up for the day and get Melissa’s notebook. Be right back.”

Patty nodded. Returning fury made her cringe for a second and she gritted her teeth. “Whoever did this better hope I never find out who they are.”

For several moments after Troy left, Patty held her children next to her while her heart and mind clung to his presence, left behind in the family room after his departure—the afterglow of his goodness and love and strength.

“Missy, Randy,” she said at length. “I can’t imagine why someone would want you to think your daddy’s a bad man. There are some sick people in the world, that’s the only way I can explain it. But your daddy’s not a bad man; he’s a very good man.”

“We know that, Mama!” Melissa said as she looked up at her mother earnestly while Randy’s assurance showed plainly in his dark eyes.

“We are so fortunate, so blessed, to have such a wonderful man as my husband and your father. This awful thing somebody’s trying to do to you—to put bad thoughts about him in your mind and make you doubt him—it has to do with the trouble going on at his office.”

They gave her knowing nods. “That Brooke Emerson person’s doing it to him,” Randy said.

“That’s right. But it’s not just her. When you get older, you’ll find out more about them—women who hate men and people who hate families and tradition and religion. People who are trying to turn our way of life upside down and using attacks on men like your daddy to do it.”

She squeezed their shoulders and kissed their foreheads.

“He knows they’re wrong and at first that kept his spirits up. But now they’re trying to use us against him—to hurt him by hurting us—and it’s

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starting to get him down. Because he loves us more than anything and it kills him to think we're hurting because of him—even if it's not his fault at all.

“That’s why we have to believe in him with every ounce of strength we’ve got. We have to love him as hard and deep as we can. So no more crying. Yes, we’re hurt, but we can’t show him tears and pain anymore. We have to show him faces of love and pride, trust and joy because that’s what he brings out in us. He’s a very strong, confident man. And as long as we all trust in the Lord, and love your daddy and believe in him, he can handle almost anything.”

The dream flung Troy upward through the layers of sleep and slammed him into wakefulness with the usual jolt. He stared at the ceiling, gasping, his muscles clenched so tightly cramps were starting in his calves.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Patty prop herself on an elbow facing him.

“Tro,” she whispered. “Wake up.”

“I’m awake,” he muttered. He rolled toward her to rest his head on her shoulder and bury his face against her neck. Her arms went around him, loving, warm, strength-giving. She rested her cheek against his forehead and brought her hand up to massage his hair.

“I want to be strong,” he said, “and just blow it off. But baby, I don’t know how much more of this I can take. The children...”

Patty gently shushed him. “They’ll be all right. You’ve been absolutely wonderful with them, all through this. Perfect. Nobody could have handled it better.”

“I still hate it.”

“I do, too.” Her arms tightened around him for a moment. “Tro, you’re not just a good man; you’re a strong man, and you have a lot of people who believe in you that you can draw on for more strength, if you need it. The Jordans and Kincaids, everybody at church—everyone who knows you here, and Atlanta, Tuscaloosa, Aberdeen.”

Gradually, his trembling stopped and his breathing normalized. He lay in silence a moment, letting the sweetness and power of her steadfast love wash over him.

“I didn’t know how much our church family meant to me,” he said, “until this happened. Their prayers...support.... But they’re just small part of this town.”

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She tilted her head to softly kiss his temple. “I know it hurts you to think there are people who believe you did what you’re accused of. But they’re not our people. Have you noticed how many of the people persecuting you have come down here from somewhere else? They’re the people who hate you, anyway, because you’re a Christian man, and you have a family you love and take care of. They’re the people who want me to support myself, they want the government to raise the children, and they want you to disappear. Don’t give their opinions any weight, not any, for one second longer.”

The shadowed room fell silent. Patty hoped her words had been persuasive, at least enough to help him get back to sleep. He had lost too much sleep over this already, and purple shadows were showing under his eyes every day. At the same time, she well understood his hurt and indignation, because she shared them.

She also feared for him.

He was very confident of his defense, and now that she knew what it was, she understood his confidence but she didn’t completely share it. Truth was indeed on his side but the people they were dealing with had no respect for truth.

She lay without moving, waiting to feel him relax. It didn’t take long. His muscles slackened, his body seemed to melt against her and his breath on her breast grew deep and rhythmic. Just as he drifted off, he whispered, “You always know what to say to me. I love you so much.”

“I love you, too. So much.” She followed him into sleep.

