

The Golden Handcuffs

The Golden Handcuffs

Susan Wade Saga Book 3

Virginia Gray

Virginia Gray Novels

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The Golden Handcuffs

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For Carolyn

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I

Twenty-one Redneck Salute

The diamond cut into my palm as I gripped the bouquet. He stood only yards away, wearing an expression so sweet I almost didn't hate him. I narrowed my eyes, and his grin turned devious. No one noticed our exchange as they rose to the pomp and swell of the organ, gasping in unison at the explosion of light and joy behind me.

I didn't need to turn to see the expression she wore; it had been the same for days, though now tears surely glazed her cheeks. The groom's face, the very picture of terror some twenty minutes prior, now basked in that same singular light. I sagged in relief. In moments, she would be his forever; his dream, though he'd been too bashful—or *stupid*—to realize it.

When father and daughter reached the foot of the altar, I knelt and straightened her train, fanning it out like a silken wave on a carpeted shore. Glancing up, I was taken by the handsome, graying gentleman's expression. His eyes were both appropriately sad and slightly threatening. The groom nodded solemnly in the silent exchange and shook Mr. Taylor's hand. Once the minister's question had been answered, he kissed his daughter's cheek and whispered, "I love ya, punkin'."

A wistful sigh escaped my lips; my father's chance to give me away

had been stolen by the common habit that had claimed his life. I forced a smile and took my place as leader of the coral brigade.

The Southern Baptist ceremony lasted all of five minutes, flute solo inclusive. The best man produced one ring, and I the other. As I placed the simple band in Mona's quivering hand, my diamond flashed, and she gasped, her eyes turning to saucers. I winced and then glared at Pete before quickly turning away to reclaim the bouquets. After vows were pledged, Jimbo stumbling only once—"until death shall separate us" does not roll off the Southern tongue well—he kissed Mona in a perfectly chaste fashion to the sound of unanimous snuffles. I shoved the bouquet back in her hand, and they tore down the aisle.

Pete stepped forward and offered his elbow. "They were gonna find out soon enough," he murmured through his thousand-watt smile.

"It just didn't need to be today," I hissed back, smiling joyfully. I gripped his arm firmly, and he escorted me down the steps.

After post-game pictures, we descended to the refectory, where Mona and Jimbo were instantly enveloped. Pete swam toward the punch bowl, and about twenty minutes later, after pretty much every woman in the building had loved on him, returned.

"Forget something?" I asked, glancing at his empty hands.

He smirked ruefully. "Be right back."

I rolled my eyes. "No, you won't."

As soon as the rice was thrown, we hopped into Pete's Jeep and raced to the real reception. "I didn't need to wear this thing today," I snapped.

"You're not taking that damn ring off. I know how ya like losin' jewelry."

"This was *her* wedding—*her* moment," I huffed. "I'll have mine later."

He turned to me with a beatific expression. "I can't wait. One day soon, you're gonna be my beautiful bride. But in the meantime, keep

that ring on your finger. Your *left* one!” he ordered, rubbing the bare digit.

The rutted soybean field jostled us as Pete drove towards the reception area. Forming a long runway, pickup trucks, their headlights blazing, had positioned themselves in two rows opposite one another; it was like a twenty-one redneck salute. Pete parked at the head of the line nearest the large plank-board stage festooned with a million twinkling lights. Taking my hand, he led me up the steps, and we sped off in opposite directions.

Like a grossly oversized fairy, I flitted from table to table, lighting tea candles and liberally sprinkling silver glitter and strips of curled ribbon. After fulfilling my decorating committee duties, I sank into a folding chair; a giant pink blossom of satin and scratchy crinoline.

Jimbo and Mona appeared a short time later. Though the locals knew the area so well they couldn't get lost blindfolded, I feared for Mona's parents and the out of town guests. Of course, they couldn't have missed Anita's five-hundred glowing, neon pink signs, the last few reading, *CLOSE, CLOSER, HERE*.

“I don't think I'll eat again for a week,” I said, as Pete twirled me under the illumined canopy, the Christmas lights operated by a somewhat noisy generator. The generous dance floor had been built onsite from a mountain of two-by-fours Mike Herring's *Hatteras Construction* minions had delivered the week before; Pete had suffered only minor injuries during its construction.

“Your toast was beautiful by the way,” I said, nuzzling his cheek. “Even I teared up.” Since my future husband couldn't be more romantic if he tried, I had fully expected to be outdone, but he completely smoked me, and I felt sorry for Mona.

As if my very thoughts had summoned Cinderella herself, a filmy white cumulous cloud skirted the crowd of revelers and grabbed my arm with a terse “scuse me”. She then dragged me down the path leading to a small dock by the river and began jumping up and down like Rumpelstiltskin in a wedding dress. “When exactly were y'all gonna tell me?!”

“Not during the *ceremony!* That’s for sure. This is your special day.”

“Well, this is pretty special, too! I mean, don’t ya think ya ought to have at least told your best friend?”

“Mona, Pete and I are engaged. *Surprise!*” I snarked, waving my hands in the air.

Huffing loudly, she looked me over from top to bottom, all angry kitten, and then flung her arms around me, “I’m so happy!” Her eyes glowed with a warmth only Mona could produce. “Y’all are a match made in heaven—or someplace like that,” she said, giggling. “When did this happen?”

“Wednesday evening. I never saw it coming.” I smiled hugely as my heart burst into song.

“Knowin’ Pete, I bet it was a perfect moment.”

“Unforgettable and rather, um...wet.” I snorted, remembering how we’d almost drowned in Bogue Sound, frantically fighting off an army of feisty crabs to rescue my engagement ring. I’d scrubbed that sucker for nearly an hour to remove all the green goo from the crevices.

Her eyes lit with newfound purpose. “Soon as I get back from my honeymoon, we’re gonna start plannin’ your wedding.”

I glanced back at the stage. “If it’s half as wonderful as this, it will be a dream.” Our first quiet moment since the pre-wedding huddle, I looked at this Southern vision before me. “You have no idea how happy I am for you.”

“Me, too.” Tears welled in her eyes.

“Oh, no you don’t!” I ripped off my sash and dabbed at her eyes. “You are not messing up your make-up.” The distant music morphed into a sappy love song. “Let’s get you back to Jimbo before he calls out a search party.”

Once securely in Pete’s arms again, I stomped on his foot. “That’s for that,” I said, nodding towards the back of Mona’s button-cinched bodice.

He pulled me tightly to his chest. “You can take out all your

frustrations on me when we get home.” His smoldering gaze made my heart skip.

“Oh, I will.” He bent down to kiss me, and I caught his lower lip between my teeth in warning.



Pete wore a dreamy expression as we made our way back to Atlantic Beach. Never letting go of my hand, his thumb rubbed circles over mine as he hummed off-key to the radio. Flying past the narrow highway’s solid wall of pines, the warm breeze swirled through the windows, brushing my skin in the most seductive of ways and drying Pete’s sweat-dampened hair in unkempt waves that I found utterly irresistible.

“The wedding was beautiful,” I said.

“Near perfect.”

“I loved the sendoff.” I pressed my nose into the now wilted bouquet Mona had launched directly at me with the force and surprising accuracy of a professional baseball pitcher.

He chuckled. “She’s got a good arm.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t need it,” I said, smiling at him. “My fate is sealed.”

His grin grew as enormous as the rising moon. “Yeah, it is.”

“I hope our wedding goes as well.”

He brought my fingers to his lips and murmured, “It’ll be even better.”

I thought about Mona and Jimbo. Right now, they were surely making passionate love in the bedroom Pete and I had once shared. I missed that house. It held our memories; the good and the not so good.

I knew Jimbo hadn’t been with many women since his long-ago divorce, and though Mona had had at least one somewhat long-term relationship, she swore it hadn’t been particularly serious. I’d never asked if she was a virgin, but I had a sneaking suspicion she was. This

left me feeling very tender. She had waited so patiently for Jimbo, longed for him for years, and when he hadn't gotten up the nerve to reach out to her, even with Pete's and my meddling, she'd finally stepped in front of him one night and dared him not to love her.

I sighed contently.

As if reading my mind, Pete said, "I can't wait for our wedding night."

"I doubt it'll top the first time we made love." That epic night of passion, the likes of which I had never known, flooded my thoughts, swelling my heart and warming dark places. A private smile spread across my face.

His lips turned up. "I think it will. Back then, you were a free agent. Once we're married, you'll be mine forever. That kind of special only comes once in a lifetime." Meeting my eyes, he kissed each of my fingers.

A warmth as thick and sweet as pure molasses filled me. "You'll be mine forever," I whispered back. And that was far more important.

When he parked in front of his—one day to be *our* lovely house, he helped me from the car and lifted me in his arms. His keys dropped into my lap when he reached the door. "Do the honors, if ya please."

"Carrying me over the threshold before we're married doesn't count."

"We're just practicin' tonight," he said.

As he lugged me up two more flights of soon-to-be-carpeted stairs, his steps echoed off the unpainted drywall.

Once in the substantial master bedroom, I loosened his bow tie and carelessly tossed it on the floor; the little black buttons down his shirt were easy enough to undo. Peeling his tuxedo shirt back over his shoulders, I momentarily trapped his arms in its sleeves and ran my tongue up his sternum and neck, grazing his Adam's apple with my teeth as if it were truly forbidden fruit. He softly moaned and then wriggled from his cufflinks.

By command of a set of fingers made for the task of undressing

women, my bridesmaid's dress obediently slid to the floor. The very image of a giant pink mushroom, I vowed to dump it into the sound at my earliest convenience.

Delicate devotion swaddled us; the desire to touch slowly, to love with a gentle passion. Nuzzling my hair, he slowly planted feathered kisses from my temple to the fragile shell of my ear, and then his parted lips traced my cheek until they reached my mouth. He was giving me a taste of our wedding night to come; the precious and love-filled rediscovery of bodies with which we were already so familiar.

My hands shook with the power of this raw intimacy. Its sweetness overwhelmed me, and I suddenly realized that I wasn't ready for this; the intensity of it. On some level, the pureness of his intentions frightened me, and rebellion shouldered its way to the surface. I leaned into his chest, and without preamble, bit his nipple hard enough to make him yelp. Then I lunged for his neck and bit him there as well, destroying the innocence, chasing it away with unfounded lunacy.

"Oh, that's how it's gonna be, is it? Not very fittin' for a night of wedding bliss."

"You were looking for bliss? You put a ring on the wrong finger, buddy," I said, before latching onto his earlobe and tugging it mercilessly. "Besides, you promised I could take my frustrations out on you when we got home. Prepare thyself!"

I jerked off his belt in one swift move, and he let out a growl that was more animal than human. Dropping to my knees, I smiled up at him. "Guess what I'm going to bite next."

He lifted me up by my elbows and tossed me onto the bed. "Me, first. And you can leave those heels on."

I squealed and slapped at his shoulders as he muscled himself between my clinched knees, wiggling and squirming until his mouth was on me. Finally giving up the fight, I sank into a different kind of bliss.

"I'm glad we don't have neighbors," Pete panted, his heart thundering in time with mine.

Staring down at him, I snorted. "The cops would already be here." Just then, a siren sounded in the distance, and we burst out laughing. "See what I mean?"

He pulled my face to his and kissed me solidly. "I do love you, Susie-Q."

"Back at ya."

After a long moment of sated silence, Pete whispered, "I left that piece of weddin' cake in the car. Want me to go get it?"

"You know, at the rate you're going, when you hit forty, that washboard stomach I love so much is going to turn to mush."

"Not with the calories we burn," he said, winking.



Spread-eagle, I lay in bed, watching the random and ever-changing patterns dance about the ceiling. The sound was turbulent tonight, batting the moon's reflection about like a piñata.

This was heaven, I thought. I was living—mostly, anyway—in a state of joyful peace. I had everything I could ever want in life, though at times, when Pete looked at me a certain way—much the way he had earlier tonight—it made me nervous. How long would this last?

My love for him was the forever kind, and I believed—no, I knew—he felt the same. But a vast world lay before us; a future that, once married, might lead us down a very different path. And what if he tired of me? What if I lost whatever it was that caused that beautiful, stupid smile to spread across his face whenever he saw me. I'd only been back in North Carolina for four short months, and we'd only been engaged a matter of days. I glanced at the shockingly magnificent ring on my finger. What if, one day, I had to give it back? What if I fucked all this perfectness up?

When he returned with the large, sugar coma-inducing slab, he found me curled on my side.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Setting a new speed record, he wrapped me in his protective cage. “Are ya not feelin’ well?”

“I’m...” I sighed mightily. “Will you always love me?”

His chuckle shook the bed. Then he threw his head back on the pillow and laughed without restraint, eventually wiping tears from his eyes. “Will I always love you?” He rolled towards me again and kissed my forehead and then nose. “My love for you would take ten lifetimes to use up—twenty, maybe. I’ll love you for all eternity.”

“What if you don’t? What if, after we’re married, you realize I’m dull and boring?”

He snorted with mirth. “Could never happen. You’re the most fascinating creature I’ve ever met. There’s nothin’ in this world you could do to make me stop lovin’ you.”

“What if I get fat?”

“I’ll have even more of you to love.”

“What if I get old and wrinkled?”

“You’ll still be beautiful.”

I sat up abruptly. “What if I cheat on you?!”

“I’ll kill him, but I’ll still love you.”

“What if you want children someday and I don’t?”

He stopped laughing and ran his fingers up my arm, finally resting his palm on my neck. Quiet for a moment, his eyes sharp and serious, he whispered, “Then we won’t have any.”

“What if I turn into a frog?” I said to lighten the mood.

His smile returned. “Then I’ll bring ya flies. Come here, Susie-Q. What’s got ya troubled?”

“I don’t know. I’m just afraid. Things were perfect, and now...well, now—” I held up my ring, the moonlight gleaming off its many facets—“it’s just gotten really grown-up all of a sudden.”

“Did I move too soon?”

“No.”

He hesitated for a moment, and then asked, “Do ya want to get un-engaged?”

I kissed his chest. “No.”

Visibly relaxing, he said, “I mean this in a serious and very grown-up way. I love you, and I want ya beside me forever.”

“No matter what?”

“No matter what.”

The silence stretched until sleep nearly overtook me.

“Do ya really not want children?” he whispered.

Though the knot in my stomach was movie screen-sized, I willed myself into the very image of sleep, making what I hoped passed for a noncommittal sound. I’d just found the one thing that might drive a wedge between us.

Prehistoric Poop

“Would you like to know what she said?” I ranted, wearing circles into the new carpet.

Pete and I had just returned from a weekend visit to my mother’s house. And unfortunately for her, Mona, still bathed in the golden aura of honeymoon bliss, had returned to a seething me.

She paled. “What?”

“I said, ‘Mom, Pete and I are engaged!’ Here I am all excited and exuberant and glowing, and she looks at me with this terrified expression and asks, ‘Are you pregnant?’ *Pregnant?! Can you believe that shit? Like I would ever get pregnant. Like I would even consider getting married just to cover it up. That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard!*”

In truth, though, I did get it. Her pregnancy had been the catalyst for a long and painful marriage that had siphoned the joy from her being, and eventually planted an acorn of male mistrust in my emotional soil that had grown so wide and sturdy it now fully shaded me.

“Well, maybe she’s just ready to be a grandma. My mamma started droppin’ hints the day we got engaged. Makes me awfully sad.”

“You’ve barely been married two weeks. You don’t actually *want* to be pregnant already, do you?” The concept defied wisdom, but

then I thought, yes, she probably did. She was forged to be a mother, and though it was selfish as hell, my next thought was *who on earth could I ever hire to replace her?* The district could literally not function without her.

“I suppose I wouldn’t mind if it happened. Jimbo’s another story, though.” She sighed helplessly. “I understand his concern and all, but I believe things happen for a reason—even bad things—and we’ll be fine. But—and I don’t wish ill on anyone in the world—maybe there was a reason the Lord took his little boy back so soon.”

According to well-informed sources, Jimbo’s estranged wife had given birth to a son who resembled him in every way. The child hadn’t lived very long due to a congenital heart defect. That kind of trauma could destroy anyone’s life, and it didn’t surprise me in the least that he was terrified to try again.

“Some things defy reason,” I murmured, shivering.

I felt a great pang of sadness, not only for Jimbo, but also for Pete, who had been off fully enjoying college life at the time when that nightmare had occurred. Though he and his cousin couldn’t be tighter if they were identical twins, he hadn’t been unaware of fate’s lightning strike until he received the call everyone in the world dreads. It was the first and only speeding ticket he’d ever received. Though there was no reason to talk about such things, I knew Pete still blamed himself for not being omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent in Jimbo’s life. I believe that event ushered Pete into adulthood sooner than completely necessary.

“Well, when the Lord wants us pregnant, that’s when He’ll make it so,” she said. “And I don’t think either of us’ll have much say in the matter. Now, what did you say to your mamma?”

She sank into one of the cushy office chairs I’d recently purchased. They were a hell of a lot more comfortable than the old straight chair that had seemed cemented just inside my office door. I laid it out for her in full surround sound, and she gasped.

“I’m surprised Polly didn’t wash your mouth out with soap,” she giggled.

“And you know what else?” I continued. “Pete thought it was a perfectly legitimate question. Men!”

Marley Sprite, my secretary, knocked on the door frame. “I’m so sorry to bother you, but when’s a good time for us to go over your calendar?”

Still snorting with mirth, Mona stood. “I’ve got to get back to work. Lunch?”

“Of course. Come on in, Marley.”

Furiously scribbling, she lowered herself into Mona’s vacant seat. “Okay. I just put lunch with Mrs. Skarren on your schedule. You have an opening at noon and another at one-thirty. Which is better for you?”

I smirked. I never thought I’d see the day when I had to schedule lunches with my best friend.

“Noon will be just fine.”

She smiled brilliantly, and I felt the genuine desire to pat her on the head. “Okay, I’ll confirm it with her. Do you need me to make reservations somewhere?”

Since we were eating in the break room, and I was pretty sure they didn’t take reservations, mostly because there was no “they”, I replied, “No, we’ll manage.”

“Now, at two-thirty...”

Marley, a sweet young girl as green as a pine sapling in a mature forest, had recently matriculated from a small community college outside Raleigh. She had been the first to apply for the position and amenable to moving here. In an attempt to compensate for her freshman status, she behaved as professionally as humanly possible, even in the face of Gene’s weekly overtures. He’d even brought her flowers on Administrative Professionals’ Day—a bogus holiday, much like Sweetest Day, which was masterminded by the chocolate, flower, and greeting card industries. *Flippin’ brilliant, I might add.* Not yet twenty-one, I regularly reminded him that she was still technically jailbait, and I regularly reminded her that he was an idiot.



As August melted into September—and I mean that literally—traffic in Eastern North Carolina eased to a trickle. The tourists had fled, and I was about to as well. Nearly packed for Quarterlies, INTech’s return to the mothership presentation-a-thon, I was my usual frantic self, stomping around like a fire-breathing dragon, demanding last minute data, scaring my underlings to death.

“Marley, is Reeves in the office?” I yelled down the hall. I didn’t exactly work on the same level of formality here as I had in my Ohio office.

“I believe he’s over at Hatteras Construction,” she said, scuttling in.

“Again?”

“Karly’s needed a bunch of help lately.” Though her giggle was nearly as sweet—or annoying, depending—as Mona’s, it sounded forced and oddly metallic today.

Mike Heron, owner of Hatteras Construction and father of the lovely fair-haired Karly, would skin him alive if there was something going on between the two of them. With rust-colored hair and dimples as deep as Anita’s, Reeves Crump was a good-looking guy. He was also nearly ten years older than Karly. I shook my head. No, surely he wasn’t that stupid. *Of course, he is a man...*

I’d assigned Reeves an office in the opposite wing of the building. Since it was now his job to browbeat the sales team rather than mine, he needed a decently appointed space. I smiled, thinking what a good decision I’d made promoting him...and in hiring Marley as well.

“You’re *quitting!*!” Marley’s letter of resignation wilted lifelessly as she handed it to me some thirty minutes later. “You’ve barely been here four months. Why are you quitting?”

“I’ve loved it and all, but my boyfriend just got a job in Nashville, and well, Havelock is just too far away. I hear it’s real hard to make long distance relationships last. I’ve really loved workin’ for you, Miss Wade. I think you’re awfully nice.”

If anyone knew about the difficulties—or rather, the impossibilities—of long distance relationships, it was me. “I guess I’m quitin’ INTech, too,” she said, looking down at her feet. “There weren’t any openings in Tennessee, or even in Kentucky, though that’d be a bit of a drive.” She sighed dejectedly. “This was kinda my big break. But I guess you have to make sacrifices for love.”

I glanced out my window at the barren wasteland I now called home. “That you do... Listen, I need you for at least two more weeks. Can you give me that much time?”

“Well, yeah. I could do that. I haven’t started sendin’ out resumes yet. Comsync’s big there. I’m hopin’ they’ll have an opening.”

“No! Marley, you do not want to work for that company. Trust me.” They had treated me, and honestly, everyone I knew, very badly when I’d interviewed with them during my senior year in college. They’d offered me nothing in exchange for a body’s worth of blood. Their reputation hadn’t changed, and quite frankly, I still held a grudge.

It was my turn to sigh; another thing added to my overflowing plate. “Could you contact Reeves? I want to see him once more before I leave.”

“Sure thing, Miss Wade.”

As the vapor trail of her sugary perfume dissipated, I scrolled the pages of the company directory until I found the name I was looking for. “Hi, Chuck! Susan Wade here. You don’t happen to need a really good secretary, do you?”



Budget concerns had never been a problem in Ohio. The district had been well-endowed, and I’d fought hard to keep it so. Not here, however. With North Carolina’s budget as disarranged as its former leadership, I was fairly strapped for cash. With Tom’s impending retirement, and my refusal to take the reins last January, I doubted he’d put forth a whole hell of a lot of effort in fighting for budget

scraps. In fact, as I thought about it, I didn't even recall seeing Tom at that meeting.

Bottom line: after setting aside moneys for Havelock's building renovation and the lease of new office space in Raleigh, little remained, and it was only mid-year. Though savagely underqualified, I'd hired Marley because she was cheap and readily available. Unfortunately, that would have to be my deciding factor once again.

I began typing the job description for HR.

Position: ~~Minion~~ Executive Administrative Assistant

Qualifications: ~~No jail time~~ 1-3 years prior experience

Category rating: ~~Cheap~~ 2-3

Location: ~~Hell's doorstep~~ NC District Headquarters

Reports Directly to: ~~A blithering, but somewhat competent psychopath~~ District Manager

I had expected little from this posting, but I had three resumes in hand before even boarding the plane. I set up interviews in Philly with each and crossed my fingers.

During these five tumultuous and exhausting days, events went amazingly well, exploded into flames, or bored the hell out of everyone. Though I'd lived all three scenarios, I crossed my fingers for latter this time around.

Reeves was presenting for the first time as service rep. We'd practiced for untold hours. Though I'd coached him on public speaking *ad naseum*, I'd been reticent to offer advice about his accent. He wasn't saddled with my linguistic concerns, and frankly, even suggesting he tone down his Southern—if he could even do that—would have added a whole new layer of fear and trepidation.

Unlike Reeves, Perry Hanes, my western regional service rep, was a ten-year veteran who needed little from me. And once again, Mona had used her magic powers (aka pleading on her knees while offering me her world-famous peach cobbler) to get out of presenting. *One day, Missy!*

“Now, behave yourself,” Pete said sternly. “Call me if I need to come up and kill anybody.”

“I’ll call you every single day. And I can do my own killing, thank you very much.”

“That’s my girl. Come back to me,” he said sincerely.

“Always.” I kissed the hell out of him, fighting the urge to drag him back upstairs again, and hopped in my car.

The district was once again a single, functioning unit, and due to our collective blood, sweat, and tears, our numbers were comfortably in the black again, sales-wise, anyway. I shook my head as I walked past Bob Shillings’ office. My life had been forever changed by the outcome of a single basketball game—one I’d never watched; a bet lost by him and won by Tom Ridgeway. For the first and surely only time in my life, I thought, God bless the University of North Carolina.

Packed into a suffocating conference room, I spied my first glimpse of Kirsten when I stepped to the podium. But for the grace of God, I was only forced to see my sworn enemy once every three months—a blessing beyond measure. Before beginning my presentation, I nodded to my district manager colleagues in the rear, most wearing the overly bored expressions of upperclassmen, and then smiled at the attentive, freshman-like service representatives up front. Reeves sat ramrod straight, altogether failing to wear the confident, impassive mask I’d sewn for him.

After returning to my seat, the echo of mild applause fizzled. I tried to look interested as the next victim began speaking. Suddenly, a small piece of paper sailed over my shoulder and landed squarely on my lap. Unfolding it, I snorted.

Want to have dinner tonight? Check yes or no.

I checked *yes* and air-mailed it back.

I’d like to tell you that important, powerful, upper middle managers were a highly sophisticated, highly mannered lot, but it just wasn’t so. Inside, we were the same smack-talking goofballs we’d been as service reps. Of course, the smack wasn’t always the jovial

kind, and the back-stabbing was done using professional-grade steel. Thus was the nature of the job, and the culture fostered by this magnanimous company.

I didn't pay particular attention to Kirsten's speech. I didn't give a rat's ass about what spewed from her thin, reptilian lips, but I did study her. She reminded me, I decided, of an emaciated flamingo: all gangly and bizarre. I ripped a corner from my legal pad and jotted *what time?* before carefully folding it and tossing it behind me. I heard a delighted chuckle. A note sailed back. *7:00 sharp. Meet me by the lobby elevators.*

After break, when it was Reeves' turn to stand on the gallows, I held my breath. He started, stalled, and started again, sweat visibly beading on his forehead. Tripping over his own tongue three times, he finally found his pace and barreled into his—*our*—first slide. I mouthed every word of his talk, including the ums I'd absolutely anticipated. When he finished, his eyes met mine, and I winked. Once his back was to me, I sagged in my seat, fully spent. *Whew, it had been touch and go there for a while.* A pretty brunette to his left whispered something in his ear as the applause died away. *Hmm...*



"I can't believe it," Jeremy said, laughing into his wine glass. "I've been trying to take you to dinner for—what, a couple of years now? And all it took was a note. Why didn't I think of that sooner?"

I smirked. "I have a strong affinity for the immature."

"Look at you." He shook his head. "I think you're more beautiful now than when we first met. There's a glow about you."

"It's called a tan."

"That's not what I mean. You look...I don't know, just really happy." He glanced at my left hand. "And it doesn't take much to guess why." My toothy smile was uncontrollable. "I'm so glad you found your happily ever after. It makes me think, someday, I might as well."

“Oh, please, Jeremy. You will.” Right then, my demon knocked on my door, and of course, I let him right in. “So...how’s Liza?”

A goofy grin, much like the one Pete so often wore, spread across his face. “She’s *great*.” Then he caught himself. “I mean, she’s an excellent employee, and her numbers are fantastic. I couldn’t be more pleased with an, um...employee.”

“I’m glad to hear she’s working out so well. Her presentation was stellar today.” I shook my head, summoning what I hoped was a rueful expression. “I really should have brought her down with me when I moved. You know, I do have an opening in my western region,” I lied, toying with my tuna roll, toying with him. “You wouldn’t be interested in a trade, by chance?” With sincere pleasure, I watched the color literally drain from his face. “When I gave you my old district, you did say you owed me for life.” I raised an eyebrow, keeping my poker face in place.

Less than six months ago, I’d walked away from one of the most lucrative, career-making districts in the company, one of the conditions being Jeremy take my place. Brokering that deal had earned me a lifetime ally.

“I do absolutely owe you. If you want to trade, Mary Albers, my northern rep, would be a much better fit. She’s got seniority over Liza, and honestly, knows her way—”

“No, it’s Liza I want. Our personalities just clicked, you know?” I smiled to myself. The girl was flippin’ terrified of me, and I’d done nothing to assuage her fears. Much to my delight, Jeremy had not come prepared to play cards tonight. “It is transfer time. I’ll have a chat with Bob and see if we can’t come to some sort of an agreement.”

He soundlessly shook his head in a horrified no.

“It’s really the least you can do. A promise is a promise.”

“Susan—”

I burst out laughing. “Jeremy! One, you’re in love with her—don’t deny it. And two, the last thing I’d ever want is to break someone’s heart. And speaking of...my fiancé knows a great jeweler. I’ll forward you the name.”

Pale to pink to normal, his complexion didn't gray, which was a very good thing, nor did he hyperventilate. He was considering it, then. Good. Jeremy was not only one of the more competent managers in the company, he was a downright decent human being. Had Pete and I not gotten back together, I might have convinced myself we could build a relationship. It wouldn't have been fair to him because I would never have stopped loving Pete, but in the name of self-preservation, I certainly could have done worse.

"You are a horrible lady, you know that?"

"Learned from the beast," I said with a snort.

"Speaking of, how long do you think they'll keep her in North Dakota?"

"Until she rots, I hope."



I had scheduled my three secretarial interviews during Wednesday's lunch break. Interview number one went pretty much like this:

Me: "I see from your file that this will be your first transfer. Why are you interested in this particular position?"

Her: "I like the South. I mean, I've never been there before, but from the movies, it seems like the perfect fit. I mean, the passion, you know? Oh, and those poor slaves, like in that Oprah movie, *The Color Purple*? I want to do something to help."

Me, on the verge of hysterics: "Um, slavery was abolished in 1865."

Her, eyeing me dubiously: "Really? That's...are you sure?"

Me, smacking forehead: "How do you feel about living in a small town?"

Her: "Oh, God no! I'm a city-girl through and through"—*smacks on gum*—"a big shopper, and a supporter of the arts. Movies, especially."

Me, rolling eyes: "The nearest actual city is two hours away."

Her, fixing jaw back in place: "I guess I can commute. I take the

train in from Jersey every day. Living in Philadelphia is too expensive...and all the traffic." *Visibly shivers.*

Me, with sneaking suspicion: "You do drive, correct?"

Her: "You mean, like, do I have a license?"

Me: Nodding.

Her: No. I prefer public transportation. Subways, taxis—you know, the usual."

Me, smiling tightly: "Okaay. Where do you see yourself in five years?"

Her: "Oh, married, two kids, house in the burbs." *Fluffs hair that would make Dottie proud.* "You know, I thought you were a man when I applied."

Interview number two was no better:

Me: "Tell me about yourself."

Her: "Well, just so you know up front, I don't type."

Me, coughing: "Excuse me?"

Her: "I have long nails." *Flashes bright red claws.* "Typing chips them. So, I don't type."

Me, *blink blink*: "Have you considered...cutting your nails?"

Her, hostilely raising super-waxed eyebrow: "Do you know how much these things cost?!"

Me, shaking head: "I see you have a four rating. Can you elaborate?"

Her: "My boss didn't like it that I don't type, so he gave me a bad rating. Can you believe that shit?"

Me: No words.

I called Mona as I gulped down a yogurt smoothie. "This is not looking good."

"Have you met all three?"

"I have one more." A solid rap on wood startled me. "Oh crap, she's here. Pray for my soul!"

Disconnecting, I glanced at the clock. *Prompt.* I squared my shoulders, preparing for doom.

"Miss Wade?"

“Yes. Please come in.”

A middle-aged woman in a rather flattering suit met me at the table. “Hi, I’m Jayne Balbach. Jane with a Y.” She firmly shook my hand, her eyes never leaving mine. She was neither smiling nor frowning. In fact, her expression was unreadable. I was intrigued.

Like the first two, I’d only taken a moment to scan the first page of her file. Unlike the first two, her file was substantial. This could mean one of two things: She’d either done a world tour and miserably failed across the company, or I couldn’t afford her.

“So your boss is retiring. Harry seemed like a nice man.”

She smiled blandly. “He was.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but she beat me to it. “I’m sure you’re wondering why a one-rated, twenty-six-year INTech veteran is interested in working for an, excuse my bluntness, inexperienced district manager in a remote area of an unimpressive district.”

“Um, the thought had crossed my mind.”

“Other than simply needing a new position, I do have an ulterior motive in regards to this particular slot.

“Please go on.”

“I’m divorced, my kids are grown, and I’ve always wanted to live at the beach. This is my opportunity.”

“But you could work for anyone in the company—anywhere.”

“I could, and I have. My specific interest in North Carolina is a bit nostalgic, I suppose. I was a military brat. My father was stationed at Cherry Point while I was in grade school. I have fond memories.”

“Well, you’ll be pleased to learn that absolutely nothing has changed.”

She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward in a somewhat intimate manner. “This may sound odd, but for once, I’m thinking with my heart rather than my head.” I couldn’t help but smile. Really, truly smile. But then it faded.

“Jayne, as much as I’d like—*love*—to hire you, my budget is rather limited this year. I really can’t afford someone of your pay grade. That’s why I was rather, well, *flexible* with my requirements.”

She laughed good-naturedly. “I can help with that. I’ve been running executive budgets for over two decades. Believe me, I can be rather creative when it comes to stretching resources.”

“Wait! You’ll run my budget?”

“Of course. Budget, travel arrangements, entertainment needs.”

“Entertainment needs?” *Does she mean hookers?*

She raised a brow slightly and nodded. “You may not recognize some of the names on my resume, but I’ve worked for several executives in the sales division. Golf course reservations, dinners, theater tickets, limos...whatever out-of-town guests require.” *Aka hookers.*

“Oh...” I scanned the names quickly, hoping she hadn’t worked for Ryan. Who knew what kind of “entertainment needs” that man required. Then I saw a truly horrifying name. “Holy crap! You worked for Kirsten Scythe?!” I was appalled and aghast and several other descriptors. I dabbed at my spittle. “What was that even like?”

She chuckled softly. “Challenging. On the best of days.” I stared at her with simple awe. Having endured too many of Kirsten’s rants about her useless and stupid underlings, I knew her secretaries bore the greatest brunt of her wrath. I suddenly felt compelled to throw my arms around Jayne and comfort her.

“I can’t imagine what you went through. I’m so very sorry.”

She laughed lightly. “I’ve worked for worse. Susan, I’m a professional. Over the years, I’ve learned to make the best of any situation.” I was stunned that there were worse people to work for at INTech. Of course, Ryan Vittorio, my ex-lover, was a prime example.

After a moment, she said, “Well?”

What else could I say? “When are you available to start?”

We settled on the particulars, and after she left, I sat back in my chair and smiled. I was finally getting the chance to help someone with her own dream.



Deserving or not, fate had smiled warmly upon me in the last year, affording me a dream promotion, giving me back the one man in the universe who loved me entirely, and sending my sworn enemy to purgatory—its northern territories. Fate's eternal mate, Karma, had taken over this afternoon, and I watched with awe and wonder as it doled out a beautiful portion of *life's a bitch* from the metric ton Kirsten had furtively earned.