Chapter Forty-Five

On the day of the informal meeting, Troy went home at midday and brought Patty back to the office with him. Dressed in low heels and a structured A-line dress, the style she preferred, this one done in off-white bouclé, she was the perfect executive wife, but her expression and demeanor betrayed her turmoil—her fear and fury on behalf of her husband mingled with her love for him.

The meeting was scheduled for three, in the small conference room downstairs, so they went to Troy's office to wait, he to his desk and his routine work—he was not going to let Grant and Roper disrupt his work—she to sit on the couch with a *Southern Living* magazine.

“I don't see how you can be so calm,” Dinah told them. “In less than two hours, it'll be here. The possibilities...your career in shambles, your reputation destroyed, your ability to earn a living impaired, your lifestyle diminished....”

Troy looked up at her. “We're aware of the possibilities. I've been aware of them since the day I read what was in that envelope. And I'm not unconcerned. I'm just...busy.”

At two-forty five, Troy cut his eyes to Patty and said, “Ready?”

She nodded, laid the magazine aside and met him as he left his desk. She lifted her arms to give him a quick hug but clung to him tightly. He took her in a strong embrace, pulling in a slow, deep breath and closing his eyes. They could feel each other trembling.

“You give me a lot of strength,” he murmured. He relinquished his hold on her, went to the credenza and took two objects from it—a file folder with a stack of papers inside, and a portable stereo.

He stepped into Dinah's office with Patty at his side. “Let's go.”

Dinah glanced at the stereo and raised a brow but said nothing. Joy, who had come to mind the office while they were gone, sat at Dinah's desk

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and looked up at Troy, her expression solemn. “Good luck, sir.”

“Thank you ma’am.”

They took the stairwell to the ground floor.

They stepped into the conference room to find the long table occupied, with Max at the far end and Brooke and Arlene seated along one side. They were startled to see Jessica Grant sitting next to Arlene. Troy shook his head slightly but said nothing.

Max looked at him with a completely expressionless face and shifted in his chair. “Y’all sit down. Patty, you’re welcome to sit at the table if you want to.”

“I’m not an employee,” she told him. “Only employees should be sitting at the table and taking part in the proceedings.” She looked pointedly at the interloper from WAG but Jessica ignored her.

“Whatever,” Max said.

The door opened again and three employees entered. Max said, “In accordance with the EFO policies and procedures manual, Ted, Celia and Sabrina are going to serve as impartial observers to make certain policies are followed and give their recommendations for resolution.”

Their faces wore a look of cornered neutrality as they took chairs along the back wall. Troy glanced at them but said nothing.

“Let’s get started,” Max said. “Arlene, you’ve had twenty days to do your investigation. What’s your report?”

“My investigation is complete,” she said. “This is a copy of the complaint, and the results of the investigation are attached to the back.”

She opened a file folder and took out several thin packets of paper stapled together. They were distributed to everyone in the room.

There were five pages in the packet and Troy skimmed them, his face like alabaster. Beside him, Dinah put a fist to her mouth as she read, and Troy could hear Patty’s uneven breathing nearby.

The only corroborating evidence were the statements of a few people who had known Troy was staying at the lake cabin during the period in question. Most of what the investigation had “uncovered” was Brooke’s statement, which was longer, more detailed, more explicit than the summary he had been given last month.

What he read now made his stomach roil. “Kissing” and “fondling” in the short report had become gross descriptions, detailed and graphic, and as sickening as pornography. He glanced at Patty and saw that she was

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white and tears were gathering in her eyes. When she glanced up, he slowly and slightly lifted his chin, a signal to her to keep hers up.

Max said, "I think everybody's had time to read this. Troy, you can give your response now."

Troy hesitated a moment, then put the portable stereo on the table and punched open the tape deck. He took a cassette out of his inside breast pocket and dropped it into the player.

"This is a transcript of the tape I'm fixing to play, for whoever wants one. Most of the tape is...self-explanatory." He took a stack of papers from the folder and laid it in the center of the table, but before anybody had a chance to get one, he punched play. The sound of his voice came out of the speakers.

"Dinah, this is to Harold Edwards at Battison, Floyd and Simpkins Corporation. Today's date is June twentieth. Use Harold's address that's in your Rolodex, not corporate headquarters. The usual greeting, then, here are the figures you asked about by phone Friday...."

Passive curiosity came to the faces in the room as the tape droned on. Steely eyed, Troy looked across the table and saw the bewilderment in the eyes of his three opponents and he could almost hear them thinking, *What does business dictation have to do with sexual harassment proceedings?*

"...I'll put a photocopy of the page with the figures in your in-box. Use the ones I've circled in red—"

On the tape, Troy's voice stopped and there came the sound of papers rattling through the speakers. The next sound was a hollow, distant knocking followed by Troy's voice saying, "You can put those over there." A short silence, then Troy again, his voice testy. "I requested that those files get here by four. I needed them for a last-minute conference call at four-fifteen. Did anyone in your department tell you that?"

That was when Brooke went stiff and her eyes opened wide.

Dinah snatched one of the transcripts from the table. Jessica and Arlene followed suit.

The next sound was a woman's voice, distant from the Dictaphone's condenser microphone, a bit hollow, but easily recognizable as Brooke's, and easily discernible as sultry and provocative.

"I'm sorry they're late. I'd love to make it up to you." There was a short pause. Then, "I'm Brooke Emerson. When I see you around here, I can't take my eyes off of you."

By now, everyone at the table except Troy had a transcript and they

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were reading as well as listening.

TS: You need to leave here.

BE: I don't want to leave. I want to be where you are.

TS: But you need to leave.

BE: I know about you. You're not living with your wife. You're all alone.

TS: Max put you up to this.

BE: Nobody put me up to it. You must be awfully lonely, living by yourself out there at the lake. I'll take care of your loneliness, right here, right now. On the couch, on the carpet, wherever you say.

TS: If you walk out of here right now, nobody ever has to know about this. I won't tell. But you have to go, right now.

BE: I'll do anything. Whatever you want.

TS: Get out of my office. That's what I want.

BE: You don't mean that.

(Transcriptionist's note: About 2 seconds of a telephone dial tone coming through speakerphone.)

Male voice on speakerphone: Security, Craddock here.

(Transcriptionist's note: Sound of telephone handset being hung up.)

TS: All right, then I'll leave.

BE: No!

(Transcriptionist's note: About fifteen seconds of ambient sound, then knocking on door.)

Unidentified female speaker: "Any mail to go out?"

(Transcriptionist's note: About 10 seconds of ambient sound and faint sobbing.)

Unidentified female speaker: "Mr. Stevenson, I know that wasn't your doing. I was out here the whole time. I heard everything and saw some of it. She's been obsessing over you for weeks. The whole place knows about it. Now she's a woman scorned and might be dangerous, so you watch your back.

Several more seconds of ambient sound played. Then there came the sound of a door closing.

Troy shut off the player. He had sat motionless and kept his face neutral during the playing of the tape, but now, as his gaze swept the trio across the table and stopped on Arlene, he had to work to control the anger flaring in his eyes.

"What the tape doesn't tell you is what Ms. Emerson here was wearing that day. It was a suit—a skirt and a blazer. The blazer was unbuttoned and she wasn't wearing anything underneath it.

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“It also doesn’t tell you what happened during the silence before the second knock on the door. If you need to know, it’s in my written response to the complaint.

“The person whose voice you hear at the end of the incident is Robin Yates, a former employee who worked in the mailroom. The door closing afterward was me leaving. The portable Dictaphone sitting forgotten on my desk blotter continued to record ambient sound until it reached the end of the tape.”

Except for Brooke’s, every eye in the room was on Troy. It was so quiet the occupants seemed to be scarcely breathing. Troy continued to address Arlene.

“The next morning, I came in early to finish dictating the letters. I found the tape at its end and realized what had happened so I played it back. I thought Robin’s warning was a stated a bit melodramatically but that didn’t keep me from believing it could have merit. So I put the tape in a safe place where it stayed until recently when I got it out to make this copy. The original is back in its safe place.”

He popped the cassette out of the player and tossed it on the table in front of Arlene.

“You can have that. For your file.”

He paused, and for the first time, looked pointedly at Brooke. She was staring at the tabletop, her face a mask of immobility. He didn’t waste a glance on Jessica.

He took the remaining papers from the file folder and dropped them on the table on front of Arlene. “Incidentally, here’s some information directly related to this matter that your...investigation...somehow missed.”

The last item in the folder was a copy of the company’s EFO policy manual, opened to the section on sexual harassment. He took it out and set it down in front of Arlene.