While reaching across the conference room table's faux wood expanse to snag a pen from the pile, accidentally knocked over my coffee cup. As I dabbed at the spill with a flimsy napkin, I heard a loud feminine gasp. Embarrassed, I shot her a cold look, only to realize her response wasn't aimed at my klutz maneuver, but rather something far more insufferable.

"Problem?" Frank Calvin asked, spearing her with an icy glare. Effortlessly handsome, the Ying to Bob's senior vice president Yang was one of the more ruthless great whites you'd ever hope not to swim past. By publically—and privately—humiliating Frank when she'd played him for a promotion nearly a decade ago, Kirsten had put herself right in his line of sight. That stunt had cost Frank a marriage and a very large loss of face. His ultimate dream was realized last year when lightning struck like fire from the heavens, and Kirsten was transferred to a district under his domain. It was one of the most beautifully chilling maneuvers I'd ever witnessed. I could only imagine what her once glamorous lifestyle was like now.

Apparently unable to answer, Kirsten had suddenly lapsed into full-on apoplexy, her bulging eyes glued to my shimmering hunk of prehistoric dinosaur poop. As her mouth worked silently, I slowly pushed a stray hair to the side with my left hand, raised my eyebrow, and slapped on one very satisfied smirk.

"Kirsten," Frank barked. "Is there a problem?"

She shut her gaping jaw then defiantly looked at him and shook her head no.

"Excellent." His lips curled lovingly—lovingly, as in *I'm looking*

lovingly at the piece of bloody steak I'm about to bite into—and then said, “Please continue.”

While she rambled through her unimpressive report, I stole a glance at Frank. He caught my eye and winked. We were co-conspirators; on the same side of a not so cold war.

Thursday's organizational meeting was everything I had hoped it would be: boring. District movement was minimal; another DM lost to an overseas assignment. As INTech expanded in emerging markets, spaces abroad were becoming easier to get, and taking one for the company by transferring to Singapore was a quick and easy way to slingshot yourself into upper management. On my own, I might have considered the maneuver, but not with a future husband whose company—*and home*—meant so much to him.

I Said Goodbye

While Pete no longer “worked”—*snort*—at the Rusty Frog, we met Mona and Jimbo there most Friday nights. In all honesty, other than hanging out at this local watering hole, there really wasn’t a whole lot to do in this fairly uninhabited place, especially during off-season.

I walked into the bar at the stroke of midnight. Only showing my face at the quarterlies wrap-up party, I’d hopped on an evening flight home and made the two-hour drive from Raleigh just in time to slow dance with my handsome fiancé. The sight of him caught my breath, as it always did after I’d been away. I smiled as he innocently danced with a woman who had become a friend.

Tossing my purse into Mona’s booth, I walked across the taped off dance floor and tapped her shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?”

Ginger threw her head back and laughed. “I’m so glad you’re home. He’s a big ol’ pain in the ass when you’re gone.” I took the place of my occasional hairdresser, and she wandered back to her husband, Bobby, who was battling Buddy Williams in a card game.

As the elastic band which had stretched all the way to Philadelphia snapped back in place, Pete crushed me against his body and kissed me so deeply I nearly swooned. “I’ve missed you like the very air,” he whispered once our lips parted.

“It feels good to breathe again,” I said, closing my eyes and

inhaling him. I touched his smoothly shaven face and then nestled into his shoulder. Holding him this way, our bodies pressed against one another as if a single unit, was the greatest kind of pleasure. We swayed in silence for the next two songs.

Eventually, he led me back to the table, and we snuggled into a space made for one. An unspoken rule, this booth had been Mona's since well before I'd ever darkened the Rusty Frog's doors, and it would forevermore be hers in a clear and official sense. Jimbo had erected a roughly carved plaque on the dingy wall above it which read: *Don't even bother sitting here.* It was a Vic Jr. original. "Hey, Mona, guess who's presenting her own report at next Quarterlies?"

She shook her head, the tips of her bob brushing her jaw. "Unh uh."

"Uh *huh!* I need to shop for a wedding gown and I'm not doing it alone. The bylaws of the friendship act of eighteen-eighty-one clearly state that matrons of honor must accompany brides-to-be in all unpleasant, yet necessary excursions. Don't worry, I'll protect you from the corporate ruffraff. We'll buy shoes, get our nails done...it'll be fun. Plus, it's an order."

She shot me a sulking glare, but then her eyes lit with mischief. "Speakin' of ruffraff, who'd ya see?"

"The usual offenders, only this time I was wearing my weapon of mass destruction." Mona gave me a confused look, so I held up my ring. "You can't imagine what the sight of a diamond will do to some people." Ryan's expression had been nearly as cosmically perfect as Kirsten's.

Pete wrapped his arm around my waist and kissed the back of my head. "I look at it as an insurance policy. Men see it, men stay away. Simple as that."

"Plus, Kirsten nearly choked in the middle of a presentation, which was an added bonus."

"I wish I could've seen that," Mona said, grinning riotously.

"Oh, and I think you're going to like the new secretary. She's rather amazing."



Last fall, Jimbo had hired a bartender to replace Pete when he'd sort of checked out. Hunter was his name—first name. In the South, your first name might have been your grandparents' surname, or that of some Confederate military figure, or quite possibly derived from your daddy's favorite coon hound. In his case, having actually met his father, I feared it was the latter.

To an eager kid, who'd recently earned a communications degree from Craven Community College but had no idea what to do with his life, serving beer seemed as good a job as any. So, for the foreseeable future, Jimbo had more help than he needed. And in my opinion, Pete had never been all that useful anyway.

"Hey, Miss Susan," Hunter said, a huge smile painting his face as I stepped to the bar.

"Hi, Hunter. What's going on in your world?"

"I am glad you asked. Don't move."

Odd, but honestly, no odder than the rest of this lot. While waiting, I assessed his backside objectively. Wide shoulders, long muscular legs, fairly perfect ass like his cousins', his mop of hair, the color of a ripe pecan, and that unstoppable carefree spirit owned by so many in the Walsh-Skarren line made him nearly irresistible to the female patrons. Pricilla's younger brother lacked her self-possession, but the piercing blue eyes they shared, and the unstoppable beauty that graced their features left no doubt they were siblings. And, according to the latest restroom graffiti exit polls, he'd fully replaced Pete as the bar's official eye candy, which was just fine with me.

Turning with a proud smile, he handed me an honest to goodness martini glass, filled with something pinkish.

"Where'd you steal the glass?"

"Turns out, Walmart sells 'em. I bought it for you, um...special." His cheeks flushed a pale rose. I'd had a sneaking suspicion Hunter

had a crush on me, and this confirmed it. “Tell me what it needs,” he said anxiously.

I took a sip and promptly choked. “Less vermouth. *Way* less.”

His eyebrows scrunched. “I was afraid of that. Let me try again.” Amused by his determination, I glanced over my shoulder. He reminded me of someone else—someone who’d been so driven to win me over, he’d used every trick in his professional handbook. *A more arrogant, gregarious, and wickedly flirtatious someone.* Pete’s laughter exploded from the booth, and I smiled, thinking of the first months of our non-relationship, of how I’d wanted to kill him, of how I’d eventually realized I couldn’t live without him.

Hunter’s tall form was hunched over a book, a martini shaker held tightly in his hand. He nodded to himself and reached for the bottle of vodka again. After a moment of apparently holding his breath, he turned with a hopeful expression.

I sipped tentatively, and then, after letting him sweat for a moment, smiled broadly. “Not bad.”

You’d have thought he’d won the lottery, because he whooped so loudly half the crowd turned to stare. “I’ve enrolled in bartending school—*online*,” he announced. “I have to do ten hours of coursework and master thirty-two exotic drinks before I can earn my certificate. I was hopin’ you might be my guinea pig.”

“Why me?”

“Well,” he said, lowering his voice, “ya drink a lot.” I narrowed my eyes and he held up his hands. “No offense meant! What I mean is, you get around.” I crossed my arms and raised an eyebrow. “No, no. What I’m tryin’ to say is ya have good taste. You’ve been to fancy places and you’re, um...experienced.” At this point, I wasn’t sure if he was commenting on my palate or my sexuality. He smacked his forehead, and I walked away, chuckling.

“So, that’s a yes?” he yelled after me.



Sunday morning, I awoke to roses and breakfast in bed. “What’s this?” I asked, kissing the most delicious lips in the world.

“I’m trying to erase the memory of last year. This may be my least favorite date: the day you came home and told me you were leavin’.”

“I’ll never leave you again.”

“You’re puttin’ that in your vows.”

Jayne was set to arrive the following Friday. I’d offered her my little cottage, since I really didn’t need it anymore, and she’d gladly accepted. Still sated from our morning workout, I was busy answering emails at the breakfast island when I realized my cottage furniture and larger belongings needed to be removed.

“Hey, Pete, you want a roommate?”

“No,” he replied absently.

I bristled. “What do you mean *no*?”

“No, I don’t want a roommate.” Stretched out in his less than attractive recliner, he flipped the channel to yet another football game. He’d been doing that for the last hour, back and forth, back and forth. “Oh, Mona asked us over for dinner tonight. I told her yes.” Then he yawned. “Wake me up if I doze off.”

“The cottage was necessary while the house was still under construction, but don’t you think it’s rather ridiculous paying rent for a place I never use?”

Suddenly, he turned. “Are you suggestin’ we live in *sin*?” He honestly looked aghast.

“We’re engaged, aren’t we?”

“Engaged and married are two different things.” For a moment, I assumed he was kidding, but then he clicked off the television and gave me his full attention. “Here’s the deal: we live in a small community filled with my relatives. If we officially move in together, people are gonna talk.”

“So?”

“So, I don’t want your reputation damaged any more than it already is.”

“You’re joking, right?”

He shook his head no, and I was momentarily rendered speechless.

“Look, most of my things are already here. My closet’s full of clothes, and I haven’t slept in that cottage once in the last two months, and rarely before that. Why are you suddenly so concerned about my reputation?”

“You’re an important businesswoman. Your reputation is all you’ve got. Don’t you think this kind of scandal will be a blow to business?”

“*Scandal?! Are you high?* I work for a multinational corporation. Nobody gives a royal crap about my personal life. And as far as this ‘small community’ is concerned, half the people here already hate me. What is *wrong* with you?”

He shook his head as if scolding a child. “What about your mother? I think it’d upset her to learn we’ve moved in together.” My jaw literally dropped. Bringing my mother into the conversation was inexcusable, and like pulling the pin from a grenade, my temper went live.

“Fine.” I stomped up the stairs, marched into my—please note, my—closet, and began tossing belongings on the bed. Though silent as a cat, I knew he’d entered the room. “I tell you what,” I hissed, ripping blouses off their hangers and dropping them unceremoniously into an empty laundry basket. “If you’re so concerned about appearances, then I’ll just move back into my place, and you can ‘come calling’ there. How’s that?” I yanked open the dresser drawers and showered my blouses with lacy underwear and silk stockings. “We’ll sit on the porch swing, and one of your elderly relatives can supervise our visits. Hmm? That sound old-fashioned enough for you?”

“That’d please Great Aunt Irma, I imagine.”

“I’m sure it would. In fact, why don’t you bring her down next Sunday afternoon, and I’ll cook fried chicken and collard greens? Excuse me,” I said, brushing by him to retrieve my toiletries.

Past the idiocy of it all, what particularly irked me was that Pete

was in no way trying to coerce me into staying. He didn't even seem to care that I was angry. Let me just say, if there was ever a relationship red flag, this was it. And at that moment, I realized I was actually too mad to even feel the burning hurt of what amounted to serious rejection. And this coming on the first anniversary of what he claimed to be *my* ultimate rejection.

I wheeled out my largest piece of luggage and pelted the interior with my extraordinary collection of shoes and purses. Glancing over my shoulder, I found him casually leaning against the wall by the door, arms and ankles crossed in a relaxed fashion.

"And that means no sex, either, buddy. We don't want people to talk!"

After stuffing my workout clothes into the outside pockets, I zipped up my suitcase and glared at him as I passed by his completely unhelpful self. As I dragged it down the stairs, the wheels skipped in hopscotch fashion from one step to the next. Jerking on the handle, I pulled it across the smooth cement driveway and popped open my trunk, shoving it inside with great force. I then marched back upstairs to retrieve the laundry basket.

Pete was no longer in the bedroom. In fact, I had no idea to which part of *our* generous house he'd disappeared.

"And I'm taking my lamp back!" I shouted, ripping the cord from the socket and balancing it precariously on top of my undergarments.

Finally ready to go, I went in search of my purse—the one housing my cottage keys and driver's license. I flew from room to room; it was nowhere to be found.

"Pete, where's my damned purse?"

He had now resumed his earlier armchair-quarterback position in the great room and was flipping through stations as if my moving out was no big deal to him. "Did ya look on the island?" he answered. "That's where you normally put it."

"Of course, I did."

"What about the table in the hall?"

"What did you do with my purse, Pete?"

“Susie-Q, the game’s on.”

“*Seriously?! I’m moving out, and all you’re concerned about is a stupid football game?*”

“The Steelers are playing.”

“So?”

“Against the *Ravens...?*”

“You don’t care about either team. You don’t even like the Steelers!” This, too, was a point of contention between us, since Pittsburgh had once been an important part of my service region, and becoming a Steelers fan had basically been a job requirement. The broadcast went to commercial, and he flipped to the Seahawks game.

I cast my eyes to heaven, and there it was like a ray of black leather sunshine. My purse, precariously balancing on one of the ceiling fan blades, dangled lifelessly as it made a hampered circuit. “Juvenile!” I spat.

Since I was vertically challenged, I marched down to the foot of the stairs and retrieved the step-ladder from the utility closet. Echoing off the stairwell walls, the sportscaster’s voice rang out, “And the field goal is good! Green Bay now leads by seven.”

“Oh, and by the way,” I shouted up to him, “we have the picture-in-picture feature on the fucking TV. Just click the damned remote button and you can watch five flippin’ games at once!”

When I returned, slightly winded, Pete had disappeared again. Muttering mean things to myself, I climbed the ladder and rescued my purse, nearly launching myself over the couch in the process. Flying downstairs again, I yelled out, “Goodbye, asshole!”

No retort.

“I said ‘goodbye!’”

Still nothing.

“Fine,” I grumbled, slamming the front door behind me. I looked up to find Myrtle, Pete’s prehistoric pickup truck, parked about six inches from my car’s bumper. And, leaning against it, one Pete Walsh wearing a smart-assed smile on his face.

“Move that ugly-assed piece of shit!”

“Nope.”

“Um, yep.”

“You’re leavin’ me again?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

“Is this gonna be our September ritual?”

“I’m not marrying a psychopath. Now move!”

He cocked an eyebrow. “You’re breakin’ up with me, too?”

“I’m considering it.”

“That’s a little extreme, don’t ya think?” His eyes glowed with anticipation.

“Move. The. Truck,” I seethed.

“No.” He crooked his finger, and I stomped around to the back of Myrtle. Less than a foot from him now, I could smell his delicious aroma. Refusing to be distracted, I crossed my arms and glowered. He inclined his head towards the bed. Rendered speechless for the second time in an hour, I realized it was filled to capacity with flattened cardboard boxes.

“Where did you get these?”

“I saved ’em.” His eyes twinkled. “I’ve been wantin’ you to move in with me since the moment you came back.”

“Then why didn’t you just ask?”

“I was waitin’ for the right moment.”

“Well, that ship just sailed.”

Pete popped open my trunk and retrieved my suitcase. Then he climbed into the back seat to get my clothes.

“Stop. I’m seriously moving out.”

“You’re seriously *not* movin’ out. In fact, Jimbo and Mona are meetin’ us at the cottage to help pack up.”

I whipped out my phone and pressed Mona’s contact picture.

“Hey Susan!” she chirped. “I’m just takin’ the cobbler out of the oven. Jimbo and I will meet ya over there in about a half-hour.”

“Don’t bother. I’m not moving in with Pete.”

“You’re not? You said no when he asked you? I mean, I know I

wouldn't let Jimbo move in with me 'til after the weddin', but, well, you and I have different, um...values."

My jaw dropped. "Are you calling me a *whore*?"

"Gosh, Susan! How could you ever think that? I just meant—wait, y'all are still comin' over for dinner, right?" She then dropped her voice. "If y'all are fightin', we'll understand, 'course."

"You people are freaks! You're all freaks—every single one of you." I killed the call and narrowed my eyes at Pete. "You were going to *ask* me?"

He nodded.

"When exactly was this going to take place?"

"This morning, but I got distracted. I thought it would maybe erase this..." he frowned deeply and looked at his feet, "anniversary."

"Why does everything have to be theater with you?"

Meeting my eyes, he smiled broadly. "Cause one of my favorite things in this world is watchin' you throw a fit."

He removed a small box from his pocket and placed it in my hand. Untying the bow, I lifted the lid. "A keychain?" It was a little plastic surfboard—the tacky, souvenir sort. He'd even managed to find one with my name on it. The keys dangling from it were to the front and side doors.

His expression suddenly—*weirdly*—became an odd mixture of hope and sincerity. "Live with me," he said simply.

Still quite ruffled, I didn't respond right away.

His gaze intensified. "I want ya to move in. Move into our house, formally."

"What about my reputation?" I sneered.

"Sweetheart, your reputation couldn't be any more tarnished if ya rubbed it in coal dust." I snorted. "But truly, I can't bear knowin' you could easily pack up leave, anytime." He glanced helplessly at my suitcase. "I want ya in a way I can't explain."

Well, that did it. I launched myself into his arms. "You're an ass."

"Is that a yes?"

“Well, I promised the cottage to my new secretary, so if I say no, I’ll be homeless as of next weekend.”

Taking my face in his hands, he whispered, “I love you so much.” Then he kissed me very deeply.

Slightly panting, I stepped back and said, “It’s quite possible I’m still mad at you.”

“I can live with that.”

4

Lighthouse

I met Jayne on the steps of the cottage. “How was your trip?”

“Wonderful. I drove the scenic coastal routes, cut through the Outer Banks, and took the ferry from Ocracoke. I’d forgotten just how beautiful this part of the country is.”

“It is that. Well, here are the keys. I’m so glad you decided to rent the place. It was a brief refuge when I moved back. It’s small, but hopefully, it will suit you until you find something more permanent. The neighbors are very nice, if not overly friendly.”

I chuckled, remembering the weekend Pete had moved me in and the three pies that had arrived shortly thereafter. “After living in Philly, this will be a big change. I mean, you can actually hear the birds,” I said, shaking my head at the squawking gull overhead. “If you’d like, I can give you a tour.”

“Sure,” she said, her eyes sweeping the porch’s blue wainscot ceiling and then its plank floor.

“You can see the water from here and from the bedroom window upstairs. I realize the town is tiny, but it’s charming—sort of, and really quite safe. I think our crime rate is actually zero.”

She glanced at the pink crepe myrtle shrub, blooming abundantly as if in proud welcome. “I know I’m going to be happy here.”

I’d opened the windows to air out the rooms, vacuumed, and even

replaced the dead ferns in the hanging pots. Evening was rapidly approaching, and the sun had begun bleeding through the billowing gossamer curtains, making them glow.

"I love those," she remarked, stepping into the living room, such as it was.

"You're welcome to keep them. They actually came with the house, and I thought they were too romantic to replace." I couldn't believe I'd just said that. I didn't even know this woman, but in truth, I wanted her to love it here. If her heart's desire was to live at the coast, then I wanted it realized.

"The breeze is wonderful."

"Isn't it? Especially this time of year." Surprisingly, I was feeling a touch sentimental. While I wasn't here all that often, this tiny space had meant something to me. I showed her my old bedroom, the bath, the kitchen, and the tiny backyard, finally ending up at the little iron fence.

"There's a good local restaurant in Morehead City called Sanitary Fish Market. You probably passed it on your way here. The name's rather odd, but it's got a nice selection of fresh, local seafood. Oh, and there's a bottle of wine in the fridge for you." I stuck out my hand, and we shook. "Drink to your new life."

"My new life," she mused.

"Nice car, by the way," I said, before climbing into my little Audi.

She ran her hand over the ragtop of her 700 series convertible BMW. "I just bought it."

"Really?" That would put a crater in anyone's bank account.

As if reading my mind, she explained, "I've been saving for a new car for some time."

I sighed. "I used to own a Beemer. I loved that car." Then I shivered at the thought of how we'd parted. "Well, I'll see you Monday."



“Jayne Balbach. Jayne with a y,” she added as she shook Mona’s hand.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Mona Skarren. Mona’s spelled the usual way, I s’pose.”

“Mrs. Skarren is our district acquisitions supervisor. She knows *everything*, so don’t hesitate to ask her,” I interjected.

“I will. Thanks.” She smiled warmly at Mona.

“Jayne, in this building, I’m somewhat informal. Occasionally, I’ll yell to you rather than use the intercom. Just a heads-up.”

“She yells a lot,” Mona said, giggling.

“Also, I get my own coffee.”

She nodded. “As you wish.”

Mona touched her elbow. “Come on, I’ll show ya around and introduce ya to everyone.” I hid my smile, knowing Jayne would be shown every single square inch of the building.

“Well, she seems nice,” Mona said, during our private coffee time later that day. I hadn’t yelled even once today, and was quite proud of myself for it. “She’s settled right in like she’s been workin’ here for years.”

“And competent. You should see her file,” I remarked.

Mona tilted her head to one side doing her best bird imitation. “Do ya think we ought to take her over to the Frog after work, so she can meet everybody?”

“Absolutely. But let’s warn her first. My introduction was rather a shock.” I smiled, remembering my distrust of Mona at the time, and the absolute hole the Frog was—still was. Then of meeting Pete for the first time. My smile grew wider. *It was a night that would forever change my life.*



Some say there’s such a thing as love at first sight; a zing, a rush of uncontrollable feelings, the ground moving beneath your feet. Pete swears it was that way for him, except for the ground moving part,

which he explained away as the result of me stomping my foot. I'd always assumed the myth was really just a load of romantic crap men thought women wanted to hear, but less than twenty minutes ago, the legend had manifested itself before my very eyes.

Mona and I had escorted Jayne to the corner card table and introduced her to the regulars. I had pre-warned her, as Mona had me the first time I'd met Billy, Vic Jr., and the rest, that she might feel a little overwhelmed. As was their custom, they immediately stood, snatched off their military ball caps, shook her hand politely, and then stated their name, rank, and serial number. And that's when it happened; the touch of skin, the eye contact. It was almost as though lightning had struck Joe Pat.

Absently smoothing back his hair several times, his jaw worked to form words that weren't coming. Even more amusing was the fact that he simply couldn't tear his eyes away from her...or let go of her hand.

"Um, Joe?" I said.

He shook his head as if to clear it, and then slapped on a mildly bewildered grin. "Awfully nice to meet you, Miss Jayne. I'm Joe Pat. I work over at the base."

"Cherry Point?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"My father was stationed there when I was young."

"Is that so? Well, if you'd like, I can sure arrange a tour."

Her face lit. "I'd like that very much."

A huge grin swept across his stubble-roughened landscape. "If you'll give me your phone number, I'll call ya to set one up." *Slick.*

After a full-blown Spanish Inquisition, one in which Joe Pat's amorous stare never wavered, Jayne pulled a cigarette from her purse. "Could someone pass me an ashtray?"

Snickering, I said, "Jayne, though most things here may never change, a few have. This is, in fact, a nonsmoking bar, but you're welcome to go on the front porch or the back deck."

"I'll show you the way," Joe said, standing so quickly his chair fell over.

"That would be great, Joe. Nice meeting you all," Jayne said pleasantly. Her eyes found Joe's again, and a secret smile crept across her lips. He fished out his lighter and escorted her towards the back. While holding the door, his eyes swept over her backside, and he smiled slyly.

"Holy shit! Did y'all see that?" Buddy Williams exclaimed.

"Never seen anythin' like it in my whole life," Billy added.

"I heard tell of black magic, but I never believed it," Vic Jr. added. I snorted. "I'm with you, Vic."

Mona and I returned to her booth. "That was awful nice of Joe to show her around the place," she said, innocent as the lamb she was.

"Very gentlemanly," I replied, scooting in beside her. I glanced at Jimbo, who was trying very hard not to laugh as he stacked glasses.



Having just returned from a whirlwind tour of my district that included stops in Charlotte, where my western district office now lay; Greensboro, to sign off on a rather impressive contract with Federal Express; and the most taxing destination of all, Winston-Salem, for an overnight stay with my mother; I was damn tired. Late afternoon Saturday, I crossed the bridge to Atlantic Beach, smiling as I glimpsed the tip of the miniature lighthouse.

I'll never forget the first time I saw it...

It had been one week after my triumphant return to Havelock. Pete and I had spent the entire morning making love. After so much time apart, we could barely last minutes without simply touching one another. And touching always led to...other things.

I hadn't even asked where we were going when Pete navigated Bessie out of the marina, mostly because I didn't care. I was with Pete; nothing else mattered.

We'd headed east on the Intercoastal Waterway, and then skirted

Morehead City to Bogue Sound. Crossing under the big bridge, the water had glimmered as if covered in gold. As we raced down the shoreline, I noticed a bizarre-looking silo structure that had certainly not been there last year.

“What the heck is that?” I’d asked, pointing.

He’d smiled hugely. “Let’s check it out.” Steering into a cove that looked similar to his own, he tied the boat to a sturdy pylon then helped me onto the very impressive dock.

“Whoa! This is awesome. Did you design it?” I asked, looking at the mammoth wooden skeleton.

“Uh huh.” He’d kissed my cheek and then guided me between several huge stacks of lumber, around mounds of building supplies, and away from mud puddles left over from last night’s rainstorm.

“Is the customer local?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” he said, smiling even wider. “Want me to tell ya what it’s gonna look like?”

“Please.”

We slowly wandered around the exterior. “It’ll have tiered decks on the first and second stories that’ll wrap all the way around the house. You’ll—I mean, the customer will have perfect views of the sunrise and sunset.”

“Nice.”

“A large living room, complete with a functioning fireplace, will take up the whole west side of the first floor. C’mon, I’ll show you.” The house mounted on a staggering number of super-high stilts, we climbed the exterior stairs, passed through a framed box I assumed would eventually be the front door, and then up a second flight. The smell of fresh wood and sawdust was heavy in the air. “There’ll be twelve-foot ceilings throughout the entire structure. The dining room will overlook the sound, and you can’t even begin to imagine the kitchen,” he said, his eyes lighting incandescently. “We’re havin’ slabs of granite shipped up from Brazil for the island and countertops. Here, I’ll show you pictures.” He pulled out his phone

and flipped through them as excitedly as a kid who'd discovered a pirate's treasure.

With splashes of copper spilling over a kaleidoscope of multicolored veins, and what appeared to be a swirling white cyclone tearing down each slab's center, I'd never seen their like. "The owner must be spending a shitload."

"Well, since he knows the couple, Mike's helping ease the pain a bit."

"Oh, so they're from New Bern."

"Originally, yeah—he is." He took my hand, and we wandered the footprint. He pointed out some structural features I didn't quite understand, but really didn't care to. I just nodded and smiled as his excitement mounted. "Now let's go to the second floor."

We crossed a huge area. "This will be the master bedroom. Floor to ceiling windows on three sides. No way they could miss a sunset from in here." After showing me the enormous master bath area, and what would surely be the largest set of closets in history, I followed him to the other end of the level, where three more bedrooms were framed out. After a brief explanation, we stopped at the foot of another flight of stairs. He lifted his chin. "Best part. Ya ready?"

I nodded, latching onto his excitement. He gestured for me to lead the way. Emerging onto a large hexagonal platform level with the roof's sharp peaks, I simply gasped. The vista was awe-inspiring. To one side, over the expanse of emerald bushes and scrub, I could see the beautiful blue-green ocean, and on the other, the sound.

"It's a lighthouse. Ya like it?" he asked, wrapping his arms around my waist and kissing the top of my head. I leaned back against his strong chest, thinking he should have designed this house for himself. He should command such a view.

"It's magnificent."

"It's yours," he murmured.

"What?"

"I built it for you."

"I don't understand."

“See, I decided I’d sit out here in the evenings, keeping watch...hopin’ that one day you’d see it and find your way back to me.”

“This is *your* house?” I croaked as tears welled.

He nodded and lifted my chin to meet his eyes. Then taking my hand, he pressed my palm against his chest. “You are my heart’s lighthouse. You always will be.”



Pete met me in the driveway of the now nearly completed home, holding two bottles of champagne.

“Are we having a party?” I asked.

“A celebration.” His smile was huge, and though I had no idea why, I found it thoroughly infectious.

“Alright, I’ll play.”

After a huge *welcome home* kiss, he said, “Follow me.”

It was hard to say no to someone whose backside was so utterly delectable, harder still to deny his twinkling eyes anything.

We stopped in front of the sound-facing façade. “Ta da!” he announced, spreading his arms wide.

“What am I looking at?” I asked.

“You, my darlin’ love, are lookin’ at our completely finished home.”

“They installed the carpet?”

“Yep.”

“Fixed the shower?”

“Uh huh.”

“Finished hanging the light fixtures?” He nodded. “Painted the kitchen and hallway?”

“Yes, ma’am. You won’t even recognize the place. I even planted this tree to mark the day,” he said, nodding at a rather impressive palm.

“Yippee!” I squealed, jumping up and down like a little kid. I then

threw my arms around his neck and then kissed him like a big one. “Pop the cork.”

“One last order of business first.” He handed a bottle to me. It hadn’t been chilled, and when I read the label, I noted it was cheap—like, Food Lion cheap.

“Ew. We don’t have to actually drink this, do we?”

He snorted. “That one’s for the house christening.”

“Isn’t that only for boats? Wait! You’re not going to name the house are you?”

He grinned madly. “I was thinkin’, *the Susie-Q II*.”

“No.”

“All the houses down here have names. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Yes, but those are rental properties. This is a private home.”

“Tradition’s tradition. Break the bottle.”

I felt a little silly hitting our house with a bottle of booze, but when in the South... Mentally shrugging, I walked over to the left corner. “Is this okay?”

Nodding, he urged me on. I tapped it against the wood. Nothing happened. I looked back at him.

“Sorry to break it to ya, sweetheart, but you’re not all that strong. Go ahead and give it a good whack. It’s not like you’re gonna hurt anything.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, took up a Major League Baseball stance, and swung the bottle with all my might. Glass shards flew out in all directions, foaming liquid exploded into the air, and several gray chunks of unidentifiable debris hit the ground with a thwack.

He took a few steps towards me, picked up a piece of debris, and analyzed it. Then he looked at me, his expression suffused with astonishment. “Damn, *Susie-Q*, ya broke the house!”

I covered my mouth with my hands because, sure enough, the latticework had a bottle-sized hole in it, and there was an impressive dent in a newly exposed flooding stilt. Pete and I analyzed the situation. He stuck his hand in the hole and pulled out the remaining

pieces precariously hanging there. Then he raised a brow. “Bad week?”

“Mom?” I squeaked. But then I straightened up and poked him in the chest. “Plus, I might be a little stronger than you think.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

The Flamingo

Little Miss Propriety in her little pink bikini squealed as Jimbo threatened to dunk her in Bogue Sound. The transformation he'd undergone still amazed me, and I continued having trouble reconciling the stoic, sometimes sullen man I'd known nearly as long as Pete with this smiling, even laughing creature.

Leaning back in his captain's chair, beer in hand, Pete propped his brown legs on the nearby bench and met my eyes. From somewhere near the stern, Mona screamed out an indignant "*Jimbo!*", and we both grinned.

A year ago, those two barely had the courage to touch elbows, and now... I sighed happily.

Pete pulled me onto his lap. "I did good," he said haughtily.

"You failed epically," I scoffed.

"Not from where I'm sittin'." After running his thumb down my cheekbone, he took my face in his hands and kissed me deeply. He tasted of beer, salt water, and a healthy dash of Pete—one very delicious combination. When he pulled back, his eyes smoldered with the certain promise of an evening bonfire, and my insides melted solely from the thought. "I got exactly what I wanted out of the deal."

Smiling, I bit my lip. "Me, too."

“So, ya wanna run off and get married?”

“I’m thinking Elvis in Vegas.”

He waggled his eyebrows. “You read my mind.”

The thing was: we were still ironing out details. He’d alluded to a big wedding with several thousand of his closest friends and relatives. I was of the *on the beach with our very dearest* mindset. My mother wanted it held in my hometown—*when I could skate on hell’s surface!*—and Mona had suggested Havelock, where Pete and I first met. In fact, pretty much everyone I knew had offered me their unsolicited opinion.

Though he’d never mentioned location, I knew his true heart’s desire: to be married in the church in which he’d grown up: the one in which his parents had said their vows: the one in which their funerals had been held. I planned to give him exactly that, but take a chunk out of everyone else in the process. I just hadn’t figured out how.

“What about while skydiving?” I offered. “I hear you can do that.”

“Hmm,” he murmured, brushing his lips from temple to ear. “If memory serves me correctly, you’re not a near-death-experience kind of girl.”

“A destination wedding in the Caribbean? White sand, blue sea?”

“Mm hm.” His nose skimmed my jawline, and then his tongue began a slow, slithering trip down my neck. When his fingers lightly traced the skin beneath my bikini bottom, heading for the Promised Land, I gasped. This could end in one of several ways, however, the only scenario I could visualize at the moment was me straddling him on deck.

Mona giggled, reminding me we were very much not alone. “Then it’s settled,” I said, grabbing Pete’s head and kissed him quickly. I leaned over the railing. “Hey Mona,” I yelled, “we’re having a destination wedding!”

Suddenly, I was the one in the water, squealing.

First thing Monday morning, I called Centenary Methodist Church in New Bern.

“Hello?” an elderly voice answered.

“Yes. I would like to book the church for a wedding.”

“Oh, that’s lovely. Let me get out the calendar.” After a bit of shuffling, she said, “Now, what date were you wantin’?”

“April twenty-sixth.”

I heard pages flipping as she hummed “How Great Thou Art”.

“Well, that date’s still open.”

“Excellent.”

“What’s the name, dear?”

“Wade. Susan Wade.”

“Wade...hmm. I’m sorry, honey, that name doesn’t ring a bell. Are you a Centenary member?” *How odd.*

“No.”

“Well, we generally give members first choice.”

I was not losing that date. Unlike Mona, I’d chosen a reasonable time of year for a wedding: warm, but not too warm; flowers, but not so many bugs. April was perfect. And, as an added bonus, during that particular week, I would be neither PMSing nor MSing. “My fiancé is a member.”

“Oh, well that should be fine then. Name?”

“Pete Walsh.” I held the phone away from my ear, prepared for the standard response. And thank goodness I did, or my eardrum would have ruptured.

“I’ve known Peter since he was a baby! I was his third grade Sunday School teacher. He’s such a fine man... *Yada yada yada.*” Five minutes later, “I surely should have recognized your name from the paper...though, I don’t recall seein’ your announcement. Did y’all just get engaged?”