“I’ve read this twice, and it’s clear about what punishments will be applied to men in this company who sexually harass a female employee. But you know what I couldn’t find, Ms. Roper? I couldn’t find a single syllable about penalties for women who file false sexual harassment complaints against men.”

Arlene opened her mouth as if to say something, but closed it again.

At last, he looked at Max, and the pain that had been growing inside him for weeks showed in his eyes.

“You were my closest friend. My best man—I chose you above my own

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brother. You know what kind of relationship I have with my wife.” Troy shook his head, mystified. “What would be happening right now if luck or Providence had not given me that tape?”

He stood up, still looking at Max, who would not meet his gaze.

“My participation in this sick travesty ends here. Let me know how it turns out.”

There was suddenly a sniffing sound in the room and Troy saw Brooke bury her face in her hands. In the periphery of his vision, he saw Patty stand up and walk to the end of the table.

Arlene looked up at Patty with guilt and a touch of fear on her face. Beside her, Jessica Grant stared at Troy with unmitigated hatred, but Patty did not see that. She had no interest in anyone but Brooke. She stared at the blonde with incredulity on her face.

Troy stepped to her. “Patty, let’s go.”

She glanced up at him, then back to Brooke.

“Patty.” He said it softly, persuasively, the way a man says his lover’s name, and her eyes returned to his face stayed there.

“Come on.”

They turned away from Brooke, away from the whole sordid episode, and walked out of the room hand in hand.

Dinah got back to her office about twenty minutes after the meeting ended. Dugan was with her. The door to Troy’s office was closed.

“They went in there and shut the door without a word,” Joy said.

Dinah tapped on the door and heard Troy’s, “Come in.” She opened it quietly and she and Dugan stepped inside.

Troy was lying on the blue couch on his back, his head in Patty’s lap, his eyes closed, coat off, tie loosened. Patty sat silent and square-shouldered, her chin held high, her passive expression masking tightly controlled emotion, one hand curved around Troy’s head, the other resting on this chest, above his heart.

He opened his eyes slightly and cut them to his visitors. “Y’all sit down.”

“You all right, sir?” Dinah said as she took a chair.

“He’s been asleep,” Patty told them.

“Sign of a clear conscience,” Dugan commented. “Max is probably going to come up here wanting to talk to you.”

Troy rubbed his eyes. “I expect so.”

“Just out of curiosity,” Dinah said, “did anyone else in the room know

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you had that bomb in your coat pocket?”

“Just Patty. She typed the transcript for me.”

“Well, it’s all over the building now, and it’ll be all over town by sun-down. There’s a lot of relief and celebration on your behalf. I don’t think you realize the hostility that has been building toward Brooke and Arlene the past few weeks.”

Dugan concurred with a bob of her head. “Everybody knew she was lying, but people were concerned that it was your word against hers. Now there’s this tape that removes all doubts. Brooke’s case was utterly destroyed and she looked pretty destroyed, too.”

“I never wanted that. I was outraged by the accusation, I wanted to defend myself and I had the means to, so I used it. But it was to *defend* myself, to show that the complaint was false, not to destroy anyone.”

“But that’s *exactly* what they were trying to do to you,” Patty said, her voice deep and quavering. “You’re being way too nice. She brought it all on herself.”

There was another knock on the door. Troy sat up and swung his feet to the floor.

The door opened and Max stepped in. His face was blank, almost like the face of a shock victim. He looked at Troy and blinked a few times.

“I just got off the phone with my father,” he said, barely above a whisper. “He terminated Brooke and Arlene from employment and the EFO has been abolished. Any EFO rules that are needed by the company will be written into the regular personnel policies manual. All subject to approval by the board.”

“Good,” Troy said.

“He also fired me.”

Troy blinked and inhaled deeply.

Max said, “So it looks like you’ll be the CEO of this company someday. You deserve it. You’ve done more to grow it than anybody.”

“You know I’ve never considered us rivals for that.”

“Yeah, I know. But Daddy did. Maybe someday, we can get together and I’ll tell you about my love/hate feelings for you. I’ll tell you about all my efforts to undercut you with Daddy at every possible opportunity, and how I let my jealousy orchestrate your ruin.”

“Max...”

“Of course, I never could have done it on my own. First, I’m not smart enough, and second, I don’t begin to have guts enough to do it. But those girls came along wanting to rip you to shreds. I could’ve stopped them—

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should've stopped them, because I knew they were lying. But I saw an opportunity to get you out of the way for good, so I threw you to those she-wolves and stepped back to watch."