“Recently, yes.”

“Well, yew need to call *The Sun Journal* soon as we get the sanctuary penned in. People need to know these things. Now, what time did yew want?” I was following in Mona’s footsteps, procedurally: late afternoon wedding, quickie refectory reception

followed by an extended evening of dancing in some plowed field in the middle of nowhere.

“The Walsh-Wade weddin’ at four o’clock,” she sang. “Why look, you won’t even need to change your initials. Isn’t that nice?”

“I hadn’t even thought of that.”

“Well, it certainly helps with the monogrammin’ and such.”

After she wished me every happiness in the world and all that crap, she said, “Now, where are you from?”

“Winston-Salem, originally.”

“Okay, we’ll just need your membership records sent down. I assume you’ll be joinin’ our church?”

“Um, well, I wasn’t really planning to.” I wasn’t a church-going girl anymore. Though I’d been Bible-flogged weekly for the entirety of my youth, my grown-up self had walked away from the guilt—*mostly*. And though God had served up one heavenly favor in giving Pete back to me, I still had a difficult time enduring sermons.

Her voice raised an octave. “It’s tradition for a husband and wife to be members of the same church, especially considerin’ yours is so far away.”

“Oh.”

“What’s the name of your church, honey? I’ll contact them for yew.”

I didn’t actually have a church home, *per se*. I’d lived in Winston-Salem, Chicago, Philadelphia, Columbus, Havelock, and now Atlantic Beach. And I wasn’t exactly a regular anywhere. I gave her the church in which I’d been baptized. “Silas Creek Baptist.” Silence on the other end of the phone. “Hello?”

“You’re not Methodist.”

“Is that a problem?”

“I’ve been a member of this church for nearly sixty years, and I can’t recall a time when a couple of ‘mixed denomination’ was married here.” *Seriously?* I rolled my eyes to the heavens. “If you want to get married at Centenary, you’ll just have to convert over, I suppose.”

“Convert? It’s not like I’m Jewish. Who cares?”

“We do, Miss Wade.”

Becoming Methodist was something Pete would never ask of me, but I realized suddenly that this was one of those “*Gift of the Magi*” moments. Giving him a wedding in this church would mean so much to him. And if switching from one flavor of Protestantism to another was all it took to score the sanctuary then I was damn well going to do it. Suddenly, a demonic thought warmed my rotten soul: becoming Methodist would absolutely torque my staunchly Southern Baptist mom.

“Let’s do this thing.”

She giggled. “I’ll mail you the information.”

After reciting my work address, I said, “Martha, let’s just keep this between you and me, okay? I want it to be a surprise.”



The following Sunday, Pete sauntered into the kitchen, swim trunks on, muscled bare chest gleaming. I swear, the sight of his naked torso still made me drool. “Ya wanna go out on the boat?” he asked, his teeth sinking into his lower lip.

I nearly panted. *Pete + water + alone = mind-blowing sex.*

“Um, aren’t you going fishing with Jimbo?” I groaned as he ran his thumbs across my nipples.

“If it’s a choice between fishin’ with Jimbo and watching you wiggle around in a bikini, I believe I’ll take the latter.” He sucked my earlobe into his mouth and latched onto it with his teeth, sending a panty-scorching lightning bolt through my body.

Midway through his powerful seduction, I glanced at the clock. I had to be at Centenary in less than an hour for my first *come to the Methodists Jesus* class. Lying probably wasn’t the best way to get this whole enterprise underway, but I had to do something before I lost all control of my bodily functions.

“I know how much fishing means to you—and Jimbo,” I said,

running my tongue down his neck and circling his Adam's apple. "You two don't get to hang out as often as you used to." I gasped as his hand ducked under my skirt and slid up my thigh. "And I take up so much of your time. I just don't want his feelings hurt," I whimpered, my hips moving involuntarily.

He stopped moving his fingers and quirked a brow. "Since when did you start carin' about *Jimbo's* feelings?"

That was an excellent point. Unless they involved Mona, I didn't. I pulled on the string at his waist. "I just don't want to drive a wedge between you two. I mean, we'll be family soon—cousins-in-law and all." I slid his trunks off his tight hips, and they fell to his ankles.

He pulled back from a very deep kiss and looked at me through eyes that held me far too high on his invisible pedestal. "You are the most thoughtful creature," he said, unlatching my bra. "Ya sure?"

I nodded and flashed him a dazed smile. "Absolutely. Oh, don't stop!"

With lips swollen and a face still flushed from our brief, but explosive passion, I was absolutely going to be late for my first class. I had twenty minutes to drive forty miles through sheriff-infested speed traps. I rushed into the classroom to the echoes of *Amen*. The minister gave me a warm smile and motioned to the seat nearest him. *In trouble already*. I flipped to page one of the United Methodist Handbook, and my eyes immediately glazed over as he began his lecture on the history of the church and life of John Wesley. I wasn't even sure who founded the Baptist movement; we just studied scriptures in Sunday School then stared at our feet while the preacher yelled at us for an hour or two.

The next three Sundays saw a nonexistent office emergency, a fake sore throat, and a wicked case of make-believe cramps. At this point, I was fairly sure Jimbo loved me. I had to confess my sins to someone, so Mona bore the brunt on her delicate shoulders.

"You've got to tell Pete! It'd make him so proud, and I think he'd be hurt if you didn't."

"But it's kind of weird, don't you think?" I was fine with holidays,

but if he believed I'd suddenly turned all religious, then he might expect us to go weekly, and I wasn't sure I was ready for that kind of commitment.

"Susan, you're joinin' his church. That's a big deal."

I looked up from my laptop that evening. "Pete, what do you think about the Flamingo Resort and Casino? They have twenty chapels, plus we can choose from a variety of themes, including *An Evening in Paris*." I pushed a cheesy picture of a couple posing under the fake Eiffel Tower towards him and channeled my inner take-no-prisoners business persona. "We could totally make this work."

His eyes scrunched up like he was in immense pain, but then he breathed deeply and said, "Wherever you are, that's where I'm gonna be. If Vegas suits you, then Vegas it is."

"Excellent. We can choose color scheme, flowers, cake, etc. right online. Plus, no invitations to stress over, and we'll save a fortune." My black widow spider nodded and continued weaving her intricate web of lies. "My job's crazy right now, and I really don't have time for all this wedding garbage. Vegas will make my life infinitely easier. Does April work for you?"

"Tomorrow works for me," he said, thoroughly melting my insides.

"April it is. I'll book tomorrow."



I was fairly inept at hiding things from Pete, but so far, this whole membership thing had gone off without a hitch. All I had to do was get through this weekend's new member's ceremony, and the sanctuary was mine.

"I was wonderin' if you'd like to have brunch in New Bern, Sunday. Your birthday's next week, and I thought it would be nice."

"Um...*this* Sunday?" I hadn't come up with a concrete plan for avoiding him, yet, but I was mulling over some sort of elective surgery or a grand mal toothache.

“I’ve already made reservations at Front Street Café for twelve-thirty. Then I was thinkin’ we could walk along the river—ya know, like on our first date.” *Crap, the romance card.*

“That sounds great. I might have to meet you there, though. I, um, have something I’ve got to do first.”

“On Sunday mornin’? What’s so important it can’t wait ’til later in the day?”

“Office?” It was a weak excuse, but he was well aware of my job affair. “I may have a conference call with China.”

He rubbed his chin. “Hmm. It would be about midnight there, if I’m not mistaken. Maybe you could cut them some slack and call when they’re actually awake.” *Grr!*

“Don’t you and Jimbo want to go fishing? I mean, we could always go on Saturday.”

He sucked in his upper lip—something he only did when he was wrestling with a strong, often painful emotion. “We could, but I was thinkin’, I’ve never taken you to the church where I grew up. Since we’d be down there anyway, maybe we could go that mornin’. I’d love to show ya off. And I’m sure some of my old Sunday School teachers would be very happy to tell you all about how rotten I was.” His tone was light, but his expression was earnest.

Disaster! I was highly uncomfortable with public displays of religion. In fact, I found it discomfiting when Mona prayed over her lunch at work, and when Pete said grace at dinner when we had guests. And my mom..? She did that shit in public! And to pledge a religious oath with him staring at me? I began hyperventilating.

“It’d mean a great deal to me.” An uncharacteristic fragility swam in his beautiful peridot eyes.

“Okay,” I sighed. “That would be great.”

He pulled me into his arms and kissed me deeply. “I do love you.”



According to the historical marker, Centenary Methodist Church

had dropped anchor in historic downtown New Bern in 1772. Pale brick, the color of stone, lent the building an old world feel. Intricate copper finials, green with age, tipped the insanely complex, slated roofline, and spiraled turrets, decorated with beautiful stained glass window slits, pierced a perfectly blue sky. We walked towards the arched entrance hovering over a series of smooth columns. It was truly a glory to behold, and I felt a sliver of excitement as I imagined bolting down these stairs, my arm looped through Pete's, rice grains pelting us. I glanced at his handsome profile and smiled. Surely the impending, most likely painful hour was worth the price.

"Ya look beautiful, by the way," Pete murmured as we neared the door.

"Peter Walsh!" A greeter shouted, throwing up his arm. "It's so good to see you."

"It's good to be here," Pete replied.

"Heard ya'd moved to Atlantic Beach."

"Yes, sir."

The man's expression suddenly became grave. "Son, you haven't set foot in this church since your mamma passed. I know Maggie wouldn't have wanted that. This'll always be your home. We love ya here, boy." Then he hugged Pete fiercely as I stood, shell-shocked.

After a brief clearing of throats, they broke with a manly back slap, and Pete turned to me. "Mr. Walker, this is my fiancée, Susan Wade." The word fiancée stopped the man dead in his tracks. What followed was a suffocating hug, laced heavily with nose-prickling aftershave.

"My goodness, you're pretty as a peach," he proclaimed, gripping my arms. "Pete, where'd you find a beauty like this?"

"Walmart. Can ya believe it?" I narrowed my eyes as they both laughed loudly. "No, Susan and I met..." He stopped and looked at me sweetly. "We met in Havelock. Luckiest day of my life."

"I'm certain of it," Mr. Walker remarked.

At this point we were holding up a line of churchgoers, so we said our goodbyes and entered the vestibule.

The next man, with whom we repeated much of the previous scene, offered bulletins. I knew my name was printed somewhere inside. If Pete saw it, I'd be flushed out like a duck during hunting season and spend the next hour suffering odd looks and silent questions.

"No thanks, we don't need one," I said, dragging Pete by the arm.

"Course we do, Susie-Q. We won't know which hymns to sing."

"Well, let's not waste valuable resources then." I smiled and took one from the man. "We'll share."

The aisles were thick with milling people, but the pews were filling quickly. "Where would ya like to sit?" he asked. There was no way in hell I was toting Pete to the special roped off area where the new members had been instructed to sit. Just then one of my classmates waved as he ushered his family past. I gave him a tight smile.

"Um, where did you sit growing up?" I asked.

"Well, Mamma always sat up front." A shadow of sadness crossed his features. "Looks like that's full, today, though. Must be something special goin' on."

"How about the back? I'm feeling a little nauseous." *Totally true.* "I might need to sneak out."

"The bathrooms are through the double doors up front by the organ, actually. If you're not feeling well, we could go."

"No! I mean—"

Just then the shit hit the fan.

"Peter Walsh! Heavens! And don't you look so handsome in your fine suit."

"Why, thank you, Miss Martha. This is my—"

"Fiancée?" She raised an eyebrow and then winked. *Oh, let the earth swallow me whole.*

He gave me an odd look, but before he could speak, several high-pitched voices squawked, "Peter Walsh!" all at once.

Then it was like a Macy's after-Christmas sale, with half the women in the church crawling over one another to maul him with

affection. I tried to escape the melee, but he kept a solid grip on my hand.

“I want y’all to meet Susan Wade, my fiancée.” Feminine peals shimmered around us. Joining the cacophony were more than a fair number of “It’s about time you found someone” and “I wish Maggie could see this” comments.

“Y’all’ll be comin’ to my house for Sunday dinner,” a largish elderly woman pronounced.

“No, my house,” another said.

I prepared for the ensuing catfight, but Pete, sensing the estrogen surge, politely said, “We’d love to visit with all y’all, but I’ve already promised to take Susan to brunch for her birthday.” They beamed at me, and then turned back to him in unison. “Well, aren’t you the sweetest thing?” I rolled my eyes steepleward.

We were dragged to the middle of the church and sandwiched in the dead-center of a long pew spilling over with people. Though November, I was sweating like it was the Fourth of July. Becoming increasingly nervous, I flipped through the bulletin. The list of new members was between the *who’s in the hospital* and the *who died* sections on the last page. I breathed a small sigh of relief. Perhaps no one would even notice. Pete reached for the bulletin, but I held onto the flimsy sheets like a wad of hundred dollar bills, then carefully folded the pages so only the scripture lesson and the hymn numbers were visible.

The service was exactly like every other Sunday worship service I’d ever attended: welcome, introductory hymn, Old Testament scripture reading, prayer, New Testament scripture (while standing), prayer ending in the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, another hymn, and special choir music as the offering plate was passed. Pete emptied his billfold and winked at me. “I’m a little behind on tithing.”

After yet another prayer and a short song verse, we settled in for the sermon, which so happened to be titled “Assessing Your Personal Relationship with God”. I swear, the man should have just used my full name and gotten on with it. When I glanced at Pete, his top lip

had disappeared, and I wondered if he wasn't feeling the exact same way. If he hadn't darkened these doors since his mother's death, then there was way more going on here than a casual church visit. Pete and Jimbo's Sunday morning fishing trips suddenly seemed more an exercise in avoidance than a weekly boondoggle. His eyes met mine, and he squeezed my hand.

Pastor Hewitt was a gifted speaker. His points were well-made and insufferably compelling, and he didn't raise his voice even once. Perhaps that, Pete's comforting grip, and the fact that we were literally packed into a pew like a tin of escargot were the only things keeping me from slithering under the oak bench and military crawling it out of the sanctuary.

Were my motives for joining this church self-serving? Absolutely. Was I committed to worshipping on Sundays? *Snort*. The long and the short of it: I was a Methodist poser. I hoped the Methodist hell was more forgiving than the Southern Baptist one, because... *Yeesh!*

"Friends, we are blessed today. Through the grace of God, our church family has grown by ten. It is my honor to introduce our newest Centenary members," Pastor Hewitt proudly announced. Clapping and a whole lot of "Amens" followed. "New members, please step forward at this time to receive your certificates."

As everyone stood and filed out of the front pews, my palms went slick, and I felt a bit faint. To my right sat a pack of slightly overweight ladies fanning themselves and looking rapt. To my left, Pete and another pile of ladies. How the hell was I going to get out of here?

Pastor Hewitt met my eyes and nodded expectantly. I sucked in a whole bunch of air and closed my eyes. It was now or never, so I did the unthinkable: I stood.

"Susie-Q, you okay?" Pete asked, concern painting his face.

I pulled that shit right out of my butt like I was sitting in Bob's office, completely unprepared. "I feel the spirit moving me." Then I turned my back to him and murmured, "Pardon me," all the way to the aisle.

Standing ramrod straight and refusing to look at the congregation, I thought about how truly ridiculous this was. I had no problem whatever speaking before hundreds of colleagues and executives, where literally millions of dollars and my job itself were at stake. Yet here I was, facing a medium-sized congregation of loving people in a small town church, about to go into heart failure.

When my name was called, I mounted the steps and met the minister at the podium. I answered his questions mechanically, bowed as he said a quick prayer over my head, and grasped the membership certificate, rolled up like a diploma and tied with white satin ribbon. After taking my place at the foot of the stage, I finally met Pete's eyes. He wore the most bizarre expression of awe, and I suddenly experienced a great sense of peace, as though I'd done something really special—something right.

Then, as if somebody had just scored a touchdown at a damn football game, a balcony filled with cheerleaders whooped and did the wave. Shocked to note it was nearly overflowing with Pete's relatives, I cringed as Anita and my new sworn enemy, Mona Taylor flippin' Skarren, led the go-team merriment.

After six excruciatingly long verses of "Amazing Grace", Pastor Hewitt invited our families to join us at the front for the meet and greet. Without trampling a single little old lady, Pete muscled his way through the crowd. His hands found my face, and he kissed me quickly before swallowing me in a hug I never wanted to end.

"You didn't need to do this." His voice was thick with emotion.

"I love you," I replied.

The crowd descended upon us. Between handshakes and hugs, I turned to Pete and casually said, "Oh, and by the way, *this* is where we're getting married."

He beamed so brightly you could have cut the power, and no one would have noticed.

6

Mona in Wonderland

“But, I don’t want to go to Quarterlies!”

“But, I don’t care,” I retorted. “You’re going. Now let’s run through your presentation once more.”

“I haven’t done this in I don’t know when.”

“No one knows their job like you. What’s the problem?”

She advanced on me with a look of sheer terror. “I’m afraid to speak in public.”

“You surely presented when you were working in the Atlanta office.”

“At the home office, but I wasn’t at a level requirin’ me to speak at corporate. I went up, but I didn’t have to actually *talk*.”

“Tom surely sent you, right?”

“Unh uh,” she replied, the tips of her immaculate hair brushing her cheeks as she shook her head. “He sent the service reps, of course, but not me. What am I gonna do?” Her large hazel eyes, framed by those thick eyelashes I wanted to steal, pleaded with me for understanding. They found none.

“You’re going to prep this talk, and you’re going to go up there and give it. You’re a significant player in the district. You outrank everyone here except me.”

“But *still*.”

If I thought prepping Reeves had been difficult, Mona was nearly impossible. Her voice was suddenly too soft to hear, she hunched her shoulders until her body seemed to cave in upon itself, she tucked her hair behind her ears so often her skin had begun visibly chafing. Were I not on a highly self-serving mission, I would have relieved her—and myself—of this chore.



“Whew, I’m glad that’s over with,” she said as we touched down in Philly.

“What’s over?”

“The plane ride. I don’t fly all that often. I was kinda holdin’ my breath durin’ landing.”

Why did this surprise me? In my head, Mona was the same as me: a business traveler, the keeper of a bazillion frequent flier miles. But as I thought about it, other than her honeymoon on Ocracoke Island, she hadn’t gone anywhere except home to Charlotte since we’d met.

Our swank downtown hotel was surprisingly well within budget, thanks to Jayne’s close and personal friend, Mr. *Hotwire*. To further cut costs, Mona and I were sharing a room; a novelty for the business me. The personal me would share anything with Mona, including plastic forks, ICEE straws, and possibly a kidney, but when I came to Philly, I had certain rituals: pep talks in the mirror, the scarfing of chocolate from the mini-fridge after particularly taxing days, the coping with deep-seated anxiety via copious amounts of alcohol.

“I don’t remember Philadelphia bein’ this...*big*,” she remarked, gawking at the absolutely average sized-forest of glass and cement pillars. Jostled and bumped in completely normal fashion as we negotiated sidewalks flooded with well-dressed commuters the following morning, Mona rapid-fired “scuse mes”, “sorrys”, and “you can go aheads” like machine gun ammunition.

“Stop being so damned nice,” I grumped at a crosswalk. “Just shove past them.”

“I will not,” she retorted. “Gosh! That’d be rude.”

Shaking my head, I dragged her onward. Suddenly, she stopped square in the middle of the INTech plaza and stared up at the skyscraper like a kid on a field trip.

“What is *wrong* with you?” I demanded.

“It’s just...well, the building is so much *bigger* than I remember.”

“Everything’s bigger than you remember,” I snipped, dragging her through the revolving doors and into the, admittedly, impressive atrium.

Mona audibly gasped, her eyes becoming saucers. “It’s awe-inspirin’, isn’t it?”

I turned to urge her onward, but then promptly froze as a great sense of *déjà vu* swept over me. I’d had that very same thought the first time I entered this building. I remember feeling as if heaven’s pearly gates had cracked open just wide enough to let my tiny self through. It had been thrilling, and yes, awe-inspiring.

We flashed our badges to security and crossed the marble floor to the bank of elevators. I stabbed the sixth-floor button once inside, and the steel jaws snapped shut. Five other passengers shared the space with us, and no lie, Mona made eye contact with every single one of them. Then, sin of all sins, she introduced herself.

“Hey, I’m Mona Skarren from the North Carolina district. How’re y’all this mornin’?” In return, she received tight smiles and a few cordial grunts. I loved Mona like the moon and stars, but I swear, she was absolutely channeling my mother.

As with every other, my old floor buzzed with palpable energy. I savored the rush as we passed by multitudes of busy employees, smiling as if I, once again, belonged here. She obediently followed me to Bob’s office.

“Enter,” he growled.

Mona’s face was painted with the kind of fear reserved for the Grim Reaper. Remembering the days when I’d felt similarly, I reached out and squeezed her quivering, ice-cold hand. “His bark’s way worse than his bite—well, most of the time,” I whispered.

She said absolutely nothing during our brief meeting, and honestly, when he spat out his first expletive, I was rather afraid she might faint.

“That was the scariest meeting I’ve ever been to,” she exclaimed as we wandered back down the hall.

I snorted. “Actually, I thought he was in a rather good mood this morning.”

Habitually, I visited my old veal stall. “This was my corporate office,” I said mock-proudly. Not only had the cat lady not been fired, it appeared each of her pictures had given birth to a new litter of kittens, and these were now pinned to every remaining square inch of her partition.

“This?” Mona exclaimed.

“Yep.” I snorted, remembering how concerned Mona had been that I wouldn’t like my giant North Carolina space. Far too absorbed with my misery at the time, I’d done little to dispel her fears. I plopped in my old chair. It squeaked out a pitiful *I’ve missed you*.

“It’s a lot smaller than I imagined,” she murmured.

It appeared this was *Alice in Wonderland* day for Mona, and I couldn’t help wondering which potion she would drink next.

Spreading my arms widely, I said, “Location, location, location.” After my sense of nostalgia waned, I glanced at my phone. “My next meeting starts in ten minutes. You know where you’re going, right?”

“Um...”

“You should have received an email from Bob’s secretary, detailing your itinerary.”

“Oh, that.” She pulled out her phone and read it aloud like scripture.

“Sounds like you’ll be starting your day on the tenth floor. I’ll walk you there.” Her look of gratitude was beyond hilarious, and I realized that out of her element, she was fairly lost. I offered what I hoped was a reassuring look. Suddenly, all her comments coalesced.

“Mona, how many times have you been to corporate?”

“Well, there was that one Quarterlies...”

I waited for the list to continue, but that fragment simply hung above her like a partially inflated balloon. “Didn’t you interview here?”

“No, I did that in Atlanta.”

“So, you’ve only ever been to Philadelphia once?”

“Well, yeah. I thought you knew that.”

I shook my head no. With a clearer understanding of her deer-in-headlights demeanor, I smiled with sympathy. “It sounds like I need to give *you* ‘the tour’. Bathrooms and all.” As we approached the elevator, I said, “I’ll meet you back here at noon, and we’ll have lunch. Right *here*.” I pointed to the floor.

Nervously tucking a strand of hair behind her fiery pink ear, she smiled warily. “Okay.”

I spent the next three hours—days, really—fearing for Mona’s life. She was a tasty morsel dropped in a tank of starved piranha. At noon on the dot, I found her standing by the elevator, chewing on her lip. I towed my bewildered friend to one of the various lunch buffet lines, piled her plate full of richly caloric food, and sat her down at a table. “Eat.”

The good news? Mona’s talk had been scheduled early in the week, and once we put that little nightmare behind us, we could get on to the most pertinent part of the trip: wedding dress shopping. The bad news? For some ungodly reason, our Tuesday presentations had been scheduled concurrently. *Oh, the humanity!*

That night we ordered room service and went over her talk four more times. Once asleep, I ravaged the minifridge, devouring anything the Mars Candy Company had seen fit to leave there.

Scalding my tongue on a truly magnificent latte the next morning, I briskly ushered her towards the large conference room that she viewed as her personal gallows. Before bolting for my own meeting, I pulled her aside and gripped her shoulders. “Your talk’s going to be great. You’re a fabulous and amazing woman, who knows her job like the back of her hand. Find me in the middle of the audience once you’re on stage. Look at me the whole time as if no one else

is in the room and speak directly into the microphone just like we practiced. Your slides are perfect, and I doubt anyone will ask you any questions.”

“Questions!” she gasped. “You never said anything about that!”

“Breathe in and out slowly and listen to me. Most people will be so bored by the time you speak, they won’t even bother paying attention. I promise it’ll be fine.”

“You promise you’ll be there?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course, I will.”



“Trade slots with me,” I hissed at Bert Knellinger, whose seat I slid in beside just as opening remarks concluded. Bob raised an eyebrow as he passed by, and I smiled brightly in return. A stroke of luck, Bert was slated to speak third. All I had to do was switch places with him, then, once finished, launch into an epic coughing fit and excuse myself, leaving me plenty of time to reach Mona. The plan was flipping brilliant.

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

“When do you speak?” he asked, glancing down at the list. “Twentieth? No way.”

“Yes way. Trade with me, dammit.”

His lips turned up. “What’ll you give me?”

Just then I got a panicky text from Mona. *They’re starting. I’m about to be sick.*

“What do you want?”

“Your first born.” I rolled my eyes. “Okay, one of your service reps.”

“What?! No. That’s outrageous.”

“Then I guess you’ll be sitting here for a very long time.”

I’d forgotten how wicked he was. I crossed my legs, uncrossed them, fidgeted, and tapped my foot impatiently as the first speaker

delivered a relatively decent talk. Except that I didn't care because Bert wasn't budging.

"Only one, Susan," he whispered.

"Reeves is painfully green. Why do you want him?"

"I don't. I want Perry. He's got the years of experience my people don't. Give him to me, and the slot is yours."

As I seriously debated the offer, my phone vibrated again. *Now there are only nine people in front of me!*

I looked frantically around the room. Jeremy, who was eighth, was on the same row as me; only twelve district managers and the wide center aisle lay between us. Leaning forward to catch his eye, I discreetly waved. Nothing. "Jeremy!" I coughed out. He inclined his head in the opposite direction and said something to Beth Stamler. She was after me, and therefore of no use.

Bert whispered, "I never thought I'd find *you* in my lap. Maybe I should have asked for something else." I flipped him off and continued sending psychic messages to a clearly psychically-challenged Jeremy. Bert chuckled again. "I think I'm in love."

Another text from Mona: *The next speaker is going up.*

I scrolled through my contacts and texted Jeremy's ass. He didn't even move to retrieve his phone. *Grr.* As another round of polite applause dimmed, Bert stood. "See ya, babe."

"I hate you," I muttered.

He chuckled evilly and strode to the podium.

I texted Beth as Bert began speaking. No movement from her either. Did everyone have their flippin' phones on silent? Cursing under my breath, I scanned my sheet, a smile spreading across my face. Sitting beside Bert's unoccupied chair was Alex Ramirez, the DM for Arizona. He was slated sixth. I scooted next to him. Though Alex and I had attended a number of meetings together, I'm pretty sure we'd never had an actual conversation. "Hi," I whispered.

He nodded.

"Listen, would you mind terribly if we exchanged speaking slots?"

I'm in a bit a situation, and if you'd trade with me, I would greatly appreciate it."

"Remind me of your name again," he replied. *Seriously?*

"Susan Wade." I reached out and quickly shook his hand.

He scanned the list. "Ooh...sorry, no good."

"Oh, come on. It can't be that big a deal to you." I was fairly certain I couldn't sneak out, help Mona, and return in time for my own talk. Plus, I'd probably be sent to the corner for misbehavior.

He glanced at his phone. "My daughter's school play begins in thirty minutes. My wife's streaming it for me." He returned his attention to Bert.

"Can't you just record it and watch it later?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I think not."

Smiling smugly, Bert returned to his—now, my seat. "You want me."

"Slaughtered, yes."

My phone buzzed again. *Where are you?*

One way or another, I was getting to Mona's talk. I made an executive decision. The applause faded for Matt Kemper, speaker four. As he stepped off the stage, I snatched up my laptop, brushed past Bert, and raced to the podium. Gregory Foster of Massachusetts stood as well and began moving up the aisle. I grabbed the mic. "Due to a personal conflict, Greg Foster has asked me to trade slots." He raised his eyebrows in surprise, and I smiled apologetically. A look of pure malice spread across his face after he returned to his seat.

My first slide popped up on the large screen, and I ran through my talk as quickly and professionally as humanly possible, refusing to make further eye contact with Greg. To the sound of pale applause, I took my seat and texted Mona. *Coming!*

Jostled by Alex on his way to the front, Bert and I settled into our seats again. As Alex began speaking, I commenced my coughing fit, elbowing Bert in the ribs several times with calculated precision for good measure. I coughed even louder. Alex, who was now on slide

two, shot me an annoyed look. I yanked up my briefcase and slipped out.

“Stop!” I yelled as I lunged for the elevator. The last thing I saw before it closed in my face was the smug smirk of a vindictive secretary. I made a mental note to cause her professional harm. I jabbed the button over and over, watching the floor numbers descend. Then I spied the exit sign. I raced through the door and flew up the almost never used stairs, my spiked heels echoing off the bare cement. Mona was speaking on the fourteenth floor. My thighs were on fire by twelve, and my feet were nearly numb with pain. Gasping for air, I threw open the door and staggered towards the large conference room. Applause was spilling from the entrance.

I started up the aisle just as Mona nodded nervously to the large crowd. She searched the room for a moment. I stepped forward until I was literally in the center of the room. With nowhere to sit, I simply stood, blocking numerous views. I heard hisses behind me, but I ignored them. Mona’s eyes met mine, and she visibly sagged in relief. Then she squared her shoulders, stared right at me, and began speaking.

At her concluding “thank you”, I limped to the back of the room and leaned against the wall for the duration of the session.

“You did great!” I said, hugging her proudly at break. “You sounded like a real pro up there. The real pro you are.”

“Ya really think so?”

“I absolutely do.” And I was not even lying. It was as if her presence had magnified ten-fold on that stage. In her own way, she’d commanded the room. I wanted her to succeed, to shine, to demonstrate the kind of confidence that had bloomed since she’d become Mrs. Jimbo Skarren, and she had stepped up to the challenge. “I’ve got to return to my meeting before I’m lynched. Meet me on six when you’re finished.” Glancing at my phone, I squealed, “Gotta go!” I bolted for the elevator, the blisters from my wickedly pointed shoes threatening to erupt.

“What the hell?” Greg growled.

“Couldn’t be helped. I had an emergency.”

“You made me look like a fool. You owe me big time. You understand that, right?”

I calmly took another sip of lukewarm coffee as our own break concluded. “Whatever you need.”

He broke out into an almost cruel smile. “I’ll be in touch.”

I realized I’d just made a giant mistake. I didn’t know the man well, and in retrospect, I had probably made him look somewhat weak in front of our drooling wolf pack. I snagged a heavily iced-Danish and coated my poor judgment with a thick layer of sugar.

“That was an interesting speech,” Jeremy said as I seated myself beside him, prepared to listen to my service reps speak.

“My district acquisitions supervisor was presenting for the first time in her life, and I had to get there.”

“I think you made an enemy in the process,” Jeremy said, glancing back at a still fuming Gregory.

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

When my meeting finally broke, I found Mona waiting outside the door. I grabbed her schedule and scanned it. Then I took out a pen and drew a giant X across the lower half. “Oops. Looks like you’ve just been called into an all-afternoon meeting with your boss.”

She smiled hugely.



“Gosh! How many stores are there up here?” she exclaimed as I dragged her out of Nordstrom’s. I’d compiled a fairly extensive list of department stores and boutiques I wanted to visit. In catalogs, I’d seen a number of dresses that interested me; none of which, of course, were available in Eastern North Carolina. We’d blown through Niemen Marcus with little luck, and after a late afternoon snack and a much-needed pedicure were now on our way to

Bloomington's. Tomorrow, our afternoon would be consumed by visits to two bridal boutiques, and finally, Saks.

"Susan Wade," I said to the Saks' bridal consultant. "I have an appointment."

"Excellent. I'm Marion Coleman. A pleasure meeting you."

"This is Mona Skarren, my matron of honor."

"Delighted. We have the dresses you requested, and I've taken the liberty of adding a few more options to the collection. Would you both like wine while I get the models ready?"

"Bring the whole bottle. It's been a very long day," I said, wilting into a chair.

"They do that?" Mona whispered after Marion disappeared.

"For the prices they charge? Hell, yes."

As we munched on cheese and crackers and sipped fairly decent wine, the first model waltzed into our private viewing room, wearing an absolutely not-for-me dress. I shook my head, and she trounced back behind the doors. A few moments later, a brunette with a figure similar to mine, except for her seven foot long legs, strode out.

"That one looks like it's growin' out of a big ol' flower," Mona remarked. She was spot on, too. Layers upon layers of stiff taffeta encircled the last two feet of the otherwise plain satin skirt like too many petals at the end of a stalk. I shook my head vigorously.

The Vera Wang dress I was most interested in floated into view. Over our two-day shop-a-thon, I'd identified several dresses that were more than adequate, but none that I'd fallen madly in love with. This dress honestly looked better than in the photo, and my heart skipped a beat. "Gorgeous," I said. "What do you think?"

"It's real nice. I love the lace *and* all the buttons," Mona added with a giggle.

The model turned around several times, and I sank into a state of genuine bliss, imagining myself floating down the aisle in this masterpiece. We were shown two more after it, but I'd already made my decision.

"I'll try on the Wang," I said when Marion entered the room, all smiles.

That dress has been wildly popular this season. While we get it ready, there is one more I'd like to show you. It's an Amelia Sposa," she said reverently. She clapped her hands, and the brunette emerged in the most frigginly gorgeous dress I'd ever seen is my whole frigginly miserable life! Mona and I gasped and grabbed one another's arms simultaneously.

The dress hugged the model's body as if the two were making love. The open back plunged elegantly, and the skirt not so much flared as cascaded to earth in a shimmering waterfall of pale silk and intricate lace. The golden threads, weaving through the material and beading, glinted in the light, and the train fanned out across the floor like the most delicate of waves. It was beyond breathtaking, and my covetous heart commanded I rip it off that leggy model and spirit it away, cradled to my bosom.

"I believe I'll try that one on," I said calmly.

"I was certain you'd like it. The Wang as well?"

"No. Just that one."

We were swept into the dressing room, and she and Mona fitted me in a corset. Still sore from yesterday's fire-escape escapade, my feet, having been shoeless for the last hour, nearly cried when I crammed them into stilt-high strappy heels. The dress was then brought in by assistants. My hand reached out of its own volition; the fabric pulsed electric as it made contact. I knew then that no greater love had ever existed.

The bodice did not cling to my body as it had the model's, and a whimper escaped my lips. Marion pinched the material from behind, and suddenly I was in the throes of an impassioned embrace.

"Oh, Susan!" Mona gasped. Our eyes met. Tears welled in hers; dollar signs in mine. And then, after a moment of gazing into the three-way mirror, I decided I simply didn't care anymore.

"Clearly, this dress is too large for your petite frame," Marion said.

“Clearly. Bring in the next size down.” Mona cleared her throat and narrowed her eyes. “Please.”

“That’s quite impossible, I’m afraid. We’re only permitted one sample per store.” She quickly took my measurements. “Sposa couture must be custom-ordered from Italy. What you’re currently wearing amounts to an Italian size thirty-four. It appears you’ll need something closer to a thirty-two.”

“Make it so,” I ordered.

After filling out the paperwork and plopping down a painfully hefty deposit, I turned to Mona. “Drinks. Lots of drinks.”

“Sounds good to me.”



In her one and only visit to Philly, Mona had not darkened the doors of the Blue Papaya.

“Wow, this is fancy.”

We waded into the well-dressed sea of INTech employees, the blue neon lighting around the counter’s lip casting a strange glow to her skin and coloring her eyes purple.

“Two cosmos,” I told the bartender.

In mere seconds, I pressed an expertly-made, designer drink into Mona’s hands. “Taste this.”

After a tentative sip, her eyes flared. “Oh my.”

“I know, right? Beats a Budweiser any day of the week.”

“This place is so different from the Frog,” she yelled over the throbbing electric beat.

“It’s my favorite bar in the world—well, second favorite.”

Lustful eyes caressed us as we meandered through the crowd, though I’m certain she was completely oblivious.

“Susan!” Jeremy shouted, waving us over. His other arm, I noticed, was wrapped tightly around Liza Min’s tiny waist. She glanced at me warily.

“Liza!” I said. “Great seeing you.” I didn’t think she was quite

ready for a hug from me, so I patted her arm and smiled as warmly as I possibly could. “This is North Carolina’s District Acquisitions Supervisor, and my very dear friend, Mona Skarren.”

Jeremy was quickly heading towards the toasted side, and thus, tried to give her a hug, while dragging Liza along for the ride. She did not look particularly pleased. Honestly, neither did Mona.

“Dear friend, huh?” I felt the sweltering heat of evil incarnate behind me.

“Best friend, actually.”

“I’ve been replaced? I’m so hurt,” Kirsten said snidely. I glared up at her towering form as she stepped around me. “Mona, is it?” Mona nodded anxiously. “It’s so nice to meet you.” She reached out her hand, and Mona politely shook it, all the while staring in disbelief.

“I have holy water in my purse,” I whispered. Then I turned to Kirsten. “What do you want?”

“Susan, I so love it when you’re here. Tuesday’s presentation was so...mediocre. Gregory thought so, anyway.”

“Come again?”

“Gregory Foster? We’ve recently become quite close. You know, any enemy of yours is a friend of mine. Ta!” She turned on her heels and slithered away. I was overcome by a sudden wave of nausea.

“Jeremy, when you’re sober, I’ll need the lowdown on Greg Foster.”

“Ooh...bad news,” he replied exuberantly.

“Lovely.” Turning to Liza, I rolled my eyes. “You might consider getting him back to your hotel room soon. Take care!”

“What was Kirsten goin’ on about earlier,” Mona asked as I flopped on my bed, the ceiling slightly spinning.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay, but who’s Gregory Foster?”

“The DM of Massachusetts. I may have insulted him the other day by accident. I’ll deal with it.”

“That woman downright scares me.”

“I’d worry about you if she didn’t.”

Future Felony

Thursday ended on a note of hilarity as Kirsten failed yet again to maneuver a transfer. I hailed a cab and spouted the address of Vincenzo's. Mona needed a dose of good food, and I a good dose of wine. As we sat at the bar nursing drinks, I heard a far too charming laugh, followed immediately by an innocent giggle. I whipped my head around only to find my ex-demon sitting with what amounted to a minor.

"I may vomit," I groaned.

Mona had no idea who I was cursing this time, until he possessively squeezed shoulders. "Susan. Gorgeous as always."

"I'm engaged. Go away."

"Who is this lovely woman?"

"She's married. Go. Away."

He picked up Mona's hand. "I'm Ryan Vittorio, and you are?"

"Mona Skarren. Nice to, um, meet you." Her eyes bugged as he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Dammit, Ryan," I huffed. "Now she needs more hand sanitizer."

"Baby, I should have married you when I had the chance," he purred. "Later."

"Much."

Ryan wandered back to his future felony, and I downed the rest

of my martini in one scalding swallow. The hostess signaled that our table was ready, and we followed her into the intimate dining room. Our bread arrived along with an exceptional bottle of wine that I had not ordered. Before I could question the steward, he said, "From the gentleman at the bar."

I narrowed my eyes. "Has it been poisoned?" His raised a brow in surprise. After a sniff and a small taste, I said, "It's excellent. Thanks."

I turned to salute Ryan, but he was gone. I shrugged and then tapped my glass against Mona's. "To surviving your first real Quarterlies."

"To never comin' back again!"

"Oh, it hasn't been that bad."

"The pace is awful. I can barely keep up."

"I honestly miss it at times. This is how I lived my twenties." It surprised me to realize I would be living my thirties quite differently. And interestingly, I wasn't convinced that that was such a wonderful thing. I sighed. "Okay, moving on to pressing matters: bridesmaid's dresses. That one boutique had a very nice selection. Do you want to start there or go back to Saks first?"

"I liked the boutique. It was cozy."

"Alright, breakfast, hair salon, and then the boutique."

"That sounds great." She smiled brightly, but then her expression darkened.

"What's wrong?"

"You're welcome," a komodo dragon hissed in my ear.

I set my glass down so hard, red droplets splashed onto the white linen tablecloth. "You have got to be kidding." He pointed to the seat nearest me, and the young girl sat obediently. He then positioned himself across from her so that I was forced to look at him. "How much did you have to tip the hostess to get this table?"

"Enough," he replied with an amused smirk.

"I'm having a dinner meeting over here, Ryan."

"As am I."

Mona fought a smile. “Maybe Quarterlies are more interestin’ than I thought.”

“Are you from South Carolina, too?” Ryan suddenly interjected.

“I’m from *North* Carolina.”

“Your accent is intoxicating,” he silkily mocked. I scowled at him.

Immediately blushing, she turned to him and replied with manners I would never possess, “Thank you. That’s very kind of you to say.”

“Don’t talk to him,” I warned.

The waiter appeared, effectively shutting Ryan out of our bubble. After a long line of questioning, we made our selections. He then turned to Ryan’s table for drink orders. That’s when I noticed the fifty-dollar bill change hands. Within moments, two restaurant staff appeared. Ryan stood, as did his date, and the men picked up the table and placed it flush against ours.

“What the hell?! This is absolutely unacceptable. I want to see the manager.”

“But the gentleman said—”

“I don’t care what the ‘gentleman’ said. He’s not welcome at our table.”

The man looked to Ryan in question, and true to form, he simply whipped out another large bill and laid it on the table. “It’s fine.”

Rendered speechless, all I could do was gawk at Ryan. The staff quickly disappeared, and we were left awkwardly staring at one another; Ryan grinning, his date pouting, Mona hiding a smile, and I steaming like a lobster.

I suddenly turned to the young blonde now pressed against me. “Does this not bother you?”

“Um.” Ryan shot her a cautionary look. “No, it’s fine,” she replied quietly. She then dropped her eyes to the table.

Feeling a great wave of pity for her, I whispered, “Be careful with him. He’s more dangerous than you realize.” Her eyes widened for a moment, but then she regained her demure composure.

“So, what were we talking about?” Ryan asked with a large smile.

“We weren’t.”

“The last time we were alone in your hotel room...it didn’t end quite the way I’d hoped.”

My smile was unstoppable. “It ended exactly the way I’d hoped. Down to the very last detail. What were your parting words again? Oh yes, I remember. You didn’t have any.”

Ryan noticed Mona’s shocked expression and seized upon it. “Baby, that was only a few short months ago. I can still taste your lips. We could meet later tonight. My place?”

Mona looked from me to him and back, her jaw grazing the table. I shook my head. “It was nearly a year ago, and trust me, nothing of any relevance happened.”

“Hmm, the fiancé doesn’t know about our little tryst, does he?”

“The fiancé knows all about you. And he’d *love* to meet you in a dark alley at your earliest convenience.”

Ryan’s laughter dribbled from his lips like melting butter. “That would be fun. Speaking of dark places, why not bring the lovely Mona along. Baby, you know there’s room in my bed for three.”

I turned again to the girl. “Does he call you ‘baby’, too?”

“Baby, don’t answer,” Ryan advised.

“I’m confused, Ryan. Which ‘baby’ are you talking to?”

His lips turned up in a wicked smile. “Susan, do you remember that scarf we used to play with?”

“Ryan,” I warned.

“Do you still think of me when you wear it?”

“I might, had I not incinerated it along with everything else you’d ever given me. I have noticed Kirsten still wears the red blouse.” Then I turned to the girl. “You see, at his advanced age, Ryan’s memory often fails him, and he ends up giving all the women he’s sleeping with the very same gift. That, or gets a volume discount.” I took another sip of, admittedly, delicious wine and looked at my former lover. I was confident that, at this point in his life, he was never going to change, and I felt sorry for him in a strange way.

Our entrées arrived, and I shoved a forkful of salmon in my

mouth to avoid further conversation. Mona did likewise, and we chewed and swallowed and ignored Ryan altogether, until he finally began to actually interact with his date.

“You don’t really want dessert, do you?” I asked as our plates were cleared.

Ryan, joyfully massacring his baby cow, stopped mid-bite. “Baby, you must stay for dessert. You love the tiramisu here, if I’m not mistaken.”

I slapped my hands on the table. “Holy hell, Ryan Vittorio, you just remembered an accurate personal detail about me. I’m in shock.”

“Baby, I remember everything about you. The way you smell, the way you taste.”

“Enough, Ryan. You’re being vile.” I looked at Mona. “Are you ready?”

“Uh huh.”

Mona suddenly gasped and turned absolutely white. From her violated expression, I knew immediately what he’d done. She hopped up from the table, grabbed her glass, and splashed the contents in his face. “You are not a nice man!” she stammered before marching off.

“Ryan, sweetie,” I scolded. “You *must* learn to keep your hands to yourself. And while my fiancé has a fantastic left hook, her husband has the scariest damn knife I’ve ever seen, and the military training to use it properly.” I blew him a kiss and followed Mona out.

After pouring three rum and cokes down her throat, and feeding her all the chocolate in our restocked mini-fridge, I was able to talk Mona off the ledge with the promise that Pete and I would handle the epic hailstorm that would be Jimbo when he found out. If we had to park Mrytle on his chest to keep him from coming up here and skinning Ryan alive, we’d do it.

I left her passed out in the fetal position and locked myself in the bathroom. After turning on the faucet to dampen the sound, I forewarned Pete.



I had been looking forward to taking Mona to the end of week reception after another glorious day of shopping. There were so many people I wanted her to meet, so many with whom she should network. Instead, I contacted Jayne and had her change our flight to the earliest available. As the sun rose, we said goodbye to Philadelphia from twenty-thousand feet.

Early that same evening, I met Jimbo at the bar. I knew Pete had already talked to him, and that he'd imploded. And by now, poor Mona had surely confessed her non-sin. It was my turn.

"Jimbo."

"Susan," he grunted.

"May I speak with you out back?" He turned immediately, and I followed him through the *employees only* door and out the delivery entrance. The pungent aroma of rotting fruit and soured beer wafting from the dumpster nearly made me gag.

Jimbo turned on me. "I'm gonna kill that motherfucker, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

"I'm onboard with your plan. In fact, I'll be happy to give you his address. I just need you to wrap your mind around two things first. One, Mona did absolutely *nothing* wrong. She did not lead him on in any imaginable way; in fact, she barely even spoke to him. The only reason he touched her at all was to piss me off." Jimbo narrowed his eyes accusingly. "Two, though he's duly deserving of a full measure of your wrath, he's rich, arrogant, and sleazy as hell, which means he can afford *really* good lawyers."

"I don't give a shit about that."

"I know you don't. But Mona does. See, she just married the only man in the world she's ever loved, and it would be a travesty if the only time she got to see that man was during visiting hours at a Pennsylvania penitentiary."

He spat on the ground and cursed under his breath. After several long minutes, consumed with what appeared to be a fierce argument between his conscience, his love for Mona, and the righteous indignation of an obscenely protective husband, he pegged me with

a cold, crystalline look. "I'll think about what you said, and I'm not makin' any promises, but either way, I don't want her ever goin' up there again. You understand?"

I nodded gravely. "Completely."

Star of Wonder

There are things—*little* things—that you don't know about a person until you start living with them. Things, such as...your roomie is a hell of a lot neater than you are; or that he prefers reading in bed rather than watching TV; or, if you're really lucky like me, you discover your future spouse is a friggin' Christmas freak! This little detail revealed itself to me one fine evening, midway across the Atlantic Beach Bridge. Over the last week, I'd enjoyed the sight of Christmas lights twinkling from several homes on the water. Their reflections mirrored a certain holiday beauty. Then, on that fated night, my eyes latched onto what I could only describe as... *Okay, I still have no words.*

“What have you done?”

The entire house, from the mailbox to the end of the friggin' dock, was outlined in blinking neon. And the giant star mounted on top of the lighthouse? Don't even get me started.

“Ya love it, right?” Pete said, opening my car door.

“Love it? You can see our house from flippin' Jupiter!”

His grin was nearly as brilliant as Rudolph's blinking nose. “Ya think so?”

I gawked at the giant lighted balls dangling from the palm tree, and then back at him. “Who are you—Father Christmas?”

"I like the way you're thinking, Susie-Q. If I start now, I bet I could grow a big ol' beard by next December."

"I, I...I can't even talk to you right now!" I turned, stormed into the house, and slammed the door. Then I stormed right back out again. "And where did all this damned mistletoe come from?"

"I shot it out of a tree with Jimbo's shotgun." At my horrified expression, he grinned hugely. "Pucker up, sweetheart."



"What are you gettin' your mamma for Christmas?" Mona asked at lunch the next day. Though fully aware of Pete's holiday fetish, she'd somehow neglected to warn me.

"And mistletoe's poisonous, anyway." *I hadn't finished my rant.* "I may make a brew from the berries and slip it in his coffee. Death by Christmas. See how he likes that," I muttered.

"Well, I thought it was real sweet of Jimbo to bring some home. He hung it right over our bedroom door. He's so romantic." I raised my eyebrows and stared at her, unblinking. "Well, he is!" she said. "I mean, Pete is, too, of course."

"Pete's a freak."

"Well, what'd you get your mamma?"

"A bunch of crocheting crap. That's all she wants. Oh, and a gift certificate to a bed and breakfast off the Blue Ridge Parkway. I thought she and Gary might like that."

My mother's gentleman friend hadn't proposed, and I hoped he wouldn't, but my mom had never seemed happier, and that pleased me more than I thought possible. She deserved love more than anyone in this world ever had. "I mailed it today."

Mona gaped at me. "You're not going to see her for Christmas!"

"No, we're staying here." I was looking forward to some serious alone time with Pete; time where we didn't have to go to work; time when we could sleep in until noon and then make love the rest of the day. Now, that was my idea of the perfect Christmas. "Besides, I'm

sure she'd rather see you than me." Mona was basically her second daughter—her *favorite* daughter by far, I might add. They talked on the phone more than we did. In fact, I still wasn't sure Mona wasn't Mom's secret lovechild.

Mona scoffed, and then tutted me. "Ya ought to go."

"Are *you* going home?" I assumed Charlotte, Jimbo's mother, would have a strong opinion about her only child celebrating Christmas with in-laws living across the entire state.

Mona smiled warmly. "Uh huh. Day after tomorrow. It's our first married Christmas, and since we spent Thanksgivin' over at Charlotte's, it's only fair we spend Christmas with my family. There's a huge to-do on Christmas Day. We have a big ol' dinner for about forty of us, and there's a gag gift exchange. It's a whole lot of fun, and Jimbo'll just love it. Mamma called Charlotte and invited her, but she said she was gonna spend it with her sisters. She's not used to him not bein' hers alone. I understand that and all, but, well, he's got a wife now. Besides, we'll drive back here the next mornin' and have a late Christmas with her."

"And how does Jimbo feel about that?"

She giggled. "Jimbo'll do about anything I ask right now. I'm sure that'll change in time, but either way, I'm the luckiest girl alive."

"If you say so," I muttered.



Returning from a long run, I had no trouble finding our nearly hidden driveway—what with the heavenly glow and all. I rolled my eyes at the blinking snowman beside the steps and then staggered into the kitchen in search of Gatorade. There, I found my darling love sitting at the granite island, staring rapt at his laptop's screen.

I leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Whatcha looking at?"

"I had no idea how many Christmas festivities go on in Winston. The list is endless."

"So?"

“So, I don’t want to miss any of them.”

“What are you talking about? We’re staying here.”

He turned and looked at me incredulously. “Don’t you want to go home?”

I shrugged. “This is home now. Besides, I was hoping we’d have a quiet ‘you and me’ Christmas.”

“You don’t have a lot of family, but I can’t imagine they wouldn’t want to see you. And I know it’d mean the world to Polly if we went. I’m sure she’s planning a feast.”

I smirked. He was right, of course. She’d been pestering me for—“Wait a minute!” I said, eyeing him suspiciously. “Did she put you up to this?”

He smiled and shook his head. “My idea.”

“Bull!”

“Look, if my mamma was still alive, that’s where I’d want us to be. It’s only right that we spend it at yours.”

“Fine,” I said, exhaling heavily. With them both against me, I knew I’d have no chance of winning this fight. “But you’re going to miss some very fine festivities in front of that fireplace!”

He glanced at the hearth longingly, his pupils dilating on the spot. Then he inhaled deeply. “We’ll do New Year’s up right. Anita’s hostin’ the party this year.”

“A drunken orgy,” I said, smirking. But deep inside, I glowed with nostalgia—or the lack thereof. I’d been perhaps the loneliest girl on the planet last New Year’s Eve. Certain Pete was out of my life forever, my emptiness had consumed me. The thought of kissing his highly intoxicated self at the stroke of midnight this year was purely glorious.

“Well, if the fireplace is out,” he said, gripping the hem of my running shirt and pulling it over my head as he stood, “then why don’t I help you with your shower?”



“Susie!” my mother shouted before the car had come to a full stop. She raced to my door and flung it open, hugging me where I sat, still buckled. In a flurry, she then scurried around to Pete’s side, her arms open wide.

“Ya look beautiful as always, Polly,” he said, pecking her on the cheek.

“Now stop that. You’re gonna make me blush.” Pete carried our bags into the house, and we followed my mother down the hall. “Now, Peter, I’ve got the guest room all fixed up for you, and Susie’ll sleep in her old bedroom, of course.”

“Mother, we humored you when we announced our engagement, but we are grown adults, living together—” Pete raised his eyebrows just as the bomb detonated.

“Y’all are not livin’ together out of wedlock!” she exclaimed in horror, her face paling.

“Are you flippin’ for real? I’m thirty-one years old. I’ll do whatever I damn well please.” Pete laid a hand on my back and gently patted it. Translation: *Chill*.

“We didn’t want to upset ya, Polly,” he interjected. “What I think Susie-Q means is—”

“Mom, we’re sleeping in the same room, and that’s final.”

She didn’t meet my eyes, but said, “Alright. Do what ya want.” She then turned on her heels and went back to the kitchen.

Pete looked at me and shook his head. “You are somethin’ else.”

I narrowed my eyes and dragged my suitcase to the *Susan Wade Memorial Shrine*. The walls were still the lavender of my childhood, and the princess-style furniture I’d thought so sophisticated when I was eleven, was still neatly and perfectly placed as if I’d never left home. My track and field ribbons and various academic awards still clung to the same cheap corkboard that had been hanging in the corner since junior high, and the yellowed *Bon Anniversaire* sign my French class had made for my sixteenth birthday still topped the mirror. Pete lifted the *Soapbox Derby* trophy from the small shelf

Daddy had made for it and smirked. “Honorable Mention? Knowin’ how you drive, I’m surprised ya didn’t win the whole thing.”

“I freaked out on the blocks and rode my brake the whole way down the hill, okay?”

“You?”

I grinned. “I was ten, it was steep, and I’ve spent the rest of my life making up for it.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “Yes, darlin’, I’m well aware of that.”

“Y’all come on and sit down,” Mom bellowed. “I’ve cooked you a pot roast.”

Pete literally towed me up the hall. “How can we refuse an offer like that, Polly? And, boy, does it smell good!”

Once seated, she looked us over sternly. “Did y’all wash your hands?” My jaw dropped in utter astonishment.

“I was just about to do that,” Pete said, hopping back up and disappearing.

“What the hell, Mom?”

“Susie Wade!”

I pushed back my chair and headed for the bathroom, muttering mean things under my breath, and I continued muttering as I washed my perfectly clean hands. “What does she think we are, six?”

“Hush now. Let her be.”

“She may not live through the weekend.” He reached over, pecked my cheek, and steered me back to the table.

“Pete, would you bless the food?” Mom asked.

“I’d be delighted to.” After the *Amen*, he loaded his plate to overflowing. “Polly, you have outdone yourself.” Pot roast, potatoes, carrots, and onions cooked in Campbell’s cream of mushroom soup; Pete was in heaven. “And the rolls. Mmm!”

“I’ve had ’em risin’ all day.”

“I can tell. Would you pass the butter, Susie-Q?”

Still annoyed with my mother, I picked at my food sparingly. It was good, of course, but the South was on a deliberate mission to destroy my hard-earned figure. Pete glanced at my plate and said,

“You’re ready for seconds already? Let me help ya.” He dished a substantial helping of pot roast onto my plate and gave me a look that said, *please be kind to your mamma*.

Coming home was very hard for me. My childhood had not been a pleasant one, and Daddy’s ghost still haunted the place, casting shadows and harsh memories in the recesses. “It’s delicious, Mom. Thanks for going to all this trouble,” I said, biting into one of her famous yeast rolls.

“Well, I don’t get to see y’all often, what with you livin’ so far away”—*a whopping two-hundred-fifty miles*—“and workin’ those long hours”—*no comment*. The mistress of guilt, any way I responded would leave her winning the round, so I just stuffed a forkful of potatoes in my mouth and smiled tightly.

After dessert, we retired to the family room for two hours of idle chit-chat. Mom had started volunteering at the symphony this fall. Mom’s watercolor classes were going well. Mom and Gary had gone to Williamsburg again for Thanksgiving. Mom thrust two hundred pictures in our laps, over which we were expected to ooh and ahh. Mom’s church Christmas cantata had gone off wonderfully, as evidenced by the video we then were forced to watch in its entirety. Mom was so busy, it was exhausting even hearing about it. Take home message: Mom was happy, and that made me smile.

“Man, I’m beat. I think we’ll turn in,” Pete announced, winking at me as WXII Channel twelve’s ten o’clock news came on.

“Yeah,” I said, fake yawning. “It’s been a long day. Night, Mom.”

“Y’all sleep well,” she said, glowering with disapproval.

I followed Pete’s so very nice ass down the darkened hallway and closed the door. My room was only slightly larger than my closet at home, and we bumped into each other getting toothbrushes out and scrounging through our suitcases for pajamas we would only need in case of emergency—or pretense. As I brushed by him on my way to the bathroom, a flame ignited inside me. As if sensing it, his eyes sparked.

“I’ll be right back.”

"I'll be waitin'." His voice was low and held unmistakable promises.

I scurried back to find him stretched out in bed, his arms spread across the headboard, his chest gloriously exposed. I actually salivated. "You know," I whispered, snuggling in beside him, "no man's ever slept in this bed before."

"Is that right?"

I nodded.

"Nobody tried to scale the wall?"

"Not one pebble thrown."

A very self-satisfied look spread across his face. "You have no idea how happy that makes me." He clicked off the little lamp and rolled on top of me, entrapping me in an inescapable cage. I trailed kisses across his jawline, and then nipped at his earlobe. He quietly groaned before finding my lips, his tongue leisurely exploring my mouth. My hands slowly slid down the back I knew so well, enjoying the feel of his skin, his muscled ridges and tapers. He was a great and beautifully-made thing, and sometimes I still had trouble believing he was mine.

As his lips began a slow descent down my stomach, Mom's slippers squeaked on the wooden floor outside our door. We froze.

"Night y'all," she said loudly.

"Night," we replied in the same cheery tone. Pete chuckled softly, and I snorted.

"We should have a wild night of passion just to piss her off," I whispered.

His teeth flashed in the darkness. "I'm in."

Instead, we made love as quietly as possible. The mattress was old and creaked in rebuke. When my mind started leaving me, I bit down on my moan. Pete's speed increased, and on a particularly powerful thrust, a loud crack startled us, and the bottom left corner of the bed suddenly dipped. Pete lost his rhythm entirely and buried his face against my shoulder, shaking with silent laughter. "Oh Lord," he gasped, "we've gone and broken the bed."

Flipping on the nightstand lamp, I hung over the side to see what damage we'd done. "Holy crap! The leg's completely gone."

"Here, hop off, and I'll brace it for the night. I'm sure I can fix it in the mornin'."

Just then, there was a prim knock on the door. "Everything alright in there?"

"Just fine, Polly," Pete answered in a humor-drenched voice. "Susan fell right out of the bed." I punched his arm.

"Well, it's awfully small for two, I s'pose. Try and be more careful, Susie. Night."

I glared at Pete, whose face was beet red with uncorked laughter. "Bastard," I whispered.

He lifted the frame and propped the leg upright to hold the corner in place. Then he grabbed a stack of dusty books and shoved them under the box springs for good measure. After gingerly climbing back under the covers, he wrapped himself around me. His arousal poked into my backside, and when he began kissing my shoulder, I elbowed him in the ribs.

"Unh uh, buddy. You're on your own."

The bed held a double mattress—an extra small double, it appeared. It had seemed fairly roomy to me in the past. Of course, I didn't have a full-sized man taking up most of it. Over the course of the night, as we tossed and turned, sleep-fighting each other for space, the leg flipped out of Pete's makeshift "fix" two more times.

At five a.m., I snatched up a pair of sweats. "That's it. I'm going for a run."

The old neighborhood had changed little; small ranches neatly lining uninteresting, but kempt landscaping. The asphalt was in need of repair, and too many cars were packed into small driveways and on lawns. When I returned an hour later, a new and better person, I found Pete seated at the dining room table, polishing off a doughnut. He plucked another from the box. "Want one? They're still warm."

"Warm? Like, just off the conveyer belt warm?"

“Say you want me.”

I leaned over and licked sugar glazing from the corner of his mouth. “I want you right on top of this table.”

I straddled his lap and sucked on his lower lip, trapping it between my teeth. A low growl rumbled deep in his chest. He grasped my bottom and pressed my pelvis against the erection bulging in his jeans. His hand slipped under my nylon shirt and slid up my sweat-slicked back.

“How’d y’all sleep?” Mom asked, shuffling up the hall. I jumped off Pete like he was a car hood in July.

“Like babies in a crib,” Pete replied as she came into view.

“Susie, your face is all flushed.”

“Just got back from a run. Gotta hit the shower.” I popped a bite of doughnut into my mouth and hustled down the hall before she could inspect me further.

9

The Holy Bible of Sex

Our clasped hands swung as we meandered down the busy Thruway Shopping Center sidewalk, searching for stocking stuffers for my mom.

“How about a purse?” Pete offered. “You like them.”

“I collect them like art. Mom uses the same one all the time. Knowing her, she’d just take it back.”

“What about a cooking gadget?”

“That would be you. She’s a tool minimalist.”

“A necklace?” he suggested, nodding towards the display of sparkling stones. The jewelry store definitely looked inviting. I remember gazing through its windows as a teen, wishing I could afford anything inside. I smiled to myself; I certainly could now.

“Shall we?” I asked, taking his arm.

The door dinged as we entered, and an expectant face warmly greeted us. After only minimal debate, I slapped down my Amex black card to the shocked delight of the salesman, who then tried to tempt me with diamond stud earrings.

“Bet you could use a snack,” Pete announced a bit later. Code for: *I’m hungry and/or you’re getting grumpy.*

We discovered a café/bookstore, and he held the door for me. The aroma of heaven itself hit out noses. “Oh yeah,” Pete said, gazing at

the chocolate chip cookies cooling on a rack. He snagged a menu. "Hmm, today's special is tuna salad on croissant with melted Havarti. Sounds good to me."

"Thanks to last night's supper, I'll be doing the salad thing."

After devouring our food and splitting a large gooey cookie, we perused the aisles in no particular hurry. "Check this out: adult coloring books. I may have to buy one of these," Pete said, laughing.

"And Santa can bring you crayons," I snarked.

As Pete dug through the mountain of options, I snuck to the cookbook section, searching for one he might not actually own. Then I compared their prices to Amazon's.

"Susie-Q, I just found the holy bible of sex. This is goin' right under the tree. The *Karma Sutra* is the gift that keeps on givin'!" I snorted.

A piercing female giggle erupted as I turned down the next aisle. I glanced up, fully expecting to see a group of high school kids. They were, in fact, high school kids; they'd just grown up to adult size. I did a double take at the man standing in front of me, and then examined the woman batting her eyelashes at him. I hadn't seen either of them in over a decade.

As my blood drained to parts unknown, all I could think of was scampering to the horror section, where my face would look no more terrified than those on the covers. Unfortunately, my feet seemed to have taken root in the carpet.

At first, the man, his eyes filled with unchecked lust for the blonde, didn't notice me. But becoming aware of my blatant stare, he glanced fleetingly at my face, and then his eyes swept my form, lingered on my legs before finding my breasts. He offered me a lecherous smile when our eyes met. His behavior was a minor offense at best; rude, but not particularly abnormal. What hurt in a way I found hard to articulate was the obvious fact that he didn't remember me.

I shook my head ruefully then turned and focused on the book titles beside me, not really seeing words so much as binding

colors. *Of course, he wouldn't remember you*, my demon chided. *You meant nothing to him.*

"Susie Wade?" he said suddenly.

"Tyler," I responded all too quickly. My acting skills failing me, I realized belatedly that I'd forgotten to feign surprise or even confusion about his identity. I mentally kicked myself.

His eyes were the beautiful blue I remember, and he'd filled out quite nicely. He wore a wedding ring, which made the lascivious grin spreading across his face as his eyes fondled my breasts once more, utterly repulsive. "You look mighty fine."

The blonde glanced at me, and her mouth fell open. "Susie Wade? Oh. My. Lord. I can't believe it! You remember me, don't yew? Darla Jennings?" She shuffled over in her high heels, her fake breasts pressing into my chest as she hugged me like I was a long-lost friend, rather than her personal whipping post.

She then held me at arm's length and catalogued the female attributes Tyler had missed: hair, weight, make-up, clothes, purse, shoes. Interestingly, her expression suggested awe. "I heard you were a big shot up North. Are ya home visitin' your mamma?"

"Yes," I answered robotically.

Darla then glanced between Tyler and me as electricity crackled. His power source: the *hey baby, let's go watch Netflix and chill* kind; mine: the *I hate you and I've died a thousand deaths, wallowing in the despair of the rejected* type. My palms were moist, and my heart was racing. That had been my go-to response whenever he swaggered past me in the dingy halls of our high school, all perfect and beautiful.

Darla said, "Hey, didn't y'all used to date?"

"Yes!" Tyler loudly announced.

"Sort of," I mumbled synchronously.

"Who's this?" the alpha male materializing beside me asked. Darla's tongue actually fell out of her mouth, and I'm pretty sure she started panting.

"Um...this is Darla Jennings, and, um, this is Tyler *I stole your heart*

and virginity then dropped you like a hot lava rock Nail.” Yes, that was his actual last name. And boy had he been that legacy realized.

“Well, hey Darla, Tyler. I’m Pete Walsh.” He reached out to shake their hands, his eyes trained on Tyler’s face like the laser sight of a rifle. “Susan’s fiancé,” he added.

Darla’s eyes instantly dropped to my left hand, and she did a double take. *Oh, hell yeah, biotch!* I smiled sweetly then looked at hers. Bare. *Interesting.*

Pete began stroking my back, and warmth spread through me, along with a shot of confidence. “They are—*were* classmates of mine.”

I had to hand it to him. He registered my surely blanched complexion and the anxiety my wooden stiffness must have betrayed. One of the more psychologically astute members of the human race, he opened up a can of verbal whoopass and doled it out generously. I fully committed to thanking him in every position the *Karma Sutra* illustrated.

“Classmates? Did y’all attend Northwestern, too? Academically ranked tenth in the nation. Y’all’ve got to be so proud. I doubt there’s a single graduate from Susan’s class who isn’t successful. I mean, Susan’s slated to be an officer of the largest computer company in the world.”—*I did not know that*—“I’m lucky she even talks to me. So, what business are y’all in?”

“Textiles,” Tyler boasted, his eyes boring into Pete’s. Of course he was in textiles; his grandfather owned a carpet factory.

“No, honey,” I interjected. “They’re *high school* classmates.”

“High school? Oh, sorry about that. I just assumed.” Then he cocked his head. “You know, I was very surprised to learn Susan wasn’t homecoming queen. I mean, just look at her. A few more inches and she’d be a supermodel.”

I looked up at him like he’d lost his ever-loving mind, and then at the actual homecoming queen, the king standing right beside her. It struck me suddenly how very sad the sight of the two of them together was: not sad for me, but sad in a cosmic way. Here, some

twelve years after high school, the same people were hovering around one another, their clique a life sentence. And I wondered, had I ended up moving back home, would I have remained in my same caste as well; locked in the social rankings of childhood?

While Pete and Tyler stared one another down, a dense fog of awkwardness rose up between us, and the buried memories of my youth, of the way these people had treated me—of how they had looked down on me and made me feel inadequate and inferior in all ways, crawled from their shallow graves. I felt a piece of my soul shrivel, and I wanted nothing more than to sink into that blinding fog and disappear.

Pete, sentient as always, suddenly met my eyes and seemed to register my anguish. He pulled me tightly against him and whispered, “I got this.” Then he turned back, banners waving, and charged.

“So, where did y’all go to college?”

Darla looked at the floor, suggesting she’d missed graduation day, but Tyler puffed out his chest and replied, “Carolina. You?”

Pete smiled, all cocky. “Vanderbilt. You look like the fraternity type. Who’d ya pledge?” The entirety of my knowledge on the subject gleaned from a handful of snooty girls in a few of my classes, that question would never have crossed my mind. Clearly, it meant something to Tyler, because he recoiled.

“Kappa Sigma,” he muttered.

Other than the hum suddenly vibrating through his body, Pete was silent for a moment—a dramatic silence, during which I’m certain I heard the scream of a ballistic missile. “Really?” Pete raised a censorial brow. “That must be a sore subject, what with your chapter bein’ dismantled and all. I can promise your brothers at Vandy were shocked senseless when the scandal made national news. Farm animals,” Pete tsked. “Oh Lord, y’all must’ve been desperate.”