Troy couldn't keep pain and incomprehension off his face. "Why?"

"Because you took my daddy away from me."

"I did not!"

"You did. You just don't know it. When Shearwater started looking like it might become profitable, it was because of your efforts so they poured all that capital into it, all because of you. He told me that. And he told me how disappointed in me he was, and how proud he was of you. Said you were like the son he never had." Max laughed bitterly.

Despite everything, Troy felt a searing pain around his heart. What must it have done to Max to hear that.

"I never meant to come between the two of you. I don't even like your daddy."

"I know." Max looked more miserable every moment. He cut his eyes to the right and said, "Patty, I'm sorry."

Patty's face was carefully neutral, but her eyes snapped with resentment. "Stick with talking to Troy. I don't know why, but he loves you. He'll forgive you a whole lot sooner than I will."

A short silence filled the room.

"What are you going to do?" Troy said.

"He'll find me something. He won't let me starve. He'll find somebody to bully into hiring me. And if he can't, or won't, Mama will. I'm going home to Birmingham. I'm leaving right now."

Troy got to his feet and they looked at each other across the room, but neither moved toward the other.

Blinking fast as his eyes reddened and pain and guilt etched his face, Max said softly, "You're the only person in my life who ever really cared about me."

He left the room.

Epilogue

Twenty minutes earlier Dinah Langley had glanced around her as the small conference room began to clear out. She stood, put her palms on the table and leaned forward to stare with sheer disgust at the stunned faces of the three women across from her.

“Do you have any idea of what your abominable lie has brought down on an innocent man? He’d never tell you, but I will. He’s been savaged in the local media by people who don’t even know him. Removed from coaching in the youth leagues, which meant so much to him, and helped so many kids who needed it. Really brave anonymous people drove by his house and threw firecrackers at him and his family as they arrived home from church. Unknown parties put signs up here and on his street and other parts of town libeling him as a sexual predator.

“But the topper was when some sick, unknown pervert with a talent for cartooning slipped pornographic caricatures of him to his children at school.”

Her flaming eyes swept their faces. They sat stunned and mute except for Jessica who raised a defiant glare to her.

“Are y’all proud of what you’ve wrought? Proud of the trauma you’ve inflicted on him and his family?” Dinah paused. “Don’t everybody talk at once. In fact, don’t talk at all. I don’t want to hear you. It makes me sick just to look at you.”

She straightened and turned toward the door to see Dugan enter and step to the table to gather up the papers left there. As she passed the tall brunette on the way to the door, she said, “I’ll wait for you in the lobby. I’ve had about all of these three I can take.”

Brooke Emerson did not wait to find out that she would be fired. After the Dobie’s tirade she left the conference room without a word to Arlene,

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Jessica or anyone, and went to her cubicle in the library like a sleepwalker. She retrieved only one thing from her desk, her purse. Moments later, she drove the Chevette out of the parking lot and headed west on Fowler Avenue but didn't make it all the way into Verona. She turned onto Interstate 75 and streaked southward, toward Florida.

A few days later, after hearing an account of the sexual harassment meeting from acquaintances, Angie tracked her down by phone at her parents home in Orlando. They spoke briefly but Brooke seemed disinclined to talk and Angie promised to call back when she was feeling better.

Over the months, they gradually lost touch.

In the autumn of 1984, Angie heard Brooke had gone to New Jersey, where her mother's family lived, and had found a married man to have a sexual relationship with and a home to wreck.

Arlene Roper went back to her cubicle in a daze, as well, but beneath it lay roiling shame, embarrassment and regret fighting to erupt through the pall. She had been such an idiot to let Jessica manipulate her so. This job at Shearwater-Ingram had been a fantastic opportunity, a great career boost and she had blown it by becoming a man-hater's marionette.

She didn't know how long she'd been sitting at her desk when Max Ingram wandered in, looking as dazed as she.

"You've been fired," he said softly. "And your department's been shut down. Effective now."

She nodded pensively. "I'll just...clean out my desk and be on my way."

She went home to her middle-class ranch in Maplewood Estates where she spent a month in near silence, distant from her family, hardly stepping outside, trying to come to grips with what she had done.