Tyler’s face alternated at regular intervals between ghost white and beet red while he tried to make his mouth work again. I took the time to compare my stunning future husband to this man—boy still, in my mind—who I’d once believed I loved. Though still attractive,

the golden aura surrounding him at seventeen had disappeared; he was now merely mortal. And though I'm quite certain Pete's seventeen year-old self was surrounded by a similar glow, if anything, it had magnified. And unlike Tyler's air of snobbish entitlement, bolstered exclusively by generational wealth, Pete's confidence stemmed from a deep respect for family and community, and his financial success had been achieved solely through hard work and fierce determination.

"Honey, we've got to meet Mom at three," I lied.

He glanced at his watch accordingly.

Tyler cleared his throat and finally spoke. "Well, it's been great seein' you, Susie. Here's my card. Next time y'all are in town—*eyes solely on me*—give me a call." He winked, a snotty smile spreading across his lips.

"We'll be sure to do that," Pete replied, snatching the card from his hand. As we left the bookstore, he tossed it in the trash without a glance, and I stared at him with newfound admiration.

"Who exactly were you channeling back there?"

He snorted. "As in every walk of life, there are assholes, and my sophomore roommate topped the list. Plus, I can smell a Kappa Sig a mile away. Don't know how many of 'em I had to put down in college. And with a *pig*?" He shook his head in disgust. "It's damned embarrassing."

Pete turned on the ignition and hit my seat warmer. Then he looked carefully at my face, all humor gone. "You wanna tell me what happened back there?"

There are those conversations you inevitably have with your lover—usually early on in the relationship: when you lost your virginity, how many sexual partners you've had, etc. Pre-Pete, I hadn't cared in the slightest about reciting my stats. My relationship with Ryan had been my longest, and his only interest in such information was as a means of exploiting others in the company for personal gain.

Pete and I had never really gone there—not in the standard sense.

I knew vague details about Ashleigh, the girl who'd claimed his young heart, and of course Babs, his high school sweetheart—that title, as I understood it, shared with half the men in New Bern (rough estimate). He'd never said she was his first, or even if they'd had sex, but having met her, there's little way any teenaged boy could turn that kind of shit down. And though I assumed there'd been a legion of women in between those two, when it came to partners, blissful ignorance was the state in which I paid my emotional taxes.

Though he didn't ask directly, he was clearly curious. And I honestly didn't want to answer. Keeping secrets from him was not my M.O., per se, but this man I truly loved. This man made me wish I'd saved my virginity for him.

When I answered with a single headshake, he tried a different approach. "Okay. So tell me what kind of person could rattle the most beautiful, confident, successful woman I've ever met—someone who, if unleashed, is quite capable of taking over the entire free world?"

I sighed. "Pete, don't ask questions you don't want answers to." His face darkened perceptively. I sighed in surrender. "Okay, do you remember the night we met?"

"I'll never forget it." His smile was radiant.

"Remember how I was such a bitch?"

"You were in rare form," he answered, a dreamy smile forming.

"And do you remember our faux-date when I accused you of being a lot of things you really weren't?"

He nodded.

"He's why."

"Ah." After a moment of silence, he lifted my chin and looked into my eyes. "There is no one on this planet who can ever make you feel badly about yourself. Plenty will try, but in the end, it's your call." He then kissed my knuckles and let the subject drop.



We only exchanged stocking-stuffers at Mom's, though he kept threatening to put that stupid book under the tree. I think we both wanted our personal gift-giving to be done in private—preferably with no clothes on.

“Open it,” he said, kissing my cheek. Our king-size bed was an island floating in a sea of boxes and wrapping paper. It had been a William-Sonoma Christmas for Pete, as I'd purchased the last thirteen items he did not already possess from that fabulous kitchen store. I'd been hiding the copper fish steamer in the back of my closet for over a month. Inside, I'd planted the lingerie surprise I was currently wearing—well, sort of wearing.

“C'mon,” he cajoled, running the milk-frother gently up my arm. I unwrapped the large, yet very light box. Inside was another.

“This isn't one of those nesting deals is it?”

He laughed. “I figured you'd beat me if I put more than three together. I was right on target.” The small box sent a large thrill through me.

“Thought we could start our own luck,” he said as I cracked the lid. Beautiful diamonds glittered up at me from their pale satin pillow. “They're not the same quality as your ring. Considerin' the trouble you have with earrings, I thought it unwise. Ow!” he then yelped as I twisted his nipple.

“They're lovely,” I said, mesmerized. As with my ring, they were set in a beautiful and unusual way. “I'll wear them on our wedding day.”

He kissed me tenderly. “I was hopin' ya would.”

Bridezilla strikes!

“The dress has arrived!” Mona announced.

Buddy Williams, the postmaster himself, marched down the hall behind her, carrying the large box. He set it on the floor carefully. “It’s supposed to go to your house, and it’s a federal offense to take it anywhere else, but I knew you’d want to see it soon as it arrived.” Glancing back at Jayne, he smiled sheepishly.

Though Joe Pat had clearly staked his claim on Jayne, having taken her to dinner several times, he was not her only suitor. I sensed a storm brewing that only a good bar fight could fix.

I couldn’t say she was immensely attractive, but she had a certain charm that seemed to attract males who would be considered her peers. While her figure was still pleasing, and her voice deep and smoky, I believe it was her general air of authority that drew these ex-military men to her like metal shavings to a magnet. What’s more, being a marine brat, she was one of them by extension.

My office door was suddenly crowded with staff. Buddy pulled out a box cutter and very carefully slid it across the top. I ripped open the box as soon as he stepped away.

“Ooh!” Mona exclaimed, running her fingers down the bodice. “I believe it’s even prettier than the one in the store. Try it on!”

“Everyone but Mona—out,” I ordered. They fled as I cheerfully

slammed the door. I then hugged it; hugged it to my chest and danced around the room with it in a sloppy waltz. While stripping down to my underwear, Mona cooed to it as she unfastened its buttons.

“Okay, climb on in.” She held up the gown, and I gingerly stepped into it, my body immediately swallowed down its silky throat. I pressed my arms to my sides, holding the bodice in place as Mona fastened the back. Glancing down, I decided my red bra straps made me look like a harlot passing herself off as a virgin. I laughed at the thought.

“Okay, you can let go now,” she said.

I did. I did, and the bodice sank to my hips like a deflated balloon. “Mona, I think you missed a couple of key buttons.”

“Honey, I surely did not.”

“You fastened all of them?”

“Every last one.” I turned to her, and she gasped, throwing her hands over her mouth.

“Oh, this is a nightmare!” I wailed.

She began fretting and fussing with the back. “Finally, she said, I s’pose you could order the next size down.”

“This is the next size down! Remember? She measured me before she placed the order.”

“Well, I guess you could eat a little bit more.”

I glared at her. “I’m calling Saks!” I dragged the weighty train to my desk and pulled out the bridal consultant’s card, tapping the numbers of her direct line. “Hello” barely spilled from her lips before I attacked. “This is Susan Wade. My dress just arrived and it doesn’t fit!”

“Oh dear. Hold the line, please.” I tapped my foot impatiently as I listened to the crappy music, interrupted periodically by ads touting their high quality of service, an upcoming perfume extravaganza, and the ever-popular “open a Saks card today...” Some five minutes later, she returned.

“Miss Wade, my records show that you tried on our size thirty-four and it was too large.”

“Yes, Marion, and you assured me the thirty-two would fit perfectly, so that’s the one *you* ordered. Do you have *that* in your records?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it doesn’t fit!” I screeched.

“I see. Let me put you on hold once more.”

I rolled my eyes and Mona looked at me quizzically. “I’m on hold again.”

When Marion returned this time, I could hear the panic in her voice. My heart accelerated tenfold. “I’ve just been on the phone with the designer in Italy. Unfortunately, they’ve retired that particular style.”

“What exactly does ‘retired’ mean?”

“In layman’s terms, your dress has been discontinued and is no longer available.”

“Can’t you just order one from another store?”

“Each dress is custom made. I’m so very sorry.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

“We do have a wonderful alterations department. Just pop over and have our seamstress take a look. She’s quite gifted.”

“I can’t just ‘pop’ over. I live in North Carolina!”

“Oh. That *is* a problem. She certainly can’t alter it without measurements. And of course, you’ll want to do a final fitting for any last minute adjustments.”

“Hold, please.” After stabbing the button with enough force to crack the glass, I turned to Mona and sweetly said, “You may want to step outside for a moment.” She flew out as if strapped to a jet engine, the door slamming behind her. I calmly took off my shoes, threw them against the wall with all my might, and screamed bloody murder. I then sucked in several deep, cleansing breaths and took Marion off hold. “Connect me with alterations, please,” I said sweetly.

“Immediately, Miss Wade.”

I opened my office door, and a wide-eyed Mona tiptoed back in. During the next five minutes of listening to the painful sounds of scratchy Chopin, we discussed the situation.

“I have to take the flippin’ dress back to Philly for alterations.”

“Well, Sally Russ over at Belk’s does a fine job. She did my dress, remember?”

“She did,” I said with a tight smile. Honestly, there was nothing wrong with Sally’s work on Mona’s uncomplicated dress, but she sure as hell wasn’t touching my *x*-thousand dollar masterpiece. This was *my* wedding, dammit! “I’ll just ‘pop’ over during January’s budget meeting.”

Saks’ seamstress finally came on the line, and I set up the appointment.



“Independence Hall...” Pete murmured, suckling one of my breasts. I moaned in ecstasy while his magical tongue performed great feats of...well, magic. When he gently twisted my nipple with his teeth, I nearly convulsed.

“The Liberty Bell...” he continued. His fingers slowly traced the contours of my ribcage, waist, and hips while he delivered the lightest of butterfly kisses down my stomach. He spread my legs apart and shouldered them. His tongue swirled around my clitoris, and then he blew on it. I writhed, my hips bucking. “Fancy hotel room...”

“I know what you’re doing,” I gasped, balling wads of sheet in my hands.

“Great food...” He slid a finger inside me.

“Nonstop—*argh*—meetings,” I garbled.

A second finger followed the first, and he began moving them in that torturously slow and utterly illicit way that generally rendered me incapable of thought.

“Historical sites...”

“Covered with snow—right there! Don’t stop.”

“Shopping...” he whispered, pressing firmly against me with his tongue.

“Yes!” I screamed out as a violent orgasm rolled through me. He skillfully teased it out for the length of eternity. Finally pulled back to earth by thoughtless gravity, I whimpered, “I mean, no.”

Positioning himself above me, his eyes bored into mine. “I want ya safe.” And with those words still hovering in the air, he slammed into me in a single, powerful thrust, driving his point home.

Starbursts exploded beneath my eyelids. I scored his back fiercely as I yelled out, “I am!”

He pulled back slowly until nearing the point of disconnection. “You’re not.” Then he thrust deeply into me once more and began slowly rolling his hips in a way that will never be legalized.

“Differences between Mona and me,” I panted as we found a steady rhythm. “One, I know the terrain.” His speed increased, and I groaned gutturally. “Two—*harder*—I have allies.” I wrapped my legs around him to anchor myself and ground my pelvis into him. “And three, as you—*ohh*—often remind me—*oh fuck*—I’m meaner than a snake. Pete!” I screamed out, as I shattered into fine pieces. “You’re not coming!”

“I am!” burst from his lips as his breath exploded. His body shuddered violently, and my inner walls clenched around him as he throbbed. He then collapsed, panting. I ran my fingers through his damp hair, twisting strands, and then drew serpentine designs on his slick back, while our hearts slowed. After a few moments, he rose up on his elbows and kissed me tenderly. “I love you, Susie-Q.”

My heart still skipped a beat whenever he said those words. “I love you, too.” I kissed him ardently, and then said, “But you’re still not coming.” I then bit his lip to drive my point home.



I had mailed my dress to Saks so I didn’t have to haul that sucker

on the plane. Now standing on a pedestal with pins sticking into me like an acupuncture session gone wrong, I fidgeted while the seamstress made tutting sounds.

“Can you have it finished by Wednesday?” I asked, once dressed.

The woman snorted. “Do I look like miracle worker? Twenty dresses before you. Twenty. Then you.”

“But—”

“When you marry?”

“April,” I mumbled.

“No Wednesday! I call when ready. Have nice day. Okay, bye-bye!”

I grumbled my way down the escalator, but as soon as I saw the bank of cosmetics vendors, I skipped to the Dior counter and forgot all my troubles. “What’s free with purchase this month?” I asked cheerily.

II

Saved by the Scratch

I would never be poor again. I'd made myself that promise in college, and I'd spent my adult life fulfilling it. But after nine months of nearly starving to death, professionally speaking, I marched into the January's fiscal budget meeting with sword drawn.

This was, without a doubt, the most vicious, no-holds-barred, fight-to-the-death event of the year, with all the district managers crowded around a single table, staking claims to mineral rights. Based on last year's disaster, I presented my tale of woes with great passion, letting loose my entire stockpile of artillery in one great burst. Armed with formidable *VIN* diagrams, death-defying bar graphs, and boldly colored pie charts so vivid they could be seen from space, I was taking no prisoners, nor was I walking out of here with less than my fair share of the budgetary booty.

"No fucking, goddamned way is she getting that much!" Gregory Foster growled.

"You wanna make a bet, asshole?" I retorted.

Greg looked angrily at Bob, and then, pointing his finger at me like a first-grader, spat, "Her budget was half that last year. My district needs a complete technology overhaul, and I'll be traveling back and forth to Asia at least three times in the next six months. She's not even outlined any specifics for her travel budget. Who

knows where the hell she's planning to go. Her state's a tiny piece of shit, Bob. She doesn't need any more money!"

"Bite me, Greg. I have a ton of upcoming meetings stateside, and unlike you, I don't need boondoggles to Asia every two months. That's what conference calls are for! Plus, I've had to replace staff—*key* staff. Keeping them costs real money!"

"You're unprofessional, and you don't need any more fucking money."

Ah, I realized then that this was about last Quarterlies when I'd accidentally stepped on his foot. "Half the people here need increases. Weren't you listening to Finn's presentation? He's practically drowning in Maine. And I feel so bad for Fisher I'm about to write him a personal check!"

"Enough," Bob barked, his glasses riding up on his forehead as he rubbed his eyes. "North Carolina's budget was poorly negotiated last year, and when Susan took over in March, she had to run the district and play service rep until she could hire a replacement."

"Let me get my violin out," Greg muttered under his breath.

"She gets the two million increase she's requested. Foster, I'll grant you an additional three hundred-thousand for overseas travel and a partial technology upgrade, but otherwise, your current budget number stands. Now onto Finn..."

Greg flopped back in his chair, fuming like a spoiled child, and I rolled my eyes at Jeremy, who was too mesmerized by his massive pile of big district gold to even notice our little Shakespearean play.

When the meeting broke, everyone spilled from the stuffy conference room, laughing and teasing one another as if the earlier dogfights had never happened. Everyone except Greg, that is. Without warning, he walked right into my personal space and growled, "This isn't over."

I glanced back at the now empty room and laughed. "Um, yeah it is."

"You didn't deserve Ohio, and you don't deserve a budget

increase. In fact, you don't even deserve to be a district manager." And *that's* when I realized he was sleeping with Kirsten.

Suddenly seething, I snapped, "What's your problem?"

"Whoa, children, playtime's over." Jeremy draped his arm over my shoulders in clear demonstration of whose side he was on. "Did someone just take my district's name in vain?"

"Not your fight, Briggs," Greg said. He shot one last dagger at me and stormed down the hall.

"That dude's got anger management issues," I said, smiling up at Jeremy.

"Yeah. Whines about his budget every year."

Thinking back, I did vaguely recall Greg making a fuss last year, but, like Jeremy, I'd gotten to dip my ladle in the large districts' pot of gold, and I'd paid attention to little else after that.

Jeremy dropped his arm and said, "Do you want to grab a drink?"

"Blue Papaya?"

"Where else?" he replied.

"I need to drop my stuff off at the hotel first. I'll meet you there in half an hour."

"I'll have your cosmo waiting."

"You so rock!"

I hit the restroom, and then barely waited ten seconds before the elevator doors popped open. So pleased we'd have cash to spare this year, I entered, humming "Money for Nothing" by *Dire Straits*. Floating on my personal cloud of happy, I barely registered the other three people in the little metal box.

"Hi, Susan!"

"Denise, how are you?" I gave her a quick hug. "Tell me you aren't still working for Lord Voldemort."

The other two women snickered.

"Believe it or not, he won't let me leave."

"Well, you are very attractive."

"Thanks, but that's not why. Since he's taken to dating women

half his age, he doesn't even hit on me anymore. It's actually a pleasant environment now."

"If I'd had the money, and you'd had any interest in moving to North Carolina, I would have stolen you in a second."

"I heard you hired Ballbreaker."

I snorted. "Jayne's a sweetheart."

"Uh huh."

"What do you mean?"

Denise glanced at the other women, who'd stopped their conversation to listen. She smiled and shook her head. Rather than getting off on ground level with the others, I let the doors close.

"Okay, seriously. What do you know?"

"She doesn't stay in one place very long."

"I noticed that from her file, but everyone she's worked for has been major league."

The elevator dinged, and its doors opened onto garage level three. Denise patted my shoulder as she stepped out. "Just keep an eye on that one. She's seen it all, and she's *done* it all. It was great running into you."

"Same. Take care."

The doors closed again, and the elevator ascended back up to G. I was troubled, but I couldn't think of a single instance when Jayne hadn't gone above and beyond to make me happy. She'd worked miracles with what pittance remained of our budget, and thanks to this afternoon's winnings, this year would be a cakewalk for her. I inhaled with satisfaction.

The doors opened with a resounding ding. A tall, well-dressed man stood just outside them, cursing into his phone. He turned to the sound, and our eyes met. His face screwed up murderously, and I quickly jabbed the *close door* button. The panels stopped within inches of one another. I looked down to find a shiny black shoe wedged between them. Two sets of fingers gripped the doors, forcing them open wide enough for him to slide inside. He then neatly

pressed garage level one, raised an eyebrow, and then leaned back against the wall, eclipsing the emergency call button.

“I didn’t expect to see you so soon,” he said, slipping on expensive leather gloves with deliberation. His cologne filled the space, swirling around my head like dancing wisps of incense. “What am I going to do with you, Susan?”

“I have people waiting for me.”

“Well, I guess they’ll have to wait a little longer. Shall we take a ride?”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I said, “We have nothing to say that can’t be said here.”

I’m going to admit right now, that I was more than a little afraid. I had no idea what this man’s intentions might be, or for that matter, what he was honestly capable of. Regardless, he was significantly larger than me, meaner than me, and had me trapped in an elevator after hours. Adrenaline streaked through my veins like lightning, my breathing suddenly loud to my own ears.

“Nervous?” he asked with a smirk. “You should be. I don’t enjoy looking foolish in front of anyone. *Ever.*”

The doors opened, and I lunged for the nearly empty garage. My heels cracked like gunfire on the cement as I ran, their sound bouncing loudly off the cavernous walls in mocking echo. I only made it past a few cars before he caught up with me. My torso was slammed hard enough against the cold and unforgiving metal hull of some foreign sports car to knock the wind right out of me. I unsuccessfully gasped for air as he flipped me on my back. With a cruel smile, he raised a balled fist, and I instinctively crossed my arms over my face.

“Get the fuck away from my car!” an angry voice shouted just before Gregory’s head snapped sideways, and he dropped to the cement.

The man then looked at me, an incredibly surprised expression exploding across his features. “Susan, what the fuck?”

My mouth worked for a moment before the following words

popped out: I've honestly never been happier to see you in my entire life.

His lips unfurled into a lascivious grin. "Exactly *how* happy are you?"

I threw my arms around Ryan's neck and let out a strangled sob. "Just hold me for a minute, you leech."

Laughing, he wrapped his arms around me, and then said, "Shit, you're shivering." He quickly opened his buttery cashmere coat, and without hesitation, I snuggled against a body I knew too well.

After a long moment of rocking me, he said, "You want to tell me what's going on?"

I glanced at Greg's unconscious form, and then met his eyes. "Could you just get me the hell out of here?"

A burst of laughter rumbled through this chest. "Baby, I thought you'd never ask."



City lights flew by in great electric streaks, and I pondered whether or not I had just jumped from the frying pan into an all-consuming fire. But completely out of character, Ryan drove me directly to my hotel without argument. He tossed his keys to a now fully-erect valet, and then stopped, ran a finger across a spot near the engine, and frowned.

"Let's get you warm," he said suddenly, wrapping his arm around me and steering me into the impressive foyer. After a quick stop at the bar, he escorted me to my room, ordered dinner from room service, and sat on the desk across from me, one leg dangling, staring deeply into my eyes without a trace of sexual intent. "Alright, baby, start from the beginning."

I poured a generous portion of pinot noir into his glass, and then put the bottle to my lips. Enjoying the liquid warmth spreading through my limbs, I fell back into the stiffly upholstered chair and told him the extended, uncut version.

Ryan patiently listened, and when I'd finished, he lifted my chin with his finger, wiped away an errant tear, and smiled down at me like the predator he was. "That bastard will be gone before next Quarterlies."

"You really mean it?" I sniffled.

"I abosofuckinglutely do." He cocked a perfectly arrogant brow. "Nobody gets away with scratching *my* car."

I actually giggled, and his expression changed. "That's a nice sound. I haven't heard you laugh in a long time."

A knock at the door announced dinner. As food was quietly placed in front of me, Ryan slipped on his coat and fitted his hands into gloves looking all too similar to Greg's. He then dismissed the server with a surprisingly large tip and turned back to me.

His eyes unwavering, he said, "I've never loved anyone. But you've come closest." He leaned down and kissed my forehead softly. "Eat up, baby. Daddy's got work to do."

With a glint in his eye, he smiled sinisterly and disappeared into the night.

Mao Tse-Tung of Fashion

The crow's feet I'd spent a lifetime forming had completely vanished over the last year. Unfortunately, in the last month they'd made a startling comeback and were deepening by the day. Fifteen too many things demanded my attention; these on top of the normal pre-Quarterlies frenzy. In all honesty, had the building been more than one story high, I would have seriously considered plummeting to my death.

"Wedding," Jayne said, tossing me the packet as I stormed past her desk. I quickly scanned the messages, tossed most in the trashcan, called Belva Sue back immediately, and then promised myself I'd deal with the rest later. My fingers flying across the keyboard as I shot off yet another scathing email, I munched on a handful of Tums, waiting for her to pick up.

"Is everything alright with the order?" I asked, nibbling on the remainder of my thumbnail.

March fifteenth was closing in on me like a team of Navy Seals, and I was utterly frantic. This would be the first birthday party I'd ever tried to plan, and to surprise Pete would be a magician's feat. In the past, this duty had fallen on the shoulders of any number of his relatives, but now, as his future wife, the torch had been reluctantly passed to me. And over my dead body was he getting some sad-assed

Betty Crocker gone wrong disaster-cake like last year, though Piper Skarren, now settled into her marketing job at Aylward Enterprises in New Bern, had graciously offered. And, of course, *I* wasn't baking it, because it would, well...suck.

"Sugar, don't worry about a thing. I'll take good care of yew." Not only the most gifted pastry chef in all of Eastern North Carolina, the woman would do absolutely anything for Pete. "I just wanted to double check on the icing color."

"Blue," I said.

"Donna Hicks on line two," Jayne interrupted though the intercom I refused to use.

"Carolina blue?" Belva Sue asked.

"No! Just a nice light blue."

"I know just the one," she said.

I hung up, thanking her profusely, and then yelled, "What the hell does Donna want?"

"Help."

"Transfer her to Reeves' office. And please gently remind her that I am no longer her service rep."

"Will do."

Not two minutes later, Jayne's somewhat bland voice floated through the intercom again. "Gene Daniel on one."

I let out a curse. "Reeves is his boss. Or ask Patty to deal with him. I don't have time for his shit."

"You got it."

I then yelled, "Jayne, don't patch any more calls through to me unless they're outright friggin' the-district-is-on-fire emergencies, okay? I've got to think." I felt the beginnings of a migraine coming on. I rifled through my drawer for Advil, and then marched to the break room, snatching the last Fresca from the fridge. Sometimes this gloriously glamorous job flat out sucked.

Between reviewing my underlings' presentations, double-checking my own data, running the whole damn district,

coordinating Pete's surprise party, and dealing with a boatload of wedding shit, I was nearly in tears by Sunday.

"I'm sorry, Pete, but I've got to go to work. I'm drowning."

He held me to his chest and whispered soothing, supportive, and completely useless things into my ear. "I wish I could help ya, but I don't know how."

"Go fishing with Jimbo. At least one of us will have a good day." I kissed him goodbye and screeched my tires as I whipped onto Hwy 58. "I do love you," I told my car, realizing at once that I was nearing the brink of insanity.



My lips still sizzling from Pete's molten kiss, I fled for Raleigh, hoping my flight to Philly had been delayed. Past New Bern, the road became one long, flat stretch of blessed nothingness. As traffic was fairly nonexistent, I pressed the accelerator to the floor, heading for the sound barrier. When I saw blue lights in my rearview mirror, I glanced at my speedometer and sagged.

"Ma'am, do you realize you were driving ninety-seven miles per hour in a fifty-five zone?" The officer raised his eyebrows over his mirrored shades and looked pointedly at me. I inhaled deeply and let loose my Southern accent.

"But Mr. Officer, I've got a plane to catch in Raleigh, and I'm runnin' awfully late. I live over in Atlantic Beach, and yew never know about traffic." I batted my eyelashes and smiled prettily. "Do you think you could look the other way...just this one little time?"

"Killin' yourself or someone else isn't gonna get ya there any faster."

No lie, for the first time in my life, I actually teared up in front of a cop. Pride forever at my helm, I'd never used that trick before, and in all honesty, I wasn't planning on using it now, but the whirling dervish that was my current life coupled with yet another insurance

hike thanks to this outrageous, albeit deserved, ticket had literally just pushed me over the edge.

He looked pained as I shakily handed him my paperwork, and I thought, holy crap, this shit actually works! His expression changed, however, when he studied my license. His lips quirked, and then he broke into a delighted smile. “Well, I do believe I’ve pulled over a celebrity.”

“What?” I snuffled.

“Miss Wade, you’re about famous in the law enforcement community. Between your spectacular wreck, your numerous tickets, and the occasional intervention by Mr. Dupree, you’ve earned a good ol’ reputation. I’m thinking I’m gonna need your autograph.” He started belly laughing, which in turn set off my temper.

“Those tickets were biased. I had Pennsylvania plates on my car—”

“Those tickets were valid from what I hear.”

“Okay, fine. I won’t say they weren’t, but still, my fiancé will kill me if I get another one.”

“Yeah, and you’re about near losin’ your license as it is.” He placed his metal clipboard on top of the car and filled my window frame with his broad shoulders. “But since you’re marryin’ Pete next month, and I’ve been invited to the wedding—thank you very much for that—I think it’d be bad form to give you a ticket. Consider this my weddin’ gift to y’all.”

My jaw literally fell open, and I stared at him mutely. He then took off his glasses and looked at me quite seriously. “Susan, take it easy, honey. Pete loves you with all his heart. It’d kill him to lose you.” Then he smiled broadly. “See ya at the weddin’!” He slapped his hand on the roof then sauntered back to his car. Mental note: Officer Thompson was getting preferred seating in the sanctuary.

I honestly did drive slower the rest of the way to Raleigh. One, I didn’t want to push my extremely good luck, and two, the fine officer’s words kept ringing in my ears. I’d worked very hard to calm

my life down; to find peace and satisfaction. Though the world seemed like it was caving in on me at the moment, I knew deep inside it was a passing thing. Plus, if I never stepped foot in a hospital again, that would be just fine with me.



In its perennial way, Philadelphia was beautiful to me: the gleaming high-rises in the distance as we made our final approach; the sparkling ribbon of water reflecting a cold, but agreeable sun; the red ribbons of traffic never failing to draw the eye. Did I love Atlantic Beach? Absolutely. Did I pine for this living, bustling city? Yes. Yes, very much.

I tipped the taxi driver, smiled up at the mural of Ben Franklin in the foyer, and quickly followed the bellboy into the warm and stately interior of the Kimpton Hotel. The view of the twinkling cityscape from my large bedroom window sent an electric thrill through me. I pressed my nose against the glass. Though it had been only a short time since my last visit, I missed this. Hell, I missed this hotel. I unpacked my bags and slipped my brand-spanking new Taser into my purse. I hadn't told Pete a thing about January, but from now on, I wasn't coming up here without protection. This was my professional home, dammit, and no one would take it from me.

True to his word, Ryan had worked his sorcery, and Gregory Foster was no longer District Manager of Massachusetts. When I casually inquired, I was told he'd been sent to Asia on special assignment. The last person who'd had "special assignment" pinned to his name had never been heard from again. My level of anxiety dropped an order of magnitude.

I looked for him: Ryan. I wanted to thank him for what he'd done, the rare kindness he'd shown me. Regardless of true motive, he had, for once, done something good—at least for me.



Wednesday afternoon couldn't come soon enough. I literally cared more about wrenching my wedding dress from the clutches of the Mao Tse-Tung of fashion than the fantastical impossibility of getting promoted to vice-president. *Snort.*

Spat from the revolving glass jaws of the monster called headquarters, I scurried across the plaza, waving my hand wildly for a cab. The wind whipped furiously at my coat, sending goosebumps swarming along my extremities. It was absolutely flipping freezing in the Great White North, but my heart was warm with anticipation. "Saks," I ordered...*politely.*

"See. Fit perfect."

I gazed in the mirror at a creature I barely recognized. The dress clung to me in the most perfectly alluring way, yet I could breathe comfortably. I examined every inch of the material, searching for mistakes, but it was flawless.

"So many beads. So much lace. You pick hard dress. Give me extra work."

"You did a wonderful job," I grudgingly admitted.

"I do good work. Worth wait." She unbuttoned the dress and released me from my corseted prison. While I changed, she hermetically sealed my wedding glory. "I ship to you express. Be there tomorrow."

"Thank you." I bowed slightly. Though alterations were free of charge at Saks, she'd clearly worked her ass off and deserved a major tip, which I produced without hesitation.

Looking up at me, her tiny face crinkled into a smile reminiscent of an Asian Yoda. She quickly stuffed the bills in her bra, and then said, "Okay, bye-bye."

Stroke of Midnight

I was getting sentimental in my old age. I considered my previous returns to North Carolina around this date; the scorn of the first and the terror of the second. This year, I felt nothing but calm joy; a gentle breeze on an early spring day—that, and the weight of the whole frigging world. I'd already contacted Anita twice from Philly, and once more upon landing in Raleigh.

Mona, who'd already picked up the cake and had it safely stored in the refrigerator at the Frog, had stopped taking my calls altogether, changing her voicemail message to the following: "Hi, this is Mona Skarren. If you need assistance regarding your INTech product, please press one. If this is Susan, what on earth are you callin' me about now?" *Beep.*

"It's already all decorated," Mona announced as I entered the Frog. "Jimbo and I hung the streamers this morning and we're blowin' up the balloons right now." She tossed a handful at me. "Gosh, Susan, it's not like we haven't been doin' this for years!"

Ouch! It was one more reminder that I hadn't been part of this world for long and was still an outsider in some respects—many, actually. I hadn't exactly been warmly welcomed back last year when I'd stormed into this very bar and staked my claim on Eastern North Carolina's favorite son, and I absolutely knew that most everything

these fine folks did for me was out of love for Pete. Still, I wanted to be a real part of this community, to be fully accepted. And with a sinking feeling, I knew that day might never come.

“Mona, thanks again.”

“Well, ’course. If you can get him here by midnight, we can sing to him right as the date changes.”

“Midnight,” I said with a snort. “Not a problem.”

“See ya then. Oh, and drive safe!” she added with a smirk. I rolled my eyes. Apparently, gossip here travelled faster than a speeding-Susan, and clearly, the police had nothing better to do than escort it.

My headlights licked Pete’s form as the driveway opened into our large parking area. He was leaning against the garage door, beer in hand, a look of pure pleasure on his face. I inhaled sharply; his masculine beauty never failed to stun me.

“I missed you,” I said, jumping out of the still running car and throwing myself into his open arms.

“Not nearly as much as I missed you.” He pulled my body tightly against his and kissed me very deeply. I melted into his warm chest like caramel. “Let’s get you into that house and out of those clothes. I’ve got plans.”

In all honesty, I started salivating. Quickly glancing at my watch as he retrieved my bags, I nodded to myself. *Plenty of time.*

Sweaty and sated on our dining room table, my mind returned to me along with the glaring knowledge that I had to get my charge to Havelock before he turned into a pumpkin. I ran a finger down his flushed face, tracing his cheekbone and his full lips. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

“You know what I’d like right now?”

Our lips all but touching, he whispered, “Name it, and it’s yours.”

“A beer.”

The table creaked as he climbed off. I stared at his amazingly firm ass as he ambled to the refrigerator. Popping open a Budweiser, he slowly dragged the cold bottle up my stomach and over one of my breasts. My nipple hardened instantly. He took a large sip, and then

bent down and kissed me, the cold hoppy flavor slowly filling my mouth. *Oh, this is the kind of seduction women live for.* Everything below my belly clenched, and another wave of warmth spread between my legs.

“Still thirsty?”

I nodded, and he took another sip, again pressing his lips to mine. Our tongues thrashed in a swirl of liquid foam. We were going to be late, and for a scant moment, I thought, to hell with the party. But then I imagined all the disappointed faces waiting to surprise him, and further, the wrath I’d incur if I failed to produce him on time. I sat up and took the bottle from him. “What I mean is, I’d like to have a beer with our friends.”

“Sounds great. We can meet up with them tomorrow,” he murmured against my collarbone.

“No, I mean tonight.”

His eyebrows hit his hairline. “Susan, I’ve got you naked, slick, and laid out on this table like a royal feast, and you want me to give that up so we can sit in a bar with people we can see just as easily tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding emphatically.

He shook his head in disbelief, and then simply said, “No.”

I crossed my arms mulishly. “Yes. *Now.*”

He leaned in and tried to kiss me again, but I scrambled off the table and began collecting my clothes. Latching my bra, I quickly snaked my arms through my blouse, and then snatched my skirt off the couch. Sometime during my striptease, my underwear had disappeared. Fruitlessly peering under the table, I dropped to my knees and scrounged under his recliner.

Pete cleared his throat, and I glanced up to find him twirling my panties around his index finger. “I’m not givin’ these back.”

Promptly turning, I marched to the stairs, but he cut me off by filling the portal. Given no other option, I looked him straight in the eye and said, “Then I’ll go without.” I shimmied right into my skirt, zipped it, and then planted my arms on my hips.