In early June, she sent Troy Stevenson a handwritten card at Shearwater's address. It read, *Mr. Stevenson, I'm writing to apologize for my part in the persecution recently aimed at you. I'm not asking for clemency. I just want you to know I'm truly sorry about what happened to you and deeply regretful of my part in it.*

Four days later, her telephone rang and she was shocked when the caller said, "Mrs. Roper, Troy Stevenson. Thank you for the card. Your apology is accepted. And appreciated...."

In July, she began to mail out resumes. In August, she went for several interviews, and in September, she started a new job in the personnel office of T&S Corporation, a civilian contractor that provided food servic-

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es to Martin Air Force Base, and other military installations throughout the southeast.

Jessica Grant sat at the table in the conference room for several moments after the meeting broke up, paralyzed by fury. What a disaster this had turned out to be. She would *never* trust a sex-crazed, man-hungry mental deficient like Brooke Emerson, ever again. That stupid bimbo and her sexual harassment fiasco had the potential to set WAG back ten years, maybe more.

It was bad enough the way it had ended, but the tongue-lashing from Stevenson's redheaded shrew exacerbated her rage. No telling how long she would have sat there, stewing in her wrath, if she had not noticed a hand snatch up the papers on the table in front of her. It was Dugan Haynes. She had gathered up all the papers in the room, holding them in the crook of her arm, as well as the cassette tape Stevenson had thrown at Arlene.

Jessica stood up, glared at Dugan and slammed her forefinger against the table. "The papers that were in front of me are mine."

"Sorry, no." Dugan shook her head and gave Jessica an insolent stare. "These are internal company documents. And you have no business even being in this building." She turned on her heel and strode out of the room.

Jessica left Shearwater-Ingram, practically stomping to her car, and drove aimlessly, going back over every piece of information she had about the fiasco to search for indications that she was responsible for any part of the colossal failure.

No, she had done all she could; had done everything right. It wasn't her fault Brooke was a slut and Arlene an idiot.

At some point when the sun was setting, hunger drove her to a fast food place. She carried her take-out meal to the WAG office at VSU.

There were calls on the answering machine. Still caught in turmoil, she she started listening with only half an ear as she unrapped her burger, but her attention focused sharply after a few words.

"Jessica, this is Teresa Sims. I just heard what happened at Shearwater today and I'm disgusted. I joined WAG to help women, not to hurt men. Take my name off your member list, effective today."

There were two others in the same vein.

Screw 'em.

Within a month, the organization had lost a third of its membership, and donations were down fifty percent. The grant money WAG received

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was barely enough to sustain its existence. Donations were crucial. Jessica didn't like it one bit, but she would have to put the anti-sexual-harrassment campaign on hold while she ran a recruitment effort and a campaign for donations.

So the smug patriarchs of corporate Verona and their adoring Stepford secretaries would get a reprieve. But not permanently.

I'll be back.

Max Ingram left the conference room just steps behind Troy and Patty, but turned right and headed for the elevator. He was not dazed like some of the participants and witnesses to the meeting. His perception was clear and crisp but he was too cold inside, too numb, to feel much of anything.

He stepped out of the elevator and into his office where he briefly looked out the window at the field in the late afternoon sun. He swiveled to his desk, called his father in Atlanta and gave him a terse recap of the meeting, finishing with, "The tape was a complete surprise. Nobody had any idea it existed."

There was a moment of tense silence and Hamilton Ingram said, "Tell Roper and Emerson that they're fired, effective immediately."

"Yes, sir."

"The Equality and Fairness Office is abolished. Effective immediately."

"Yes, sir."

Hamilton's cold, steely voice droned on about changes in Human Resources with the abolition of the EFO.

"All of this is tentative, to be presented to the board of directors for approval at the next regular meeting. I have no doubt they will approve it."

There was a pause and Max held his breath, knowing, somehow, what was coming next.

"You are also fired, effective immediately. And you have no recourse to the board."

Max jumped slightly at the sound of the phone hanging up in his ear. *Now* his mind was dazed and his feelings had returned, raw and painful.

Fifteen minutes later, when he left Troy's office with his heart breaking in his chest, the merciful numbness returned. It stayed with him through his rudimentary packing and the six hour drive to Birmingham, to his mother's two-story columned house in Vestavia Hills, where he had grown up.

For two months thereafter, Mary Catherine Tutwiler Ingram watched

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her son, her only child, spiral deep into depression, her fear that he would take his life growing daily. It didn't begin to diminish until Max took a job at an insurance firm in a skyscraper downtown and began to engage with life again.