His mouth popped open, and then he bit the tip of his tongue in the most sensual way. "Alright, Susie-Q, I'll take ya to the Frog." He quickly reclaimed his boxer-briefs and climbed into his baggy cargo shorts. His head poked out of his t-shirt like a snapping turtle.

I reached out my hand for my panties, but he shook his head. "Oh, no. We'll go, but I'm keepin' these." He brought the black satin to his nose and inhaled deeply before stuffing them in a generous pocket. Grabbing my purse, he smacked my bottom with it. "And you're drivin'."

It was eleven-thirty-five before we got into Morehead City, proper. I turned onto Hwy 70 and gunned my Audi, rocketing through the thirty-five mph zone at fifty. Pete turned his torso towards me and rested a warm hand on my knee. "Tell me about your week, sweetheart. Start at the beginning."

"Well, I was barely past the Glen Bernie Road exit when I got pulled over by a State Trooper."

He made a *tsking* sound and gently squeezed my thigh. "Not good."

"I know. The guy's name was Thompson. Do you know him?"

"Second cousin. Mamma's side." His thumb began absently drawing lazy circles on my already sensitive skin.

The city fell away, and after crossing the railroad tracks, we entered the open stretch flanked by the never-ending forest of solemn pines. I pressed down on the accelerator until we were rolling along at the healthy clip of seventy-five mph. The digital clock flashed 11:45. *Crap!* My mind focused on task, I soon became aware that the lazy circles on my thigh were moving a few millimeters higher with each pass. "He's comin' to the wedding, I believe."

Glancing at him, I took in his innocent-as-a-choir-boy expression. "He said that." My breathing increased as his thumb neared the danger zone. "He let me off without a ticket as a wedding gift."

"Awfully nice of him." He grazed the tips of my pubic hair. I clamped my legs together as tightly as I could manage without

impairing my driving and focused on the road. The speedometer needle had begun falling, so I pressed down harder on the accelerator. He seized on the fraction of spread and moved his thumb closer. 11:50. We were nearing the 101 turn off. I was having trouble thinking of anything other than pulling onto the shoulder and having my wicked way with him. Then I imagined Joe Pat standing sentinel at the door, the crowd groaning every time another car passed.

Absolutely sopped between my legs, when his thumb grazed my softest parts, I inhaled sharply and bit my lip.

“What happened then, darlin’?” he calmly asked.

“Well, I, um...I thanked him.”

“Always polite. What’d you do next?”

The circles became tight and mercilessly torturing. He applied a little more pressure, and I began panting. 11:54. My voice went staccato as I tried to form words. “I...uh, got back on the, um, road—highway, I mean.”

I swerved onto 101. The one and only stoplight in all of the forsaken town of Havelock turned inexcusably red. I slammed on the brakes, and Pete plunged a finger deeply inside me. “Argh!” I pushed back against the seat and tilted my pelvis, my lungs sipping air erratically. He began moving it in and out to the rhythm of his circling thumb. My eyes literally rolled back in my head.

“Susie-Q?”

“Yes?” I gasped.

“The light’s changed.”

“What?”

“The light’s green now. You can go.”

I opened my eyes. 11:58. I stomped on the gas, and in approximately forty-five seconds, fish-tailed into the Frog’s parking lot. I skidded into the first available space, threw the car in park, and promptly convulsed, groaning as my insides seized up in violent spasms.

When my throbbing subsided, he leaned over and put his lips to my ear. “Next time, you’ll stay put when I ask ya to.” He popped his

finger into his mouth and sucked on it, never breaking eye contact.
Holy fuck!

Midnight. I opened the door and nearly fell out onto the gravel. Quickly straightening my skirt, I raced around the car and yanked on Pete's arm. "Come on!"

He stood and adjusted himself, so the impressive tent that had erected itself in the front of his shorts was more a thick bulge. He allowed me to drag him up the stairs, and we burst through the door. The bar was completely empty. With very little blood flowing to his brain, he looked profoundly confused.

"Surprise!" The chorus yelled, faces popping up from behind tables, the counter, the popcorn machine. Bodies spilled from the bathrooms in a great gush.

Smiling triumphantly, I grabbed his head and kissed his lips, his stunned expression utterly comical. "Happy Birthday, Pete."

Mona scurried to the center of the room and pulled on a string, releasing an avalanche of multi-colored balloons. They bounced off his dazed head and onto the floor as a giant smile slowly spread across his face. Suddenly he snatched me up in his arms and kissed me solidly. "You wicked, wicked woman."

A goofy party hat was placed on his head, and he was escorted to a bare table over which the netting, formerly holding the balloons, dangled limply. With great pomp, Jimbo marched out carrying a giant Carolina-fucking-Blue cake, littered with flaming candles. The room broke into a drunken rendition of "Happy Birthday". Crystal Ann placed a beer in Pete's hand, and the cake was cut.

His glittering eyes found mine, and he mouthed, *Thank you.*

I love you, I mouthed in return.

After cake was served, the dance music was cranked up, and we found ourselves crammed into Mona's overflowing booth. I was sitting on Pete's lap, and I squirmed a little just to taunt him. He put his hands on my hips and planted me firmly in place.

"Y'all just barely made it," Mona remarked.

Pete and I looked at one another. "Traffic," Pete said impressively.

“Yes! Lots of traffic.” I nodded vigorously. “There must have been some road work going on.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“The best time,” we replied simultaneously.

Pete leaned forward like he was scratching his leg, when in reality he was running his hand up mine. “Susie-Q, I believe you might’ve left your headlights on. We’d better go check.” He squirmed out from beneath me and stood, pulling me close against him. “If y’all will excuse us a moment, we’ll be right back.”

He negotiated me through the crowd like a human shield, and then pulled me down the stairs. Flinging open the rear door of my car, he all but shoved me inside. “Ya wanna know what I wished for as I blew out all those candles?”

“A pet elephant?” I said, smiling hugely as he climbed in beside me. I heard his zipper rip. Flipping my skirt up, he pulled me onto his lap, spread my legs wide, and eased me down onto his gigantic erection.

“Hold tight. This won’t take long.”



Pete’s birthday breakfast was spent the way any red-blooded American male would like: in bed, with a naked woman feeding him chocolate cake. I licked my fingers and then rolled off the mattress, quickly rummaging through my carry-on bag. “Happy Birthday,” I said, kissing his frosting smudged lips. I handed him the small Cartier box I’d guarded with my very life. He quirked an eyebrow. “Open it.”

Lifting the lid, he said, “Cufflinks.”

“Uh huh. Monogrammed and everything.”

“They’re beautiful,” he said, holding them in his palm. “Weighty, too.”

“That would be from all the gold. I thought you might wear them to our wedding. They’ll look great with your tux.”

The depths of his jade eyes became infinite. He took my face in his hands and kissed me gently. “Susan, I couldn’t love ya more if I tried.”

“I feel absolutely the same.”

Male Escort Service

I could barely get any work done for the constant interruptions. Dottie needed this, Anita wanted that, floral issues, registry questions, music choices, bridesmaid issues, groom's cake...I wanted to scream. If my cell wasn't buzzing like a vibrator, my office line was flashing SOS in Morse code.

Finally, I marched to Jayne's desk. "I don't want you to get a bad reputation, but could you just start telling anyone who calls about anything other than work that I said to go to *hell*?! Could you just please do that for me?"

She blinked, owl-like, and then burst out laughing. "My last three bosses were vice-presidents. Not a problem."

"We should have gone to Vegas," I muttered, flopping back into my chair. I glared at the evil tax forms spread across my desk. Thanks to last year's gypsy-like migration, I had to file Pennsylvania, Ohio, and North Carolina state taxes. With nearly no personal deductions, I pondered the plausibility of writing off my wedding dress as a business expense. Heaving a great and heavy sigh, I laid my head on my desk and imagined I was somewhere far away—like Fiji, or some mystical place where half my annual income didn't evaporate in a single day.

"Here's a late arrival," Mona announced, floating into my office.

She primly planted herself in a comfy office chair and took a sip of coffee. “Who is Dr. Stiles? I don’t remember writin’ that one. Is he a client?”

I stared at the envelope for a moment, dumbfounded, but then as recognition dawned, a huge smile unfurled. When I realized there would be about a thousand people on the groom’s side and maybe ten on mine, I’d sent out the invitation on a whim, fully doubting I’d hear anything back. We’d lost touch nearly a decade ago, but I figured what the hell.

“No, an old friend,” I murmured, slipping open the flap. A note fell out.

Dearest Susan,

Presumably, you’re still rather odd. Based on the return address, I can only assume you speak in some unintelligible tongue. And I’m rather certain your dress will be absolutely hideous. However, I’m in need of a good laugh.

Fondly,

Lexi

PS. I still hate your fucking ass.

Lexi had been my college roommate and an odd and surprisingly influential person in my young life. After a five-hundred dollar frigging donation—aka bribe—to Northwestern’s Alumni Association just to get her address, I’d nearly choked on my own spit when I discovered she was Associate Professor of English Literature and Women’s Studies at Georgetown University.

When my chortling fit subsided, Mona looking horribly distressed, I wiped my eyes and glanced at the reply. She’d checked the yes box; I was nearly giddy.

Then I sent up a little prayer. *Please, please, please still have purple hair!*

“I’ll put her on the bride’s side then.”

“She can have a whole pew.”

Mona made a scoffing noise, and then cocked her head in birdlike fashion, appraising me critically, certainly noting the darkening circles under my eyes. “You feelin’ any better today?”

“Just peachy.” I took another swig of lukewarm Coke and fought a yawn.

I was rapidly becoming an insomniac. I’d fall asleep in Pete’s arms, only to wake soon after, roused by any number of recurring nightmares. This had been going on now for nearly two weeks, and I was flat-out exhausted. Late yesterday, Mona had shaken me awake, drool pooling on my desk. My goal today was to stay vertical until sunset.

In the pale darkness, I surveyed Pete’s sleeping form. The very picture of contentment, a vague smile floated on his lips. Conversely, another wave of apprehension broke against my rocky shore. While I should be rejoicing, deep-seated fear once again ran its icy fingers across my scalp, chilling my sweat-drenched body.

Though a year lay between this, admittedly, glowing bride-to-be and the charred and ruined shell that had been me, those dark memories hadn’t faded: the fatal sting of rejection, of him saying *I don’t want you anymore*. A newborn anxiety was springing from the ruins like a determined weed from a sidewalk crack: the terror of him whispering at the foot of the altar, *I’ve changed my mind*. And though marriage should offer an overwhelming sense of security, even after vows were pledged, there was truly nothing stopping him from walking away, other than a questionable sense of duty.

Pete rolled over, his smile spreading as he mumbled my name. I laid my head on his shoulder, and his arm snaked around me, pulling me closer. I inhaled his intoxicating and ultimately reassuring scent, reminding myself that he *did* want me; that he’d openly asked me to spend my life with him; that he proclaimed his love for me daily. I closed my eyes in search of peace.



As the countdown continued, the flurry of wedding activity escalated to a level I didn’t think possible. To combat my tattered nerves, which were now raw and living entities, I’d taken to drinking

the cinnamon vodka the owner of Tobacco Road Distillery had once given me. Donating the whole case to Jimbo's stock, it had remained basically untouched until now.

Downing my second martini, which, under my careful tutelage, Hunter had learned to make quite well, I enjoyed its sweet, burning warmth and awaited the calm it would ultimately render.

"When's your daddy comin' down?" Joe Pat asked, right after tossing an entire handful of popcorn in his mouth. I shielded myself from the projectile kernels. "Don't think I've ever met the man."

"You haven't, or you'd know it," I said evasively. I'd been thinking about Daddy a lot lately. I resented the fact that he wasn't here, while at the same time celebrated the simple happiness that enveloped my mother in his absence; her world now lacking tyranny.

"What's he think of Pete? Didn't give y'all any trouble, did he? Why, any man would surely be pleased to have him for a son-in-law. I know I would," he grumbled. Joe Pat's daughter had married a banker and was living in Columbia, South Carolina. A permanent resident on the weekly docket, Joe never missed an opportunity to expound on his less than admirable virtues.

When I didn't answer, he trudged deeper into my tar pit. "I'm sure looking forward to meetin' him."

"Joe—"

"He's a businessman, judging by you. Probably taught ya everything ya know."

"Joe, he's—"

"A busy man, too, I'll bet. Real important, right? Guess I'll see him at the wedding."

Emotion took hold of my reigns. "He's dead!" I shouted. Suddenly the bar became eerily quiet. "Dead and, and gone."

After a few beats of shocked silence, remorse painted his face, and he pulled me into a suffocating bear hug. "Aw, Susan, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to... Oh shoot, honey. When did this happen?"

"Years ago," I said, swallowing the lump in my throat. "He died

shortly after I graduated from college. Too many cigarettes,” I said, raising a stern brow.

“I’m gonna quit real soon,” he mumbled contritely. On the other hand, Jayne, who was nestled beside him, fiddled with her packet of Marlboros and looked longingly at the patio door.

We sat in relative silence for a moment. I caught Hunter’s attention and tapped my glass. He smiled and nodded, thrilled to have something to do on this fairly dead evening. Pete hadn’t arrived yet. Under the guise of working late, he was most likely biding his time until I’d subdued my increasingly frequent mood swings with alcohol.

When Joe Pat next spoke, he wore a concerned expression. “Susan, if your daddy’s passed on, who’s gonna walk ya down the aisle?”

I literally had not given it one second’s thought. “I guess I’ll walk myself.”

Mona gasped. “You can’t do that, honey, it wouldn’t be right.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s just a silly tradition. It’s not like the world will end if I go it alone.”

“It’s bad luck,” Crystal Ann interjected as she delivered my liquid salvation. *This from a woman who’d already divorced twice.*

Mona began wringing her hands—never a good sign. “Don’t you have any uncles or cousins or *somebody*?”

“You know my family’s very small. Both my parents were only children, so I really don’t.”

Thoroughly trapped in this flock of well-meaning, yet ridiculous people, I took another long sip of my drink, wondering how I could get them to scatter.

Suddenly, Joe Pat cleared his throat and sat up rather formally. “Well, if ya don’t have any people, and you’d not mind too much, I’d be honored to stand in for your daddy.”

I don’t know why, but my eyes misted. It was simply the kindest gesture. “You know what, Joe Pat? I’d like that very much. Thank you,” I whispered thickly. “Excuse me, everyone.”

Rather than disintegrate in the bathroom, I hooked a left and burst through the front door and onto the blessedly empty porch. Bracing my hands on the railing, I gasped for air between sobs.

Though I had few blood relatives, the people inside this mangy bar had become my family. They honestly cared about me, and by God, I loved them for it. No—I just simply loved *them*. I pulled myself together with that bolstering thought and wiped my face and eyes. The wood railing below me was damp and splattered with tears, but the cool evening breeze would soon remedy that; sweeping away the sadness dissolved within them. My heart lighter, I turned and rejoined my...family.

The Best Worst Bachelorette Party Ever

I'd like to tell you my wildest girlfriends chartered a jet and flew me to New York for the bachelorette party of the century, that we danced on top of tables and sucked down Jell-O shots until we passed out on the floor, that we barely made it back in time for the ceremony, but unfortunately, that was not the case. Instead, we had a pleasant dinner at The Charter House, a nice enough establishment that shared a wall with New Bern's Moo Café. Thinking only of my gorgeous dress, I dreaded talk of dessert.

With the exception of Anita, my wildest—*snort*—girlfriends were Mona, Ginger, Piper, a handful of middle-aged women, one teetotaler, two minors (eyes glued to their phones), and a small, tiara-sporting, watery-eyed, rat-dog named Lady that stared up accusingly from my lap, clearly miffed that I hadn't asked her to be a bridesmaid.

After excusing herself to take a "very important" phone call, Dottie burst back into the crowded dining room, shouting at the top of her lungs, "Y'all'll never guess who's in town!" Her large bosoms bounced like two overinflated beach balls as she scuttled back to the table. "Tony over at the Beaufort Inn swears it's her, though she signed in under a fake name. Celebrities do that, yew know," she stage-whispered. "I can't believe she's here!" Hand on her heaving

chest, Dottie fell into her seat, panting like the world might end if she didn't immediately herald these great, glad tidings.

"Who?" everyone shouted in unison. The manager eyed us censoriously, and I was fairly certain we'd soon be kicked out.

Fully ignoring him, Dottie continued at street carnival volume. "I wonder if she's doin' a book signin' somewhere? It's gotta be here in New Bern, but I haven't heard a thing about it. I gotta get me a ticket, quick."

"Who?!" we repeated.

The manager speed-walked to our table. "Ladies, please keep your voices down. There are others in the restaurant."

Dottie looked up at him like he was simply stupid. "Well, they'll surely need to know it, too. Daphne Fontaine's in town!" she hollered. Gasps erupted all around us.

Mildly embarrassed, but highly intrigued, I asked, "Who is Daphne Fontaine?" That's when the manager looked down at me like I was simply stupid.

"Why, she's only the most famous writer in the whole world!" Dottie raised an eyebrow, and then—*finally!*—dropped her voice back to its normal shrill. "I think she's bigger than...well, you know who. I wonder if she's in visitin' him."

"That wouldn't make sense, 'cause she'd be stayin' at his big ol' mansion," Hilda interjected. "I took that Junior League tour last August. He's got more bedrooms than I do hats."

Dottie waved a dismissive hand at Hilda and continued my education. "Susan, she's written over twenty-five of the best, juiciest, steamiest romance novels on God's green earth. I've got 'em all, and I'm findin' her and begging her to sign every single one! Tony's keepin' me posted."

"Ooh, get me a ticket, too," Sarah begged.

I rolled my eyes and snorted. I'd never heard of her. Of course, I didn't read for pleasure, but still. "Hello, person getting married tomorrow... Can we just get back to"—*this sad-assed party*—"our celebration?" Let me tell you that got their attention. *Not.*

“She picks out all the male models for her covers,” Dottie gushed, letting out an excited giggle completely at odds with her age. “Nobody gets to do that.”

“*Nobody*,” Ginger concurred.

“I’m on her fan site,” my mother declared. Yes, my own mother was at my bachelorette party. If that’s not an evening-killer, I don’t know what is.

“Me, too,” Mona chimed in. I gaped at my mother’s bastard child and shook my head.

After nearly an hour more of romance novel gibberish, me watching a small spider slowly scale the wall, the party broke. It was nearly 9:30. I sighed heavily.

“Susan, you need your beauty sleep,” Mom said, kissing my cheek.

My mother her charge, Mona dutifully rose as well. Hugging me tightly, she whispered, “Tomorrow’s gonna be the greatest day of your life. Promise.”

After thanking everyone profusely for such a lovely evening, I sank back in my chair, in desperate need of a few minutes of silence—or rather, calm. I was becoming a nervous mess, my wedding angst growing faster than Jack’s beanstalk.

I looked up, surprised to find Anita standing beside the table. She set a very large margarita in front of me and took a seat. “I like Daphne Fontaine as much as the rest of ‘em, but right now, I don’t give a damn if she’s here or not. This is a bachelorette party for God’s sake.” She sloshed her margarita against mine and took a large icy gulp. “Let’s get shitfaced.”

I smiled gratefully. “Best offer I’ve had all night.”



Not more than ten minutes had passed, Anita glancing at her phone several times in the interim, when she suddenly downed the rest of her drink, licked her lips thoroughly, and said, “I’ve got a surprise for yew.”

Parked half over the curb in front of the restaurant was an older-model gray limousine. The wiry man leaning against its frame hurriedly opened the door for us. Inside, I found one Tina, dressed like a twenty-dollar hooker: skin-tight red dress, matching fuck-me pumps, glossy lipstick applied to the dripping stage, and press-on talons. I was not a big Tina fan, but at this point, I was starved for excitement, and judging by the way she was dressed, I knew we were on a mission to find some.

From a Target bag, Anita pulled out a white sequined dress with matching glittery shoes and tossed them to me. "Here, put these on. They fit Taylor, so I know they'll fit you."

I gawked at the dress and then at her. "You let *Taylor* try this on?"
"Course."

Anita then promptly stripped down to her underwear and yanked off her bra, releasing a very impressive set of boobs, before shimmying into a tight blue number, the hem barely covering the apex of her thighs. My eyes screwed up in pain.

"C'mon, Susan, I know you ain't shy," Tina jeered.

I decided, if duty called, I could whore it up with the best of them. And let me tell you, my phone was ringing off the hook.

There was no back to my dress whatever, so my bra joined Anita's on the generous floor. The plunging neckline folded in layers, the material over my breasts proudly displaying my shrink-wrapped nipples. Harlot red lipstick, kohl eyeliner, and a compact mirror were then tossed in my lap.

Anita dropped her head between her knees, mussed her hair vigorously, and began spraying the holy hell out of it. Nearly choking on the fumes, I dropped my window. "Up or down?" she then asked, tossing the can to me.

"Um...down?"

"Wrong answer," Tina said, grabbing my hair painfully. She popped up on her knees and proceeded to gouge my scalp with bobby pins in the name of a quickie up-do. "All men give a shit about is your tits and your ass. Put your hair up so it don't get in their way."

The spray came next, and damned if I didn't look like a middle-tier call girl when she'd finished—that is until Anita affixed a small veil to my head. Then I just looked stupid.

The limo stopped at the outskirts of town, and we climbed out. "Where are we?" I asked, staring at a strip of poorly lit pavement.

"New Bern International," Anita said, snorting with mirth. "C'mon." She towed me to a small yellow helicopter. "Y'all stay here."

While we waited, Tina smoked a cigarette and surveyed me critically. "You'll do, I guess. You got good legs for a Yankee."

Biting down on all the wicked things I might volley back, I settled for, "Thanks?"

Anita marched out behind a stocky man with thinning brown hair, browbeating him as he hurriedly zipped up his bright orange flight suit—which also looked really stupid, by the way. "C'mon, y'all. Get in."

Anita's giant step up surely showed everything Eve had tried to hide with that fig leaf. She climbed into the cockpit and waved animatedly at us. Tina gave me a small shove. "You ain't scared of a little helicopter ride, are yew?"

I decided right then and there that whatever that bitch could do, I could do better. I tried for dainty, but then decided Anita's mount was the only way to get into the damned aircraft. As the motor revved, the propeller made a deafening sound like a million locusts begging for heat. I threw up a prayer that after I croaked, Pete would find love again, and then covered my face as the nose violently dipped forward.

The world below disappeared into the darkness that is nowhere, North Carolina, and I gripped the poor excuse for a seat with all my might. Anita sat up front jabbering away, her hair squishing out between headphones like a puffy clown's wig.

Tina pulled out a cigarette and lighter from her tiny hooker purse. I grabbed her arm. "Please don't." If we were going to crash, I'd rather not explode into flames first.

Anita turned back to me, eyes glowing with excitement, but when she registered my terror, she said, “Susan, yew need the in-flight beverage service. Here.” She tossed me an airline-sized bottle of Bacardi rum, and I sucked that puppy down like a starved infant.

“Another,” I demanded. After my fourth, a balmy calm set in, and I cared a lot less about dying.

The pilot swung out over what I presumed to be the ocean then headed towards a strip of land, aglow with multicolored lights. We set down at an airstrip only slightly larger than New Bern’s, and tumbled out laughing. As we sauntered towards the taxi awaiting us, I was surprised to find I was steadier on my platform heels than I’d imagined. But then again, the shot of white-hot adrenaline coursing through my veins during our extremely rapid descent probably burned off every bit of alcohol in my system. The driver took one look at us and didn’t even ask where we wanted to go.

We arrived at a long row of seedy-looking bars. It was now well past eleven and the sidewalks were bustling with people, many of whom were sailors from Virginia Beach’s Naval Base. Anita dragged me into a classy joint called *The Brass Ass* and raced away for drinks. To my horror, Tina squeezed her tired butt into a booth occupied solely by brawny, heavily-tattooed males, and said, “Hey y’all, this is Susan. She’s gettin’ married tomorrow, and somebody needs to change her mind.”

They literally stood as one, and I was on the dance floor in a mash of roaming hands and gyrating hips before I could say full steam ahead. Lights pulsed sickeningly as I fought to keep these sexually-starved men at bay. They weren’t being jerks, and I didn’t feel particularly threatened; we were all just having—well, *innocent* would be a misleading term—fun. I bumped and ground with abandon, successfully keeping my lips in the no-fly zone. Anita wiggled into the mix beside me and threw her arms in the air, laughing. In the periphery, I noticed Tina was doing her good deed for the evening by giving some drowning victim mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

A large platter of shot glasses arrived at the table a short while later, and the men began passing me from lap to lap, taking turns pouring alcohol down my throat. Tequila and I had a long and unpleasant history, and before long, the room was swimming. I don't recall when it happened, but at some point I found myself lying flat on my back across the tabletop.

It turns out, the concept of a wild bachelorette party and the reality of one are two entirely different things, but as the smiling faces leaning over me blurred, and the ceiling began dancing to the pulse of the music, I decided this was a pretty awesome way to spend the last night of the Susan Wade era.

Near the point of passing out, Anita suddenly grabbed my hand and dragged me right out the door and down the sidewalk.

"I've got to sit down. I just need to sit," I slurred.

"Honey, you are sittin'."

"I am?"

"Lordy, I've done my job well!" she hooted out.

While trying to get my bearings, I suddenly realized we were missing the poisonous tip of our triad. "Anita, we lost Tina!"

"She had to go to the 'bathroom,'" she chortled, air-quoting. "She'll be along shortly." *Oh.*

Looking thoroughly annoyed, Tina soon staggered out, still putting herself back together. "The damn bars are closin', and we just got here."

"What the hell? They have no right!" I said indignantly. "We've gotta go back in and stop them!"

"Bitch is making sense now," Tina said, laughing.

Anita let loose a shrill whistle, and a cab screeched to a halt right in front of us.

"I miss taxis," I mumbled as we fell out onto the airstrip's parking lot. I promptly vomited to make my point clear.

The Best of Us All

In all honesty, I do not remember flying back to New Bern, the limo ride, or even where Tina ended up. All I know was that at some point, Anita and I were lying flat on our backs beside the Trent River, laughing hysterically.

“I’m scared,” I suddenly announced, rolling onto my side.

“Everybody in their right mind’s scared. But you’ve got nothin’ to worry about. Pete’s gonna be the best husband there ever was.”

“But what if I’m not the best *wife*? What if I’m not, well—what if he gets tired of my crap and throws me out one day? What if I’m not enough woman for him after a while? What if—”

“What if a thousand butterflies swoop down and carry your ass away?” Anita interrupted, tacking on a mirthful snort for good measure.

I belched loudly, flopping back into the damp fescue of her back/front/I’m really not sure yard, giggling madly.

“What you’re sayin’ is crazy. He loves you more than I’ve ever seen any man love a woman. The way he looks at you...” She shook her head. “Lord, Susan, he’s in it for life.” She sat up suddenly. “C’mere, I want to show ya somethin’.”

I righted myself, and on wobbly legs—I *have no idea where I’d lost my shoes*—I followed her to the floating dock.

“See those lights?”

I nodded.

“When I was twenty, I dreamed of swimmin’ across the river from there.”

I sank to my butt. “I am not drunk enough to get in that water.”

Anita dropped beside me. “What I mean is, I thought I could get away from all my problems if I swam away from them. My first marriage was goin’ to shit. I ran off with Tommy to get away from my daddy. Turns out I married someone just like him.”

I looked at her, shocked. “I thought everyone in your family was so...honorable.”

“Lordy, we put on a good show, I suppose. There’s a great deal of love and loyalty for sure, but I think the reason we’re all so close is we’ve been through an awful lot together.” Her gaze returned to the river. “Well, one night I drove down to the wharf—ya know, over by the bridge?”

I nodded, all too well acquainted with that spot after once seeking its shelter during a fierce electrical storm.

“I drank down nearly a half a bottle of vodka, and then jumped in the river and tried to swim away. It was Hambone who came to my rescue.”

“Who’s Hambone?”

She chortled and lay back on the planks. “Mike Herring.”

“Pete’s never called him that.”

“No, I s’pose not. Pete wasn’t even born then. We started callin’ him Hambone ’cause his mamma used to send in hambone soup for his lunch—you know, with the white beans and all? He’d fart all afternoon.” She laughed heartily. “So *Hambone* stuck.

“Hambone—*Mike*—and I went all through school together. Lord, we got in so much trouble. It was like our thing. We dated on and off—well, not dated so much as just screwed around.”

My eyebrows hit my hairline. “I thought you two were related.”

“Lord no! We’re just good friends. He’s Kirk’s cousin, but he isn’t related to me. He introduced me to Kirk after my divorce.

“Anyway, when Tommy got drunk, he got ugly. And he got ugly a lot, know what I mean? He’d accuse me of havin’ affairs about once a week, which would have been near miraculous since I was workin’ two jobs and takin’ care of a newborn at the time.

“One night, after an especially bad fight, I decided I’d had enough. I left Taylor with Mamma, and Mike met me down at the wharf—before it was all pretty like it is now. I told him what’d been goin’ on. I hadn’t told anybody else, not even Mamma, though I think she’d started noticin’ the bruises. Mike pledged to kill him, of course—and he nearly did, but in the meantime, right after he left to go find him, I realized things weren’t gonna get better even if he did beat the shit out of him. In the morning, I’d still be married to what was left.

“I know it was selfish to Mamma, my family, and to my baby, but I just walked to the edge of the pier and jumped in. It was January. Now you know the river’s shallow in places and it’s never really all that cold, but we’d had rain for days, and it was swollen pretty good. There was a bunch of logs and trash and such that’d been carried down by the current. I got swept under the bridge pretty quick,” she said, flicking her hand in that general direction, “and then a big ol’ tree trunk hit me in the head. I went down, and the next thing I knew I was tangled up in some branches and couldn’t get out. Things get real calm under water when you stop flailin’.”

A chill ran through me, and I shivered.

“I decided to just let it happen, ya know? Go ahead and drown and be done with it. But just as I was making peace with God, an arm jerked me to the surface and dragged me to shore.

“Evidently Mike’d started gettin’ worried after he thought about what I’d said and not said. He came back to look for me and saw me go under. He dove in and swam like the dickens to catch up with me. He ain’t Olympic quality, but he’s a good swimmer by anyone’s standards.

“After he forced air back into my lungs, and I stopped coughing, I cursed him good. He promised he’d get me out of the situation,

and I went to Mamma's. Mamma's house was filled to the brim with my two older sisters and all their kids—they'd both just left their husbands as well." She laughed cynically. "T'was the season, evidently."

In my drunken stupor, I had no idea how to respond, though honestly, had I been stone cold sober, it wouldn't have made any difference. And this story wasn't making me feel any better about marriage. In fact, though Pete was beyond honorable, my terror was escalating.

"It was Aunt Maggie, Pete's mamma, who took us in. She was the wisest woman I have ever known. And the stubbornest! You remind me of her in that respect," she said, laughing.

"Aunt Maggie told me I could stay as long as I needed to under one condition. I had to better myself. See, she was all about education. She used to say, the more you had, the better off you'd be. I hadn't been ready right out of high school to think about anything but love." Anita dramatically rolled her eyes. "Of course, by then, working so hard just to keep my baby in diapers, I realized she was right. She helped me apply to college, and Lord help me, that woman found a way to pay for it.

"With Uncle James long gone, God rest his soul, and Maggie workin' so much, herself, I took classes in the mornin' and got Pete where he needed to be in the afternoon. At that point, he was plenty old enough to take care of himself and plenty dumb enough to get his ass in trouble. Know what I mean?"

I fell back laughing.

"Between the two of us, we made sure he got his homework done and kept his nose clean. Plus, then he had two people ridin' him about grades. He was smart as a whip to begin with, but when he buckled down and really applied himself, well, offers started floodin' in. He was plannin' to go to ECU so he could stay close to Maggie, but she wouldn't have it. She made him apply everywhere and told him he was goin' to the best school he got into, no matter where it was.

“When the packet from Vanderbilt arrived, she filled out the forms, wrote a check for the deposit, and mailed it all back before he even got home from basketball practice. Pete respected the hell out of his mamma, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so mad in his whole life.

“Every day for the next three weeks, he came up with some new reason why he shouldn’t move all the way to Nashville. They went round and round about it, but soon as Vandy coughed up the scholarship money on top of the financial aid, she told him it was a sign from God and the answer to her prayers. Well, that finally shut him up. Lord, that boy loved to argue.”

I snorted. “That hasn’t changed.”

Anita grinned. “And you’re as bad as he is. I think that’s why he fell in love with you in the first place.”

I thought about all the clashes we’d had those first few months in Havelock, and how, in hindsight, they were merely our version of foreplay. “Probably.”

“Soon as school got out every summer, he was back home, workin’ his butt off to help out in any way he could. And then later on, when she got sick... Well, anyone who’d walk away from a big paying job to move back to this little bit of nowhere only does so out of love, ya know?”

She let out a big sigh and turned to me. “Susan, I’m tellin’ yew all this because I need you to understand that you’re not making a mistake marryin’ Pete. He’d never enter into something so important without committing his whole heart and soul to it.” She shook her head and smiled, her dimples imploding. “He’ll do anything for you—*anything*. He’s the best of us all. And you can take that to the bank. The very best.”

Cremation

“Rise and shine. Time to get hitched.”

I groaned as morning light scorched my eyes. “I’m going to die.”

“Yeah, but aren’t we all? Oh Lord, you stink!”

“Shower,” I moaned.

“Let’s get somethin’ in yew first.”

The smell of coffee was a propellant, igniting a base need. I dragged my dew-sopped body up the steep slope after her, grass clippings clinging to my whore-dress and bare legs. I grasped the cup like the Holy Grail and gulped down the scalding liquid of everlasting life.

“Here, take these.” She dropped four aspirin in my palm. I swallowed them obediently. She then popped open a beer can and poured half its contents into a small glass. “Now, drink this.”

My stomach recoiled at the mere thought. “I’m not drinking that!”

“Trust me. It’s how I clear my head after a long night. Just pinch your nose and chug it down.”

I’d never met a woman who could bounce back from a late night of partying like her. Considering this was the most important day of my life, I dutifully did as she said, vanquishing a hollow burp.

She then handed me a roll of saltines. “Eat five then go shower. When you get out, I’ll finish your wake up call.”

I staggered to the bathroom and nearly screamed when I saw my reflection. My up-do was now a smashed side-do, and my face was pale and blotchy. Great globs of mascara had smudged around my eyes, lending them the appearance of a rabid raccoon. I scrubbed my face and body furiously, and then simply stood under the spray, swaying, nausea flirting with my stomach. Once dry, I realized with a shock that my head had somehow reattached itself to my body, and I felt fairly human.

Wrapped in a wet towel, I padded to the kitchen and caught Anita pouring a tiny bottle of energy boost into a giant plastic glass of iced tea. “My patented secret ingredient,” she said, nodding to it. “Mine’s way better than Bojangles’.” This comparison was, I assume, in regards to its restorative powers, rather than taste. Grimacing, I drank as much as I could stomach, and then set it on the counter.

“Drink it *all* and eat the rest of these saltines.” She popped a stack of three in my mouth. “By the time your mamma gets here, you’ll be fresh as a daisy.”

“My mother?!” Crumbs exploded from my lips, avalanching down my damp chest.

“I texted ’em last night and told ’em you were stayin’ with me. Wanted to make sure you didn’t cut and run.” She cocked an eyebrow accusingly, and for a real moment, I feared she was serious, but then her dimples made an appearance as she broke into a huge smile.

Anita glanced at her watch. “They ought to be here soon.”

I gasped, horror-struck. There was no way in hell I was meeting my mother in a soggy, grass-covered, hooker dress. “Do you happen to know where my clothes are?”

“In the drier.”

The peal of the doorbell, which launched into a too long version of “Dixieland”, barely even hurt my head. I stared at Anita in awe, and she smiled smugly. “Bow to the master.”

“Thank you for last night. I’ll always treasure it—the part I remember, anyway.”

Suddenly, she threw her arms around me and hugged me tightly. “Don’t forget what I said. He’s the very best of us all.” Anita then swung open the door, revealing Mona, grinning like a crazy woman, and my crazy mother grinning right beside her.

Mona grabbed my shoulders. “Ya ready?”

With a quick glance at Anita, I nodded. “Let’s do this.”



“I don’t think I can do this,” I whimpered as Dottie yanked at my hair. Though Anita had worked hard to quell them, *what ifs* still swarmed my brain like yellow-jackets around an amusement park dumpster.

“Course you can,” Ginger, who was playing both hairdresser and assistant wedding planner (aka Dottie’s minion), said. “I’d be lost without Bobby, and you wouldn’t last a week without Pete.”

“A day,” Anita corrected with a loud snort.

Along with her, I’d chosen Piper Skarren, Priscilla, Pete’s doll baby of a cousin, and Taylor, Anita’s daughter as bridesmaids. Had I my way, it would have been just Mona, but at the mere suggestion, there’d nearly been a family riot. These were the women—*girls*, for the most part—I was closest to, and more importantly, the ones who meant the most to Pete. Assessing them now as a unit, I suddenly feared they might outshine me.

“Do you love him?” my mother asked, surprising me.

“More than anything in the world.”

“Then what’s the problem, honey?” Mona chimed in.

“It’s, it’s *marriage!*” I sputtered. “It’s forever and final.”

“You’re not gettin’ cremated. Lord, we’ve all lived through it at least once, and we’re still breathin’,” Dottie quipped.

“But what if things change?”

“They’re gonna!” My mother spouted.

“And they won’t at the same time. It’s the greatest thing!” Mona gushed, beaming rapturously. Nine months in and still basking in newlywed bliss; I hoped it would never end for her.

“Well, that’s about as good as I can do,” Dottie finally announced, spinning my chair so I could see the back.

Mona’s eyes grew huge, and she gasped. “Susan, your hair’s fittin’ for a princess. Pete’s gonna die!”

Woven into a mounded bun, the mass of soft, artfully curled pieces seemed a romantic and nearly living thing. Strands were left loose to tickle my neck and vaguely frame my face. Scrutinizing it from all angles, I couldn’t disagree with Mona’s assessment.

“Nice job, Dottie,” I said, working hard to hide my astonishment.

She snorted. “Yours is not the first hair I’ve ever done.” After lacquering it with an entire can of hairspray, she said, “Now, for your make-up.”

“No! I mean, I’ll probably sweat it off during lunch. I’ll just do it myself.” I didn’t care if she had earned a damnable pink Cadillac; she was not touching my face with her cosmetics products! She hmped me and began collecting her curling iron and various instruments of torture. After removing my plastic cape, she crooked her finger at my mother, who was her next victim.

“I’ll help you with your make-up,” Piper whispered in my ear a few minutes later. “I’ve been workin’ on doing mine just like yours for months now. I think I’ve gotten pretty good at it. ’Course I can’t afford your brands, yet, but give me time.” Her determined expression made me smile.

Aylward Enterprises was a long-standing INTech customer. During my stint as Bob’s indentured servant, I’d gotten to know the general manager fairly well. After Piper graduated last June, I’d dropped by for a quick *just checking in* meeting, my underlying mission: to assess employment opportunities and drop Piper’s name. After writing her a killer recommendation letter and honing her interviewing skills to a razor-sharp point, she’d landed a very nice entry-level position there. As my protégé, we now enjoyed monthly

business lunches. My only real fear was that she might one day turn into me. And that was not necessarily a good thing.

“Thanks. I’d like that.”

The Devil's Curse

Centenary Methodist Church sat imposingly under a crystal blue sky stubbornly refusing to be mottled in any way. The wedding motorcade parked on the street in front of the lovely historic structure. Yesterday's rehearsal had removed all fears that the ceremony itself would go without a hitch. Of course, yesterday I was only focused on details: where to stand, when to hand off my flowers, etc. Today, faced with the vast eternity lying before me, those details meant nothing.

Mona had pre-ordered lunch from New Bern's one and only delicatessen, and it now lay across a long buffet table in the refectory. Running on adrenaline and a sleeve of saltine crackers, I was nearly starved, but just as I lifted the fork to my lips, Mona glanced at me sternly and cleared her throat. I rolled my eyes and dutifully bowed my head.

"Dear Lord, please shower Pete and Susan with love and joy. Please fill their home with laughter and happiness. And when it's time, dear Lord, please give them the most perfect and beautiful children—"

Snatching my hand from hers, I launched into an epic coughing fit. What the hell? How dare she say such horrible things? And on my wedding day! When my breath returned, I glared at her for all I was

worth, and then thrust my hand back in hers with a cautioning look. She raised an eyebrow before bowing her head again. "Please keep them well and healthy all the days of their lives, and let their hearts be one until you take them from this earth. Amen."

"Amen," the entire group repeated.

"Amen," I muttered, my appetite destroyed.



While the women cleared the table and readied the room for its next function, I went in search of a few moments of quiet. The lower level was a spine with tiny Sunday School classrooms branching off like stunted ribs. Children's drawings littered the cement block walls, gradually giving way to youth group bulletin boards featuring photos of mission trips and community service activities. As I ventured further, the adult rooms took over. There were reminders of upcoming social events, prayer meeting topics, and choir announcements. Colorful boxes on neat tables sat ready to accept foodbank donations, money to support an Africa village, and eyeglass frames to be refurbished and sent to Guatemala. There was a peaceful sense of goodness here that pulled me out of my head.

"Nervous?" *And pushed me right back in again.*

I turned so quickly, I nearly launched into vertigo. "What?"

"I love these days," Mrs. Hewitt, the minister's wife, remarked. "The calm before the storm. The excitement of it all. The blessed union of souls."

"Souls?" I murmured. "I thought it was hearts."

She laughed. "Are y'all in love?"

"Absolutely."

"Then your hearts are already joined. You don't need people prayin' over you for that." She waved her hand dismissively.

"I'm not following you."

"You're comin' together today to commit your lives to one another. To be joined in marriage means you're pledging more than

just your hearts. And that's maybe why you're walking up and down the hall, wringing your hands."

"I was just counting all the ways I could screw—mess it up. Sorry."

She giggled. "Child, you're not talkin' to Mother Mary here. But I'm glad that's what you're worryin' about. It means you're lookin' down the line, and you're willing to accept responsibility. I'm sure Pete's doin' that as well."

"You think?"

"Y'all are not children, though I've known Pete since he was one. He wouldn't enter into something as important as marriage without considerin' it thoroughly."

"No, I suppose not."

"Susan, love is a powerful thing, but when love's early passion burns itself out—and it will, what's left in a true union is an unfailing friendship and a deep, mutual respect for each other that goes way beyond the physical. The love you'll know then is an outpourin' from your soul. It's what'll make you want to put his needs before your own, what makes you hurt when he hurts and feel joy when he does...and vice versa. Before long ya'll'll realize that livin' without each other can't be done."

I snorted. "I may have already learned that lesson."

She looked at me knowingly, reminding me once again what a small place this really was. "Maybe so."

"But if what you're saying is true, then why do so many marriages fail?"

"I didn't say marriage was easy. Fallin' in love's what's easy," she said with a laugh. "Ya hardly get a choice most of the time. And in the glow of it, a lot a people rush down the aisle, thinkin' it'll always be that way. It won't. Marriages survive through hard work and perseverance. See, when the fairytale part ends and reality sets in, suddenly y'all've got bills to pay, big decisions to make, maybe even hardships to face. And you won't always agree on everything." She smiled mischievously. "In fact, I can promise you won't. You may have married for love, but if both of y'all aren't willin' to bend

and find ways to compromise, then that's where the trouble begins. That's about the time a lot people give up."

"I can't imagine ever giving up on Pete."

She smiled. "I can't imagine that boy ever givin' up on you, either." She patted me on the shoulder. "I'll see yew in the sanctuary."

"There you are!" Mona said, her voice echoing down the hallway. "I was about to send out a search party. C'mon, girl. Time to get you married."



After Piper put the finishing touches on my face, and I was properly cinched in my corset, Mona entered my make-shift dressing room, carrying my gown like the priceless object that it was. We carefully removed it from its protective sheath, surprised to find it hadn't suffered so much as a wrinkle. I needed to send Saks a note. Caught in the slices of sunlight cutting through the window, the material nearly glowed. As Mona helped me into it, the silky fabric caressed my body, reminding me why, amongst other reasons, I'd chosen it. I sucked in as my mother and she began the great chore of fastening buttons.

"Honey suck in a little, these last couple are givin' me trouble."

"I am sucking in."

"Well, suck in more!" my mother demanded.

"Whew. Okay, you can relax now," Mona said.

I dropped my shoulders, feeling a tingling excitement. Then I realized the tingling was not so much excitement as a general lack of oxygen. "I can't breathe!" I gasped, starbursts flaring behind my eyelids. "Fix the buttons!"

"They are fixed. Susie Wade, did you order your dress this tight on purpose?" my mother asked accusingly.

"No. It fit perfectly in March," I wheezed.

"Good Lord, that's skintight," Dottie announced, waltzing in.

“Yew do know you’re gettin’ married in a church, right?” Mounting the plastic chair she’d parked in front of me, her giant bosom squashed my face.

“You haven’t eaten a thing since your last fittin’,” Mona announced to all who had ears. “Surely ya haven’t gained one ounce.” She’d been watching me like a hawk, huffing every day at my lunch of a single nonfat yogurt. “And don’t think I didn’t notice ya only took three bites of your salad earlier.”

“Well, after you slap the devil’s curse on someone, you can’t expect them to have much of an appetite.” She scowled at me.

Had I been keeping tight reins on my diet? Who wouldn’t? But this sucker had fit perfectly in Philly. Sipping air like aged wine, I wondered suddenly if that little Yoda woman had done something spiteful after I’d gone. I’d given her a fantastic tip, dammit.

“How am I even getting out of it?”

“Honey, that’s Pete’s problem.” Mona then giggled. “It was near the funniest thing I ever heard—Jimbo gruntin’ and huffin’ and carryin’ on, fiddling with the buttons. It took him nearly fifteen minutes to get me out that dress, and me about to melt in the heat. I was afraid he’d get so impatient he’d take the scissors to it, the poor thing. Once he got me out, I fell over laughin’. ’Course, that didn’t last long.” She blushed furiously and looked at the floor.

“This tiny piece of veilin’s not gonna cover you one bit,” Dottie interrupted, holding it in the air like a piece of dirty underwear.

“And I still don’t care!” The wide weave of crinoline, dotted with pearl beads, was designed to cover just my eyes. It was simple and elegant, and as traditional as I was willing to go.

She huffed and began acupunctureing my scalp. “It’s an unveiln’. The groom’s supposed to lift it up and see his bride’s face.”

“Pete’s seen my face before. It’s not like he’s going to get any surprises.”

Dottie jabbed another pin in my scalp. “It don’t matter much, anyway, I s’pose. Y’all are already livin’ together.”

“We’re engaged! It’s the same thing. And when did *you* become the moral majority?”

After a few more moments of wrestling with it, she shook her head and said, “I can’t get this pinned right.”

“Then staple it, dammit,” I growled.

Mona gasped, her glare nearly melting my nail polish. “Susan, we are in the house of the Lord!” I rolled my eyes to the heaven I was never getting into. “Taylor, I do believe that dress brings out the color in your eyes,” Mona suddenly gushed, no doubt trying to steer the conversation back to a G rating.

Taylor entered the room more fully, her face scarlet. “Ya really think so, Miss Mona?”

Mona smiled brightly. “I really do.”

Though Priscilla and Piper were gorgeous blondes who could make any color look—*hiss*—amazing, Taylor was a fiery redhead just like her mother. “Black would have looked even better,” I whispered, smirking at Mona.

The dress skirmish had nearly required NATO intervention, but if anyone could negotiate a peace treaty, Mona was the girl.

“Black doesn’t feel right,” she’d challenged after I’d shown her pictures of the final contestants. Shopping for them had been the only sunny part of January’s budget trip. Thinking about Greg Foster, I shivered involuntarily.

“It’s *formal!*” I’d said.

“It’s *spring!*” she’d retorted. “Spring’s for pinks and yellows and such. Maybe a pretty cotton print.”

“No! No prints. Holy crap, Mona, Lily Pulitzer is *not* invited to my wedding!” I’d snarled, stomping out of her office.

“What about a deep rose? That’s tasteful,” she’d offered, trailing behind me.

“Still pink, Mona.”

She huffed in frustration.

I had serious issues with the color pink; pink meant Southern, pink meant fragile, pink meant unprofessional. My college

roommate's threat still pinged around my skull: *If you ever wear pink again, I'll slit your damn throat!* I snorted to myself. I'm pretty sure I hadn't even owned pink underwear since then. Living with Lexi had been both psychologically scarring and utterly wonderful. I crossed my fingers, hoping she'd actually show.

"Lilac. That'd work." Mona had hit me with that ridiculous suggestion later the same day.

"No!"

"What about seafoam green—or maybe even turquoise? I know we'd be gettin' into summer shades, but—"

"Black. You'll thank me later. It's very slimming, and everyone looks good in it. Plus, you'll be able to wear it again."

"To a *funeral!*" she'd squealed, flying into a rage. "Black is a death color. It's good for tuxedos and death. Nothin' else."

"Lingerie," I'd offered suggestively, stoking her fire.

She gaped at me then narrowed her eyes. "Ya might as well plop us all in harlot red."

I'd smiled deviously. That sounded just inflammatory enough to spin the heads of every woman in Eastern North Carolina. Hell, we might even get mentioned in *The Sun Journal's* "What Not to Wear" section.

"Hmm, I do like a nice red."

Mona gasped. "Stop bein' hateful, Susan. Let me see..." She'd flipped another page in the bridal magazine she carried around like the Bible. "Peach is pretty. No one ever complained about a nice peach."

"Peach is the bastard child of pink, so, no."

"Blue. There are lots of hues of it, and it'll look good on everybody. You've got to consider us all, ya know." When I shook my head, her gaze became calculating. In fact, she could have passed for Pete's twin at that moment. "Blue's your mamma's favorite color. You should choose it to honor her."

My jaw literally hit the floor. She'd just whipped out a bucketful of guilt and dumped it right over my head. I crossed my arms and

glared at her, our Mexican standoff epic. I growled. She hissed. I stomped my foot. She stomped hers harder. Finally, I sagged in defeat. "Fine. Blue. Just make it a good blue! I don't want some crappy, cheap-looking blue."

Channeling Pete once more, she'd slapped on a self-satisfied grin. "I'll find ya the best blue there ever was." And with that she'd swished back across the hall.

I'd like to tell you she'd chosen poorly, but credit where due: the women looked amazing.

Facing the full-length mirror Mona had lugged over from her very own bedroom, I analyzed myself from various angles.

During the commotion, the rest of my bridesmaids had spilled into the room, and as I turned to them, they sighed as one.

"Susan, you're beautiful!" Piper said.

"Perfect," Mona whispered.

"Pretty as a plum," Anita added.

"Plums turn into prunes, yew know!" Dottie inserted with a cackle. Then she looked over my shoulder. "Not bad, but you could use some jewelry. Wanna borrow somethin' of mine?"

"My earrings!" I screeched in horror.

"Where'd you last see them?" Mom asked, rushing back in.

"My jewelry box, at home. I can't walk down the aisle without them!"

Dottie glanced at her watch. "We surely don't have time to drive to Atlantic Beach and back."

"You don't understand. Pete gave them to me specifically for our wedding. They're Cartier!"

Mona calmly walked to her purse, pulled out a tiny velvet pouch, and dropped it in my hand. "He said you and earrings don't get on so well, so he gave 'em to me yesterday. Just in case."

"What would I do without you?"

"Fall to pieces, I s'pose," she said.

Dottie glanced at her watch and switched into wedding-Nazi mode. "Y'all finish up whatever y'all are doin'. It's nearly show time."

The women scattered like rats, except for Mona, whose arm I had hold of. “I never imagined I’d have a friend so incredibly wonderful. I need you to know how very dear you are to me.”

“Susan—”

“Anita!” I yelled.

She poked her head in the door and tossed the small pouch to me.

“These are for you. I want you to wear them today. And I hope someday you’ll be able to pass them down to your own daughter.”

She gave me a questioning look as I carefully dumped the contents into her hand. “Oh Susan!” She stared down at the pearls, transfixed.

I’d seen a display necklace in the store where I’d purchased Pete’s cufflinks. The pearls weren’t monstrous, but they were perfectly matched; I’d chosen every single one myself. She deserved no less.

“Here, let me fix the clasp.”

“It’s just so beautiful,” she said, marveling at her reflection.

I smiled to myself. “It looks like it was made for you.”

She turned and gripped my shoulders. “I’ll cherish it forever.”

“And that’s how long I’ll cherish our friendship. Now go, before you make me ruin my make-up.”



Alone at last and a sudden mess, I repeated my vows for the hundredth time. Though I looked fairly calm in the mirror, my insides were twisted in knots.

My mother entered the room, floating towards me as if entranced. She reached out and touched my cheek, tears welling in her eyes. “Susie, you look so...” She sniffed audibly. Mona appeared out of thin air, pressed a tissue in her hand, and magically disappeared again. “I just wish your daddy could see you.”

“Stop, Mom, I can’t cry.”

“But you’re the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.”

My lips wavered, and I wanted to sob. She’d been married in

a courthouse on a random weekday afternoon, only days after my father found out she was pregnant. She hadn't gotten the dress and the cake and the flowers and the church. She'd gotten blame and accusations, and I don't ever want to know what else. And in the back of my mind, I'm not sure I hadn't signed up for this whole epic wedding business for her sake; to give her a sliver of a day that should have been hers.

"I'll make you proud," I whispered.

With trembling lips, she dabbed at her tears and nodded. "I'll see you upstairs."

Mona said something kind to her, and then appeared behind me in the mirror, a warm and steadying smile on her face. "Ya ready?"

Closing my eyes, I concentrated on the one thing in the world that calmed me: Pete's face. I would never be alone again. I would belong to him forever, and he to me. I nodded and smiled. "I absolutely am."

Peace, Love, and Spider Monkeys

Light shone boldly through the stained glass windows; a kaleidoscope of colors marking the ceiling and opposite wall. Behind the buzzing swarm of blue dresses in the vestibule, Joe Pat paced nervously. His eyes lit when he saw me, and he rushed to the stairwell up which I was ever-so-slowly climbing.

“Susan, you’re prettier than...well, you’re just downright beautiful. That’s what you are.”

“You look very dashing yourself, Joe Pat,” I said, straightening his fancy tie. He placed his hand over mine, and I realized there were tears in his eyes. “What on earth is wrong?” I whispered.

“I love ya about like a daughter, and I know your daddy would’ve been a proud man today. I just want to do right by him.”

I inhaled as deeply as I could, desperately plugging holes in the dam poised to break. “You are.”

Staring at her watch, Dottie entered the holding cell. She pressed groomsmen and bridesmaids together, and then got everyone lined up in their designated order. Joe Pat gently pulled me to the corner, rescuing me from the sudden flurry.

When the death dirge—I mean, *Cannon in D*—surged, so did my adrenaline. The doors were opened, and Dottie began sending couples down the runway, one pair at a time. As my protective shield

diminished, my heart rate sped up. When only Mona and two munchkins lay between me and my future, my blood suddenly drained southward, and I felt lightheaded. Could I be the kind of wife Mrs. Hewitt had described just an hour before? Would I be willing to sacrifice the things I wanted for my marriage? Pete and I were two very seriously bull-headed people. What if we couldn't find ways to compromise? Joe Pat tightened his grip on my arm.

A confidently smiling Mona turned and met my eyes. "Don't be afraid. Your happily ever after's waitin' by the last pew." She then stepped into the sanctuary. I focused on her form; her straight back and prim stride was as proper as any woman's I had ever known. I sighed. She'd been a bridesmaid more times than I could count, and finally a bride. She would sacrifice anything for her marriage; this I knew. I suddenly wasn't so sure I could live up to those standards.

Before Mona reached the altar steps, the ring bearer tore off down the aisle at full sprint, his older sister loudly hissing his name. She turned to me, dramatically rolled her eyes—*guess whose cousin she was?*—and proceeded to slowly...very slowly...very, exceedingly slowly walk down the aisle, spreading rose petals with such abandon that they pelted anyone unfortunate enough to be within range. Pete's poor Great Aunt Irma, frail on a good day, was literally showered.

Before the little spider monkey could scale the stage, Anita intercepted him and whispered something, most likely threatening, in his ear. Highly disgruntled, he turned and stomped back to his sister. She gave him a smug, self-righteous scowl, and then threw an entire fistful of petals in his face.

Nearly choking on my spit, I was so very grateful for the diversion.

"Ya ready?" Joe Pat asked, chuckling.

"Joe—"

His expression became serious. "Pete's a good man, Susan, and he'd do anything for you. You got nothin' to worry about."

We stepped onto the runway. The bridesmaid's song continued...and continued. A full minute more elapsed. Mona

whipped her head around and cleared her throat loudly, but the organist seemed oblivious.

My eyes cut to Joe Pat's. "What the hell?" Of course, that was the exact moment she decided to end the song. A woman in the cheap seats gasped, and I was lanced with looks of the not exactly awe-inspired variety.

Joe Pat shifted his feet. "Susan, ya ought to not curse in church. It's bad luck or somethin'."

The organist suddenly pounded out *The Wedding March*, the music reverberating in great spasms throughout the sanctuary. Everyone stood and turned to me; so many smiling faces, some dabbing their eyes, though why I didn't know. It wasn't like I was exactly beloved in the community. And then it struck me cold: I was marrying this entire community. I'd signed up for Pete, not for this! My feet froze in place.

Joe Pat placed his hand on mine. "Go ahead. It's gonna be alright."

My eyes fixed on him, but before I could protest, or simply curse again, I was shoved from behind. "Go!" Dottie barked.

Surely white with a terror rivaling Jimbo's last year, I took my first steps. Joe Pat counted under his breath, keeping us in time. On unsteady legs, I slowly made my way to the altar, wishing with all my might that I had listened to those crazy women and worn a full veil to hide behind.

When we broke past the final pew, the perfect, radiant face of my future husband appeared, and my heart swelled to near bursting. His expression was so filled with love and awe that I was fully overwhelmed. I fixed that look in my mind; to stow it away in my treasure box; to keep it forever.

I love you, he mouthed.

I love you, too, I mouthed back, offering him a trembling smile.

Because Joe Pat was of no relation, he had no authority to give me away, so he kissed my cheek, shook Pete's hand, and quickly took a seat beside Mom, nodding in manly fashion to Gary, who had driven four hours just to sit beside her.

The moment our fingers touched, a balm as pure and soothing as distilled morphine filled my veins. We stood transfixed, neither seeming able, nor, more aptly, willing to move. It was as though the entire world fell away, leaving only the two of us.

“Susie!” *Count on my mother to break any spell.*

Pete shook his head, clearly as dazed as I, and we took our place in front of the minister. He clasped my hand tightly, and I noted his was equally cold and clammy. I squeezed back; two icy beings terrified and filled with love.

I would like to say I remember every single detail of the ceremony and that I followed the procedures to the letter and digested every word the minister spoke, but in all honesty, the only things I retained with crystal clarity were Pete’s vows:

“Susan Elizabeth Wade, I’ll love you ’til my last breath. I’ll honor you with my body, my mind, and my soul. I vow to cherish every day we have together, knowing each is a precious gift. I’ll never forsake you, and I’ll be faithful to you always. These things I swear to you before our families, our friends, and God Almighty.”

He then lifted my hands to his lips and kissed my knuckles. I couldn’t tear my eyes from his—not for one moment. He was an actual angel, golden and glowing, and I was eminently mesmerized.

“Rings?” the minister asked.

Jimbo and Mona stepped forward. My hand shook as Pete slid the stunning ring on my finger. I noticed his steadiness was failing him as well. I missed twice before hitting home with his simple gold band, and I knew I would suffer jokes about it for years to come. *Years. A lifetime.* My God, this was absolutely happening, and it was real and forever. He looked at his finger, and then at me, his eyes glossy as he smiled. I smiled back, somewhat dizzy. *Holy crap! We just got married!*

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. Pete, you may kiss your bride.”

Cupping my face in his hands, he murmured, “I’ve been waiting for you my whole life.” His lips touched mine softly, and then he kissed me very deeply.

When our eyes met again, he said, "I love you, Susan Walsh. I love you with all of me."

The dam broke right then, and I threw my arms around his neck. "Everything I am is yours," I whispered. Pete turned his back to the crowd and wiped his eyes. Then he wiped mine.

The minister gave us a moment to collect ourselves.

"Hey you," I snuffled. "We're married."

He inhaled deeply, his smile a peaceful river. But then his eyes sparked, and an impish grin hijacked those lips. "Yeah, 'til ya murder me."

I gaped at him and then laughed. "Sooner than later, pal."

We nodded, and the minister cleared his throat. In a resounding voice, he said, "It's my great pleasure to present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Walsh."

To standing applause, Pete raised our arms triumphantly like we'd just won Wimbledon's mixed doubles championship. The organist stood on the pedals, and we raced down the aisle, smiling stupidly.

Pink is the New Black

After a ridiculous number of pictures, we entered the fellowship hall and were immediately engulfed in a turbulent sea of hugs and kisses. Throwing elbows, Dottie dragged us through the crowd, positioning my mother and the rest in a well-formed receiving line. Order sprang from chaos, and the great crowd became a parade of colorful and heavily perfumed well-wishers.

I can't tell you how many people passed before a strange surge of energy rippled through the crowd. A woman, the rim of her impressive hat covering much of her face, made her way down the greeting line, cordially shaking hands and speaking to each of the wedding party like some kind of celebrity. My two questions: *who the hell is this person, and why the hell is she crashing my wedding?*

Dottie wormed her way in between Mona and my mother, as if she were an immediate relative, and took the woman's hand, talking to her for so long, the line began backing up. Eventually, the stranger physically tore herself away, so she could speak to Mom. She then stood in front of me, smiling like a cat who'd just swallowed a ginormous canary. I eyed her suspiciously. Her sapphire eyes and flawless skin literally glowed, and her high cheekbones and sensual lips were nothing short of supermodel quality. She was breathtaking to say the very least—well, except for the snotty smirk.

"I don't believe we've met. You are..?"

"Susan, you're an idiot," she suddenly said in the sharp New York-accented voice that had mercilessly assaulted my ears for two straight years. The only difference between then and now was it wasn't spewing highly colorful expletives.

"Lexi!" I squealed, throwing my arms around her neck, knocking that weird-assed hat askew. "I can't believe it! Look at you!" I held her at arm's length, simply marveling. Then, scanning her from head to toe, it hit me. "Good God, what *are* you wearing?"

She quirked her lips and shrugged. "Had to join society sometime."

"But, but *pink*?" I sputtered.

Like a shaken chandelier, her laugh was light and tinkling—a sound I'd never heard her make. In fact, I don't recall ever hearing her laugh. "Pink is the new black, darling."

I reached out and touched a flaxen wave. "And your hair!"

"I go *au naturel* these days."

"English professor? Never saw that coming." She laughed ethereally once more.

Suddenly, Dottie rushed her. "Miss Fontaine, I know this isn't the right place and all, but could you sign some of our books? I hope you don't mind, but soon as I got word you were at the weddin' I made some calls. We're all your biggest fans!"

I raised my eyebrows and mouthed, *Miss Fontaine?*

Lexi crinkled her nose, and then whispered, "Just a sideline. Professors aren't paid well, and DC is an expensive place to live." She winked and then turned to answer Dottie. "I'd be delighted."

Dottie took that as *carte blanche* and commandeered her immediately. After rapidly introducing her to the groom, to the tune of: "Miss Fontaine, this is Pete. Pete, Miss Fontaine", she dragged Lexi to a table in the far corner of the room, set punch and an overflowing plate of mints in front of her, and proceeded to plop down beside her, chatting away as though they were old friends. Soon, a procession of

floral dresses toting cardboard boxes marched to the table, forming another type of reception line.

Mona narrowed her eyes at the spectacle and yelled out in a ringing voice. "Okay, y'all, it's time to cut the cake!" She grabbed our arms and led us to a round table on which sat an elegantly iced cake, embellished with edible pearls and tiny rose blossoms. "Susan, you and Pete stand here, one on either side."

She placed a long, silver knife in my hand, and I offered Pete a mock-threatening look.

He burst out laughing. "So soon?"

"Yup."

Bitty, the wedding photographer, began clicking away as Mona directed us from one position to the next. This performance was a show of sorts for the portion of the community not invited to the huge evening reception. In fact, I already sensed the crowd thinning.

"Okay, y'all, now feed each other."

I glanced at Pete, ready to roll my eyes, but his expression caught me completely off-guard. He was either utterly enjoying the insanity or oblivious to it. Either way, his eyes literally glowed as they met mine, and his smile belonged solely to me.

When I lifted cake to his lips, he captured my fingertip between his teeth and slowly stroked it with his tongue. A bolt of electricity shot through me. Then, without breaking eye contact, he touched a bite to my lips several teasing times before finally feeding me. Though it was the first actual sustenance I'd had since my breakfast of beer and saltines, I can promise my moan of ecstasy had nothing to do with food.

"I believe you've got some icing on your lip," he murmured. "Here, let me help you with that." Bending down, he gave me a long, lingering kiss, and we were alone again.

Mona's intruding voice came from somewhere in the distance. "Um, are y'all about ready to throw the bouquet?"

"What?" I asked, jerked from paradise.

A lazy smile unfurled across Pete's lips. "Mona'd like to know if

we're ready to go, or if we want to stay here and further embarrass ourselves." He then whispered in my ear, "You couldn't look more beautiful if ya tried, but all I can think about is gettin' you out of that dress."

"Dude, I'm with you on so many levels," I replied, breathing shallowly.

I crooked my finger, and Mona rushed over. "Could you slip Lex—I mean, *Miss Fontaine* an invitation to tonight's hoedown?"

Mona's eyes widened like saucers. "Sure. Gosh, I still can't believe you know her."

Suddenly, my feet left earth, and I was in Pete's arms. "Excuse me, ladies and gentleman," he announced. "My wife and I will be exiting now."

"Ahem," a deep voice sounded from behind us. "Pardon my intrusion, but there are some papers needin' to be signed. I'm afraid you won't be officially married until they are."

Pete and I exchanged questioning looks.

"You'll need two witnesses as well," Mr. Dupree added.

Mona immediately volunteered. "Jimbo and I will do it."

"What papers are we talking about?"

"Your marriage license, Miss Wade," Mr. Dupree said, his eyes twinkling. It struck me that this would be the last time anyone could ever legally call me that.

Pete turned and followed them, only setting me down long enough for us to scrawl our names. Mona and Jimbo did the same, as did the minister.

Mr. Dupree then rolled up the documents, placed them in his breast pocket, and said, "I'll file these at the courthouse for you."

"Thanks so much, John," I said, kissing him on the cheek.

He actually blushed. "It will always be my pleasure, Miss, ahem, Mrs. Walsh."

Our business complete, Pete whisked me up in his arms again and carried me through the parting crowd.

Several older ladies tsked in dismay, but the overall reaction was

a mesh of male chuckles and feminine sighs. Pete hurried us through the hailstorm of rice and ribbon, slowing only long enough for me to toss my bouquet.

A wiry man, looking vaguely familiar, opened the door of an older model gray limousine. He gave me a leering smile, and my jaw dropped. Pete loaded me into the back like a torpedo, and after hopping in behind me, settled me onto his lap.

“Holy crap! Did you see who caught the bouquet?”

“If wives’ tales are true, that’ll set a new record,” he laughed, pressing his lips to mine and kissing me ardently. I pulled him on top of me, and our tongues tangled in a sensual dance.

The driver’s door shut with a thud. “Congratulations, y’all!”

Pete rose up on his arms, never taking his eyes off mine. “Thanks, Lytle. You know where you’re goin’?”

“I’m a chauffeur, ain’t I?”

“A little privacy then, if ya please.” A smoky window I didn’t recall seeing last night noisily rose.

“I want you right now,” I said, panting.

Pete whispered against my lips, “You are my bride, and I will not consummate our perfect marriage on this car seat.”

Smiling deviously, I nodded to its mirror image. “Well, there’s that one over there.”

He pursed his lips and shook his head. “I’ve been plannin’ this night ever since you said yes, and a car was definitely not involved. I want you slow and sweet.” Then he glanced at the window partition. “And alone.”

“Remember what happened last time you went for ‘slow and sweet?’” I asked.

Ginning furiously, he said, “My lips are still bruised. But, darlin’, if I have to handcuff you to the bed, I’m lovin’ ya right, starting with your toes and ending with the top of your head. My mouth’s gonna be on every inch of you, and I promise you’ll like it.”

A Toast or Twenty

“We’re here, y’all,” Lytle announced a very short time later.

Pete’s cousin, Chris, owned a large plot of land—as in *two-hundred acres large*—in the middle of frickin’ nowhere. There was no name associated with the area, and the only way I knew to get there took nearly forty-five minutes down forgotten cow paths. Pete and I may have been making out furiously, and admittedly, I did have a tendency to lose track of time and space when he kissed me, but there was no flippin’ way forty-five minutes had passed since we’d left the church.

We barely had time to put ourselves back together before the door swung open.

“Where are we?” I asked, as Pete once again lifted me into his arms.

“Limousine number two.”

Boards creaked as he carried me across an unfamiliar dock, finally stopping beside a fully decorated Bessie. White gossamer material and blue satin ribbon snaked through the railing, ending in a giant bow at the stern.

After carefully lowering me onto her fiberglass deck, Pete landed deftly beside me. His expression again a mingling of love and awe,

he took my face in his hands and planted tender kisses from my forehead to my lips. "I can't imagine livin' in this world without you."