But he had emerged from the depression with a profound personality change. The old Max, the jokester who protected his generous spirit with quick grins and ascerbic remarks, was gone and in his place was a somber, taciturn man with haunted eyes.

But at least he was still here with her.

Patty and Troy left the office shortly after Max's departure, sent on their way with hugs from Dinah, Dugan and Joy. On the way home, they stopped by the Jordans' house on Hickory Avenue, where the children had gone after school.

It was quiet in the car, not so much somber as mellow.

"What happened, Daddy?" Melissa asked.

"I was...absolved. Do you know what that word means?"

"It means you won," Randy said.

At home, Troy headed for the bedroom, suddenly drained, both emotionally and physically, and sleepy. He loosened his tie, took off his shoes and coat and stretched out on the bed fully clothed. He drifted off only to be half awakened moments later by a soft, rustling sound somewhere in the room. Coming closer to consciousness, he recognized it as whispering. The whispers of his family.

"He's already asleep," Patty said. "Let's let him rest."

"I'm not asleep," he said, slitting his eyes to see them hovering near the doorway. "Come here to me, all of you."

They piled into the bed and snuggled next to him. His arms stretched around them and he held them close. His eyes closed and he smiled.

"Y'all are what I live for."

A week later, the *Verona Beacon* ran an editorial entitled *Rush to Judgment*.

Our country's Constitution provides that those accused of wrongdoing are innocent until proven guilty when it comes to matters of legality and justice. The provision has become a principle of American thinking that

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extends beyond the legal arena into all areas of life.

But sometimes it is overlooked or ignored.

Many people in Verona know that for the past few weeks, a decent and upright man in this community has been savaged in the alternative media and on local talk radio. Accused of sexual harassment on the job, while a supposedly confidential internal investigation was underway at his workplace, details of his case were leaked to the local progressive press.

From there, information about the situation filtered out through the community at large. His reputation was sullied. His participation in civic activities, including volunteer coaching in youth league sports, was prohibited or curtailed. His wife and children were maltreated. Only his family, a few co-workers, and the members of his church believed in his innocence and supported him through the ordeal.

It turned out that he not only had ironclad proof of his innocence; the investigation also proved that he had been targeted by a radical feminist group who wished to 'make an example' of him, regardless of guilt or innocence, solely because he is a man. The accusations were completely fabricated and a young woman of doubtful mental stability was manipulated into filing the complaint.

We support women's rights. We believe in fairness and equality for all. However, we do not believe that leveling the playing results from going overboard in the other direction.

By now, news of the incident and investigation at Shearwater-Ingram Company, located in Mirabel Office Park, has traveled through the entire community. It is also quite well known in Verona and Yancey County that the accused has been proved completely innocent. His reputation and stature in the community and his positions in civic and fraternal organizations have been restored.

Still, that isn't enough. The entire community owes this innocent man a profound apology. And so, on behalf of the people of Verona, Yancey County, Georgia and vicinity, the *Beacon* staff extends to Troy Stevenson, Vice President of Marketing at Shearwater-Ingram Company, our sincere apologies, which extend also to his wife, Patty, and children Melissa and Randy.

We wish great happiness and good fortune for Mr. Stevenson and his family.

About the Author

Connie Chastain is a ninth-generation Southerner who grew up a preacher's kid in Georgia and Alabama. A former staff writer for *The Florida Sun*, she resides in west Florida with her husband, Tommy. *Southern Man* is the first in a series of novels set in her native Georgia.

Other Fiction by Connie Chastain

Storm Surge

Romantic Suspense published by Desert Breeze Publishing

A Family at Last

A Romantic Short Story published by Brasstown Books

Author's Note

So many people helped with the writing of this story, it would be impossible to name them all. However, there are those who I wish to acknowledge by name because without them, it might not have been written at all.

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Finally, I wish to thank those who provided negative inspiration, whether they hail from the heart of the Heart of Dixie or from the wide reaches of cyberspace. You know who you are. LOL!

*Connie Chastain
West Florida
May 2009*

A Note to Readers

Thank you for reading *Southern Man*. Did you enjoy reading this story? If so, please consider leaving a review at Amazon.com, Goodreads, or other book review venues both online and off. If you wish, you may also send comments to me directly at *southernwriter@cox.net*. I appreciate your feedback. ~*Connie*