I looked deeply into his shining eyes, my own tears welling. "I love you," I whispered.

The kiss lasted an eternity, and I wanted nothing more than to slowly strip him naked and make the exact sweet love he'd promised. I helped him out of his jacket and freed him from his tie. Then I unbuttoned the top of his tuxedo shirt.

Suddenly, he pulled back and shook his head slowly, his teeth sinking into his lower lip in a way that heated my blood to near boiling. "Not in a boat either." He tenderly touched my cheek. "Darlin', I get all the pleasure of unwrapping you in our bedroom, and if it takes hours, all the better. Now, if we don't get out of here soon, we won't make our own reception."

I wanted to say I didn't care about anything past this moment, but the fact was, a whole lot of people had gone to a great deal of trouble to make this happen, and I couldn't in good faith spoil it for them. "We're staying ten minutes."

"Tops," he agreed. He knelt down and retrieved a small cooler stowed beneath the bench. He reached his arm backwards, and I took the two plastic glasses.

"Champagne? You are the most romantic man I've ever met."

Rather than a cork exploding, however, I heard the unmistakable hiss of an aluminum can. "No, sweetheart, Red Bull." He tipped the slim can and filled our flutes with what looked very much like sparkling urine. "One way or another, it's gonna be a long night. And I don't want to miss a minute of it." He raised his glass in toast. "Here's to a beautiful life together, and a boatload of caffeine to keep us awake for most of it."

I looked deeply into his stunning green eyes and snorted. "Here's to a lifetime of insanity, with you leading the way." We tapped glasses and sucked it down.

Casting off, Pete headed east on the Neuse River; a bridal march to the sea. The breeze tugged at my tiny veil, but thanks to Dottie and

National Cosmetics, my hair did not even flinch. I idly wondered if it would stay this way throughout our honeymoon.



Had I a map and GPS with a dedicated satellite feed, I still would never have found the entrance, but Pete pulled into the all but hidden tributary as if he did so daily. He tossed Bessie's reins to Jimmy, my favorite, and now brace-free, pizza boy, whose sole job, it appeared, was to herald our arrival. He tied the boat and then raced off.

"They're here, y'all!" His voice resonated through the thick forest as he ran up the path.

Anita appeared. And suddenly, there was with her a multitude of not so heavenly hosts, sloshing beer and shouting, "Congratulations!"

"I don't want to know what you paid for those shoes, but let's not mess 'em up," Pete said, respectfully setting them on the captain's chair. He then helped me onto the tiny, ribbon-adorned dock and swept me up in his arms so quickly I squealed.

We moved en masse through the freshly planted field to a magnificent wooden stage. Chairs, wrapped in crisp white cotton and tied neatly with wide blue ribbon, encircled large tables laden with flickering tea candles and mounded sprays of blue hydrangeas, yellow freesias, and cream roses; replicas of my bouquet. The sun, setting over the distant tree line, decorated the sky with fiery streamers of pink and red as if by design.

Turning in a slow circle, Pete gently set me down in front of the bridal party's table and kissed me solidly. "Mona tells me you haven't eaten a thing all day. Let's fix that before ya faint."

Besieged by hugs and kisses, Pete eventually escaped through the throng of happy relatives holding us captive. Many of the men pursued him, leaving me prisoner in a cell built of multigenerational estrogen. Much to Mona's dismay, my schedule had left little time

for a bridal shower, so I found myself assaulted by the barrage of marital advice typically associated with such occasions. I nodded a great deal, but paid little attention otherwise. In retrospect, perhaps that was a mistake.

The savory aroma of Southern-cooked everything was intoxicating. A mile long table of chafing dishes stood waiting to be pillaged. Two of Pete's uncles—twins to the last detail of their smeared aprons—hacked away at hunks of roasted pig carcass with large meat cleavers. Once placed in deep dishes, another relative ladled a hot vinegar mixture over their efforts. Drool pooled in my mouth, and I was more than ready to eat a paper plate when I caught sight of Pete, chatting away with several men. I narrowed my eyes.

As the women drifted off to tend to their meal-related duties, I was blessed with a pale moment to myself—my first in days. I exhaled slowly and closed my eyes. I was married. Never in a million years could I have predicted this. And a reception here? Here, in the middle of a North Carolina soybean field? I snorted to myself then sighed happily. Absolutely perfect.

Jimbo suddenly appeared in front of me with two frothy cups of beer. "I imagine ya need one of these about now."

"You of all people would know."

In a surprising move, he sat on the table I'd been leaning against, his slightly dusty dress shoes dangling. Sliding a few candles over, I joined him.

"Yep, that's how I got through our reception. Lots and lots of beer." We sat in a bubble of silence for a moment, and then he said, "I know ya'll'll be happy as Mona and me. Pete loves you about as much as I do her." I smiled to myself. "He'll be a good husband to ya."

"I know he will," I replied.

After a stretch of stoic silence, he began tapping his fingers on the tablecloth. Then he took a large gulp of beer and cleared his throat. Then it was back to the tapping thing again.

"Something on your mind?"

"Yep."

“Alright, shoot.”

He inhaled audibly and met my eyes. “If it’s okay with you, I’d...well, I’d still like to go fishin’ with him some Sundays.”

“Fishing? Is that what this is about?” I said, laughing.

“Pete won’t cross ya for a while, so I thought I’d ask myself.”

“You want my blessing to go fishing?”

He looked slightly embarrassed. “Mona said it was alright with her. So, ya know, yeah.”

I reached over and pecked his cheek. His shocked expression was hilarious. “Well, since you’re the closest thing I’ve got to a brother, I give you my full blessing. You two can fish your little hearts out.”

He grinned widely—a sight I was still getting used to—and stood as Pete approached.

“What are y’all talkin’ so secretly about?”

“Fishin’,” Jimbo replied, patting him on the shoulder. Pete raised an eyebrow, and then took his place.

I glanced at his dessert-sized plate, and he huffed. “Ya’d think I’d have a bit more clout at my own reception.” His lopsided grin was every bit as edible as the boiled shrimp he popped in my mouth. *Oh, Holy Mother of God. Calories.*

“More!” I begged, opening my mouth like a baby bird.

Set up at one corner of the platform was a drum set, keyboard, and a couple of guitars in stands. Jimbo flipped the amplifier’s switch and handed his mother the microphone.

Charlotte cleared her throat then smiled brightly at us. “It’s time to eat, y’all. But first, let us bow our heads and thank the Lord...” Five minutes later, after yet another devil’s curse and very few dry eyes left in the place, she said, “Amen.”

As the crowd flew towards the food like a well-dressed swarm of locusts, I leaned over and whispered, “What she said about your parents was so beautiful. I wish more than anything that I could wave a wand and bring them back.”

Pete’s smile was wistful. “Me, too. This would have been a blessed day for them—especially Mamma.”

While the rest of Eastern North Carolina fidgeted in the buffet line, Mona ushered us to our seats. "We'll bring y'all yours."

Anita soon made her way over. "Lordy, that line's a mile long. Glad I've got cuttin' privileges. Kirk'll be along in a minute with a bridal feast, but in the meantime, y'all need drinks." She popped open a bottle of champagne and filled our special flutes.

"I don't care who brings it, as long as we get some food soon." Pete raised his glass and tapped mine. "To my beautiful bride. Other than oxygen, you're the only thing in life I'll ever need. I love you, Susie-Q."

"I love you, too," I sniffed as we sipped.

"Hey, y'all look hungry," Kirk said, refilling our glasses.

"I believe you're supposed to be fixin' that problem," Pete replied.

"Not me. Jimbo's gettin' y'all's plates." He raised his cup of beer and tapped our glasses. "Congratulations. Hope Y'all'll be as happy as Anita and me."

A few minutes later, Jimbo came around and deposited two cups of beer on the table. "Oh, y'all are into the champagne already. Here, let me refill your glasses."

"Kirk said you were bringing us food," I snipped.

Jimbo chuckled. "I delegated that to Hunter. He should be along any minute. In the meantime, a toast to you, Susan." He raised his cup and smiled at me. "To the newest member of our family."

"To my love," Pete added, kissing me.

After countless cousins dropped by the table to toast us, each insisting dinner was on its way, I was fairly buzzed and not nearly so hungry anymore. Pete seemed less concerned about food as well, and we soon stopped asking about it.

"Hey, y'all. Sorry about the wait. They're cuttin' up more meat now, but here's some shrimp to tide you over." Hunter delivered the small plate as if he'd done a great magic feat and popped the cork of yet another bottle of champagne. We were on our fourth, or quite possibly fifth.

Looking around, I noticed everyone near us was not only seated,

but most had finished their meals. Pete offered me the smile of the fully inebriated, and I returned it with a giggle.

“Man that was good,” Joe Pat said after a resounding burp. “When are y’all cuttin’ the cake?”

“The cake!” Anita yelled, hopping up. A table was rolled out, and she dragged us across the floor. While the church’s reception cake was substantial, this one was gigantic; ten layers, each a different flavor, inspired god-like wonder. The top layer was carefully removed and spirited away to be hermetically sealed until our first anniversary. I fully assumed it would be frost-bitten and vile, but breaking with protocol would not win me any favors.

“How do you feel about orange?” I asked Pete as I sliced into the next layer.

“I’ll take whatever you dish out.”

“Oh really?” After so many drinks, I felt loose and fully carefree, so I picked up a large chunk, goo dripping from my fingers, and crammed it into his mouth, fruity filling going everywhere.

His eyes flared in shock, and then evil itself took control of his features. “Two can play at that game, darlin’.”

“Not the dress!” I squeaked, turning to flee.

In the blink of an eye, I was against his warm chest. “Nothin’s touchin’ the dress, but you’ll have to take your medicine like a big girl.”

Whacking off another large hunk then seemingly weighing his options, he touched it to the tip of my nose ever so lightly. Then, after taking a giant bite of frosting, his lips fell on mine. I tasted all things orange and creamy. After another gooey bite, he planted sloppy kisses across my cheeks and chin, leaving a smeared trail of sticky icing in their wake. Finally licking his lips, he said, “Delicious. And the cake’s not bad either. Wanna try it?” He pinched off a tiny bit and sweetly placed it in my mouth.

Slurry Serenade

Several men pushed the tables to the edges of the platform, and a scruffy looking set of musicians took up their instruments. The master of ceremonies, whose smooth voice sounded rather familiar, took the microphone and began speaking about the importance of family, friends, and some other sappy stuff; it was sweet. When he announced the first dance in grand fashion, I realized he was one of the WSFL radio's DJs.

As there were no fathers to dance with, and only one mother, Pete did his duty and made her feel very special. I couldn't hear his words, but she nodded a great deal and wiped her eyes at one point. He kissed her cheek and then shook Gary's hand as he handed her off to him.

Pete's eyes found mine, and as our dance was announced, he took me in his arms, and we travelled around the floor as if born to the task, my mother's camera flashes nearly keeping time to the music. Suddenly cymbals crashed, and the band cranked out a mix of old rock tunes. I don't want to suggest they were good, but I'd certainly heard worse.

Nearly an hour later, or quite possibly ten minutes—honestly, I had no idea, I realized I hadn't seen Lexi in a while. Fearing she'd left, I started asking around. She'd last been sighted walking towards

the dock. Her desire for a few minutes of quiet didn't surprise me; she'd been gawked at and harassed for most of the evening. I felt partly responsible, but in the greater scheme of things, she was the one who'd decided to get all famous.

I didn't want another decade to pass without seeing her, so I gathered up my skirt and padded through the freshly plowed dirt after her. A flash of pink ahead caught my eye. As I carefully made my way down the wooded path, I spied Lexi speaking to someone, their heads close together. Lexi let out a light laugh and placed a hand on his arm in a clearly flirtatious move. Surprised, I shuffled through the eligible bachelors at the party, wondering who on earth she might have found both attractive and remotely near her age. Just as he leaned in to kiss her, a large insect crawled across my foot.

"Eek!" I squealed, trying to shake it off. When I glanced up, Lexi wore a shocked expression...as did Laney. My jaw dropped like a drawbridge on rusted chains, and I simply stood there, waiting for supportive, insightful—or really, any intelligent words whatever to leave my lips. Evidently, my brain was on full lockdown. After a full moment of awkward silence, I finally said, "Okay, I don't even know what to do with this."

"Susan—" Lexi started.

"I'm totally okay with—I mean, it's totally cool, but...Laney?" I finally stammered.

Laney flicked her cigarette in the water and smirked at me. "You can't be that slow."

"Well, I had my suspicions, sure," I said, lying and feeling monumentally stupid for doing so. "I don't care in the slightest—really, not at all, but...Lexi?"

Her laugh tinkled in the night. "Susan, I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I had a terrible crush on you in college. I knew you were hopelessly straight, and there'd be no way of convincing you otherwise, but some things in life you just can't help." She shrugged. "I love women. I always have."

Stowing that concept away for another time, I said, “But all those romance books?”

She shook her head, disapprovingly. “You never did have an imagination.” *Totally untrue.*

My mind literally blown, I had no idea how to properly respond, so I said, “Oh. Well, of course. Sure. Okay then, I’m going to—um, Pete needs me...I think. I’ll just leave you two to...you know, um...” I turned and hurried up the path, never feeling more stupid in my entire life. But then I stopped; this was totally ridiculous. I ran back and threw my arms around Lexi’s neck, hugging her fiercely. “You were the best roommate a girl could ever have, and the most fantastic friend. Thank you so much for coming to my wedding. Thank you for...” Unexpected tears pricked my eyes. “Please stay in touch. I, I don’t want to lose you again.”

For the first time since I’d known her, Lexi returned my affection, and after releasing me, glanced at Laney. “I might have a reason to visit.” Laney’s lips curled up in a rare and interesting smile.

“Yes! You should visit Laney. Laney’s awesome You should definitely...” They both looked at my babbling self. “Okay, I’ll go now. Thanks for coming, Lexi!”

“You okay, Susie-Q?” Pete asked when I flew into his arms.

Really all I could do was shake my head. Then I burst out laughing, and I laughed and laughed until I could barely breathe. I pressed my lips to Pete’s ear and told him everything.

When I finished, he smiled hugely and puffed out his chest. “I feel very privileged right now. You could’ve married a celebrity, and instead, ya chose me.”

“Shut up!” I said, smacking him on the head. We danced and laughed through some awful song, and then I asked, “Did you know about Laney?”

He raised an eyebrow. “You *sure* your middle name’s not Obtuse? Hold on, I’m gonna go ask your mamma.”

“I will divorce you!”



On a fairly regular basis, the MC stepped in and invited a guest to offer up an anecdote and toast—*Anita took the stage at least five times*. With every speech, cups of beer magically appeared in our hands, and we drank to health and happiness and love and who only knows what else.

Suddenly, the guitarist ground out a song from a very different genre. At first, I didn't recognize it, but when I did, I covered my mouth. It was my old *Pete Walsh, you suck!* ringtone—the one I'd very carefully chosen so I'd know when not to answer a call. Early in our relationship, he'd mercilessly tortured me. This was one of the many juvenile things I'd done in retaliation. Everyone stopped dancing—mostly because, how were you even supposed to dance to this song?—and stared at us as we belted out, "I hate everything about you!"

The next song was one we used to dance to on the boat between his epic air-guitar solos. I cocked my eyebrow and looked at him. "Did you choose these songs?" His grin broadened, and he nodded. As the band played on, I realized Pete had created a soundtrack mapping out our relationship's path, and I could barely wait to find out where he would take us next.

After a highly suggestive number that left me blushing from the memory, a really sappy love song, *Journey's* "Open Arms", began playing. My mother gasped as Gary twirled her onto the dance floor—yes, *I said, "twirled."* I'd never seen my mother dance before tonight. Gary caught me staring and winked, then he pulled her against his chest and they swayed as though reliving a prom.

Pete stretched his arms wide, and I lunged into them—or fell, depending on eye-witness accounts—and kissed him solidly. At this point, running completely on alcohol, ten shrimp, and three bites of cake, Pete and I were doing our level best just to keep standing. As we leaned against one another, humming along, I realized the last time we'd danced to this tune had been nearly two years ago.

On the tail-end of yet another fight, Pete had kicked everyone out of the bar so we could talk. As this song played, we'd stumbling through our apologies, both trying to make sense of our feelings. Back then, we'd been afraid to utter the word *love*—afraid for our very souls.

"This one reminds me of that night at the Frog," I said.

"I held ya in my arms so tightly. I wanted you to know how I felt. I wanted you to know that I was scared, and that I knew you were, too. I guess I needed most to know that we were alright."

"I loved you," I said. "I knew it that night."

"I loved you, too." He shook his head ruefully. "I was so damned stupid not to tell you right then and there."

My mind travelled to only a short time later, when, in the blink of an eye, our relationship had fallen to pieces, leaving me gasping for air. Internally cringing, I shrank from those memories, willing them away. All that pain was over now. We were bound together for eternity.

"Hold On Loosely" by .38 *Special* played next. "You taught me how to do that," Pete said soberly.

"To do what?"

"Hold onto ya loosely."

"Pete, I—"

"It was a good thing. A healthy lesson."

"You don't need to hold on loosely."

"Yeah, I do. But don't worry," he said, kissing my forehead, "I won't ever let go."

I sniffed. "If you do, I'll probably die."

We danced quietly through the remainder of the song, and I held onto him as tightly as I could.

"Feels Like The First Time?" I murmured, a few songs later. "Didn't they already play this one?"

He nodded. "I've felt that way twice. The first time I made love to you, it was like I'd never been with anyone in my life, and I wanted to give you everything I had."

“I promise it felt the same for me. And the second?”

“When you came back to me. It was maybe the first time I’d ever felt truly whole.” I pressed my face into his already damp chest, clinging to him as waves of emotion crashed over me. “Hey, no cryin’,” he said, dipping, and then nearly dropping me on the floor.

Pete towed me away from the dance area to the edge of the platform near the abandoned tables. It was darker there. He lifted my chin and met my eyes. “You are my everything, Susan.” He touched my sticky face and kissed me tenderly. Next thing I knew, my back and the tabletop had become one, my fingers winding through his hair as our tongues took over the dancing business.

“If we don’t leave soon, I’m gonna peel that dress off you right here in front of everyone.” He grabbed my hand, and we stumbled through the crowd towards the band.

Laughing, I said, “Where are you going? The boat’s that way.”

“I just gotta do one more thing.”

He removed the mic from its stand and blew into it. “May I have your attention, please? I wanna thank y’all for helpin’ us celebrate our weddin’. You only meet a woman like my wife once in a lifetime, and I wanna thank Jimbo for buyin’ the Rusty Frog, just so she could walk through its door. Thank you, man.” Pete waved, and Jimbo doubled over with laughter.

“I have loved Susan since the day I laid eyes on her, and now she’s mine forever.” Hoots and whistles augmented the raucous applause. Using the stand, Pete steadied himself. “Susie-Q, I’m gonna serenade you with a song that says it all.”

I shook my head fervently. I truly loved my husband and had promised to support whatever stupid things he decided to do in the future, but allowing a man who could not hold a tune in a flippin’ swimming pool to sing publically was more than I could bear. I stared into his eyes, begging him to seriously rethink this plan. Clearly past the point of logic, he glanced back at the band and said, “Hit it boys.”

The guitars groaned, and the drummer beat on his kit a couple of times then tapped a little bell. This was repeated once or twice more,

and then Pete began. He slurred some lyrics about time and illusion, or something like that, and then met my eyes. “You’re my fantasy girl. Hold on *mumble mumble mumble*. Be my fantasy girl...”

I have to say this: either he had miraculously been cured of tone-deafness, or I was way drunker than I thought, because he sounded nearly professional—*okay, perhaps I’m exaggerating just a hair*. Enthralled by the spectacle that was my husband, I smile hugely. When the music unraveled into complete discord, I glanced at the band. The lead singer was bent over laughing, and the other guitarist, red-faced and shaking, was only hitting about every third note. The drummer seemed utterly unaffected, never missing a beat.

When it appeared he had forgotten the rest of the words, or possibly what he was doing, Pete placed the mic back in the holder and thumbs up-ed the singer before throwing his arms around me and dancing right in front of the little amp.

This all happened shortly before the earthquake. Seriously, the ground began tilting back and forth, and suddenly there were triplets everywhere I looked. I sank to the floor. Rather than sitting down beside me, Pete just sort of drop-seated, his legs deciding they’d had enough of this holding up his body business.

“Let’s just lay down for a minute,” Pete slurred.

“Good idea.”

Missing Luggage

“What’s your name, little girl? What’s your name?” *Lynyrd Skynyrd* belted out.

“Turn that shit off,” I moaned, prying my eyelids open. Faint light bathed a too close ceiling covered in tan material. Pete, his dead weight crushing me, merely snored in reply.

I struggled under him, finally biting down hard at the base of his neck. He made an unintelligible sound, and then his panic-stricken eyes flipped open. “The alarm! Susie-Q, get up.”

“Can’t,” I groaned.

He catapulted off me, only to ram his head against the roof in an echoing thud. After spewing a solid curse, he moved to disentangle the two of us and tumbled onto the floor. His hair was a turbulent golden sea, and his tuxedo shirt and pants were rumped and soiled. He looked so damn handsome, I thought errantly.

“Where are we?” I croaked through a fair amount of cotton candy.

“Looks like the back seat of my jeep.”

“Huh? What time is it?”

He squinted, trying to focus. “Five-thirty. That gives us...” Dazed by the impossible math, he finally said, “About twenty minutes before we have to leave for—”

“Our honeymoon!” I shrieked.

Pete kicked open the car door, and I scrambled out behind him. Dizzy and slightly nauseous, I leaned against the car for support, the cool dew offering me timid relief.

His bloodshot eyes roamed over me. "You are one beautiful lady," he murmured. Though somewhat blanched, he sported that *I'm not dead, therefore I want you* look.

"Don't even think about it. We've got to change, shower, and pack the car." I marched up the sidewalk, towing him towards the front door.

"Wait! Let me carry ya over the threshold."

"No time. Give me the keys."

He patted himself down. "Don't have 'em."

"Check the stupid car."

Once inside, I staggered to the kitchen and pulled out two large glasses, filling them with water. I gulped mine down like I'd been in a desert for three days and slid the other towards Pete. "Drink. And then for the love of heaven, get me out of this dress."

His skilled fingers taking their own sweet time, he kissed my back after freeing each button. I wanted very much to submit to his warm hands and soft lips, but we had a full week in a tropical paradise to enjoy such pleasures. That is, if we made our flight.

I whirled around. "We don't have time."

"This is not how I planned our wedding night," he grumbled, sounding beyond annoyed with himself. "I don't know how this could've happened."

"I'll tell you exactly how it happened. Your stupid cousins got us stinking drunk then dumped us in our front yard. And if we don't hurry, we're gonna miss our damned honeymoon!"

"But we haven't cons—"

"Look, Pete, I haven't taken a full breath in eighteen hours." I glanced down at my dirty feet and gasped. The front of my glorious wedding gown was painted in wide, tobacco-field-brown streaks; the silk sheath smelled like rotting beer. I wanted to cry. "It's ruined anyway. Just rip it," I said morosely.

"I'm sure we can get it cleaned."

I turned and scrunched my eyes. "Just rip it, dammit!"

Buttons popped, hitting the floor like a tiny hailstorm. Free at last, I inhaled in ecstasy and wilted against the granite countertop.

"Oh Susan," Pete whispered reverently as he peeled the material from my skin. "Your satin corset, your lacy garter belt, these gorgeous silk stockings..." His hands fanned over my hips and bare bottom, the thong embedded so deeply, I'd likely need surgery. Groaning as if in pain, he wrapped his arms around my stomach and rested his cheek against my back. "What have I done?"

"Make it up to me later."

I stumbled to the bathroom and stripped off the remains of my intimates. My blue garter was gone. I have no idea who'd caught it, the memory of that ceremony a vague blur.

One look in the mirror and I snorted. That tiny shock of veiling was still attached to an up-do that looked every bit as perfect as the moment I'd stepped out of Dottie's salon yesterday. The rest of me? Not so much.

I yanked off the veil and dropped it, the little pearls pinging as they hit the marble floor. I didn't bother giving the water time to fully heat, but jumped in and quickly rinsed off the dust and grime. Drying off at the speed of light, I flew by Pete's gloriously naked self. Half hard from his failed attempt at seduction, I took a split second to admire him. I'd deal with that piece of equipment later.

Throwing on the first thing my fingers touched, I looked around the bedroom frantically, noting the curling rose petals littering the floor. Then I ran back into the bathroom, where Pete was brushing his teeth like a madman.

"Where's our luggage?"

He spat out minty foam. "No idea."

"Dammit! We'll just buy clothes when we get there—or in the airport. It doesn't matter."

Grabbing one fistful of underwear from my drawer and another

from his, I flew downstairs and stuffed them into my oversized purse, pre-packed with our money and passports.

Pete appeared moments later in cargo shorts and a polo shirt, his hair dripping wet. He locked the house, and we hopped into the jeep. Pete jammed the key in the ignition and...nothing.

He turned the key again. The engine didn't even make a sound. "C'mon," he growled, past the point of patience, our furious hangovers and empty stomachs not helping in the slightest. He slammed his hands on the wheel. "Did they leave the damn lights on all night?"

"Evidently," I spat. "We'll take mine."

I raced back into the house for keys and then sprinted into the garage. Pete skidded to a halt behind me, and we simply gawked.

Amongst the white graffiti, *Just married* was scrolled across the back glass and side windows. Crêpe paper wound around the frame like an ill-fitting bandage, and cans dangled by taught strings from the trunk. I hit the button on my fob, and the cans clanked loudly as they fell onto the cement floor. Under the *Happy Honeymoon* sign inside was our neatly—*Mona* neatly—packed luggage.

Pete chuckled. "Gotta love that girl."

"Or hate her," I growled.

Pete opened the passenger door. "Get in, sweetheart."



Passing the strip mall housing Michelangelo's, the hands-down best pizza restaurant in the area, a pitifully-stocked Food Lion grocery store, and a fairly decent ice cream parlor, Pete screeched into the Bojangle's parking lot.

"Four large teas with extra lemon and two bacon, egg, and cheese—" he glanced at me for confirmation, and I nodded frantically, "biscuits. That is all. Thank you very much." He hit the gas before hearing the total and skidded to a stop at the pick-up window.

Oh bloody hell!

Boasting an unprecedented six back-to-back *employee of the month* awards was Freddie, the overly chatty server. He stuck his head out the window, smiling broadly as if working a fast food drive thru was his dream job.

“Good mornin’, Pete. And a fine hello to the fair Miss Susan. How’re y’all this beautiful mornin’?”

“Fine,” Pete curtly replied.

“What are y’all doin’ up at the crack of dawn? Goin’ fishin’?”

“Fred—”

“And what happened to Miss Susan’s car? Did some kids get hold of it or somethin’?”

“Freddie, we’re kinda in a hurry, if ya don’t mind.”

“Well, the thing is, Pete, the bacon’s gonna take about five minutes to finish up, but I promise it’ll be good and hot. And to thank you for your patience, I’ll throw in an order of hash browns on the house.”

Pete shook his head. “No can do. What else’ve ya got?”

“Well, let me see... We’ve got a couple of country ham biscuits, enough gravy for maybe one Bojangle’s special—I’m makin’ more as we speak, one—no, two sausage, egg and cheese biscuits. Wait, only one has cheese. The other—”

I leaned over Pete’s lap and looked him straight in the eye. “Freddie, here’s the deal: we got married last night, and if we’re not in Raleigh in ninety minutes, we’ll miss our honeymoon flight. Now, if you’ll hand us our tea, throw two of whatever the hell you’ve got in a bag, and not say another word, Pete will slip you a twenty on the sly. Got it?”

Freddie’s mouth popped open to respond, but I cut him off. “Nod your head if you understand.”

Bewildered, he nodded.

“Now go!”

He immediately disappeared from view.

Pete’s grimace melted into a giant smile. “I do love you.”

“I know, right?”

Exactly seventy-three seconds later, Freddie returned. “Here’s y’all’s—”

I held up my hand. “No words!”

He quickly shoved who only knows what through the window, Pete threw money at him, and we flew back onto the highway, leaving smoking tire marks in our wake.

Social Media Disaster

The greasy biscuit and hangover-helper tea were doing wonders for my throbbing temples, and thanks to the blue ribbon wrapped bottle of Motrin Mona had thoughtfully placed on the dashboard while vandalizing my car, humanity was nearly restored. Color had returned to Pete's cheeks as well, as had his trademark good humor.

As we flew westward, spears of sunlight poked through the ordered litter of pine trunks. Yearning for a few more hours of sleep, I stifled a yawn, glad that Pete was behind the wheel. We'd no more passed the marine base, when Pete suddenly exploded with laughter. Pulling onto the shoulder, he doubled over and shook against the steering wheel like he was having a seizure.

"What's wrong with you?!"

"Look," he choked out, pointing through the windshield.

Covering most of the faded Rusty Frog billboard's façade was a huge white sheet, reading, *Congratulations Pete and Susan! Don't forget the condoms!* At least twenty rolls of toilet paper streamed from the catwalk, undulating in the faint breeze like lude tongues. Grabbing his phone, Pete hopped out and began taking pictures. I did the same.

"This is goin' on Facebook as soon as we get to Raleigh!" he said, peeling back onto the highway, still chuckling.

"I'm sure it's already there."

“Check and see.”

Flipping through the plethora of posts from well-wishers, I found the blurry image. It had been uploaded at three-thirty-five a.m.

“There and shared—holy crap!—forty times already. We’ll be trending soon.”

I flipped through the boatload of pictures from last night, some of which were more than a little embarrassing. In many, our flaming red eyes peered into the camera like drunken gremlins. I chuckled at the comments, fully humored and feeling quite loved. Then an older post froze my blood. The perfect semblance of a bridal whore, my head was thrown back in laughter as a kneeling sailor was about to kiss my ass—literally.

Praying Pete hadn’t seen it, I texted Anita: *Get that bachelorette party photo off FB right fucking now. If Pete sees it, he’ll divorce me! PLEASE!!!!!!*

Tina—*quel surprise*—had posted it and tagged Anita and me. So there it was polluting my page. I quickly removed it and blocked her, but I feared the damage was done; it had already been shared seven times. What happened in Virginia Beach needed to stay there, dammit!

I hopped over to Pete’s page. Deeply buried under all the reception pictures was a shot of Pete in a bar with a fairly innocent-looking band of drunken men. And under that, Tina’s flippin’ post. Her lovely message read, *Pete, looks like your fiancée is already shopping for husband #2 LOL*

Gasping, I quickly glanced at Pete. He was smiling away as he hummed to the radio. He hadn’t “liked” it, so most probably he hadn’t seen it yet. Surreptitiously, I logged into his account and removed the post, blocking Tina there as well. I noticed he had three pending messages. And though I absolutely positively shouldn’t have, I did the unthinkable.

1. Anita: *Y’all be safe!*
2. Jimbo: *Where R U*

And...oh holy fuck! 3. Barbara Fisher, aka Babs, aka the blond bitch of insecure women's nightmares: *Can't wait to see you*

What?! I scrolled up the conversation strain to the beginning.

Babs: *Hey you sexy devil*

Pete: *Hey Babs*

Babs: *You sure you wanna get married?*

Pete: *Yep*

Babs: *Let's meet for a drink*

Pete: *Can't*

Babs: *Where's your bachelor party gonna be at?*

Pete: *Don't know*

Babs: *You remember that night down at Dawson's Creek?*

Blood drained from my face and my stomach lurched. *What fucking night? When?*

Pete: *Yep*

Oh God!

Babs: *That thing you did with your tongue drove me crazy. Meet me there tonight*

@#\$\$%^&()_# CUT HER @#\$\$%^&*()*!!*

There are worms you simply do not need squirming through your brain matter—especially en route to your honeymoon. This was one of them.

My phone vibrated. Anita: *Did ya like the sign? Hope y'all have an awesome honeymoon! What's wrong with the post? It's funny!*

I huffed in frustration. When Pete glanced over, I forced a *happy to be married and on my honeymoon* smile, and then frowned at the screen.

The sign was hilarious. Thank you. No, it's not funny. Take it the fuck down. And tell Tina she's a dead woman!!!!

My hope was that the resort did not have wifi. But then I thought, if he had met her, I wanted to monitor the situation and then shove it back in his face. As my imagination ran wild, my angel and demon shoulder ornaments fighting tooth and nail, I wondered what the procedures for an annulment entailed.

“Somethin’ wrong over there, Susie-Q?” Pete asked, snapping me to attention. I was about to lie and say everything was fine, but before we got on that plane, I needed to clear the air.

“How was your bachelor party?” Admittedly, my voice sounded a little too high-pitched and a lot too saccharine.

“A drunken disaster.”

What does that mean? “Oh? Who was there?”

“The usual offenders. You?”

How to play this? “It was pretty quiet, really. I mean, Anita and I may have had a few too many, but, you know...” I shrugged.

I hate myself.

He nodded thoughtfully and then lifted my hand to his lips. “I do love you.”

“Love you too, sweetie.”



The looping exit ramp was designed for a thirty mph ascent. Pete took it at sixty, which was still too slow. “I’ll drop you off with the bags then park.” He kissed me quickly. “Don’t leave without me.”

I raced down the narrow concourse to our gate. “Wait, wait!” I yelled, waving my arm. “My husband’s coming right now.”

“I’m sorry, but we have to close the door.”

“No! Please. It’s our honeymoon.”

The airline representative gazed at me impassively. “There are two hundred passengers on the flight who would like to take off.”

“But—”

Suddenly, Pete was beside me, panting. “Ya waited.” His smile was nearly euphoric.

“Did you honestly think I’d get on the plane without you?”

“I wasn’t countin’ on it.”

I simply gaped at him for a moment before delivering the bad news. “We’re screwed. They won’t let us on the plane.”

“Won’t let us on? Surely not.” He turned on his thousand-watt

smile and released a full metric ton of Southern charm. “Now, what’s your name?”

Before I’d finished the second verse of “Dixieland” in my head, she was all perky smiles and talking into the intercom.

“Y’all can go on down. But just this once, okay?” She batted her long eyelashes at my husband, and I swear I nearly puked.

“Thanks, darlin’,” Pete said with a wink.

Unsure whether I was astounded, envious, or simply disgusted, I marched ahead. “You’re a damned snake charmer.”

“And yet you’re completely immune,” he replied. “That’s one of a million things I love about you.”



Concourse E of Atlanta’s Hartsfield–Jackson Airport is one of the busiest strips of metal and carpet on earth. Where most of the international flights board, the people watching is fantastic. Pete and I grabbed seats by the shiny grand piano and listened to Broadway show tunes while munching our food court brunch.

Slurping a creamy latte, I thanked God yet again for the gift of caffeine. The haggard-looking man seated next to us moaned in ecstasy as he bit off another mouthful of a loaded Nathan’s hotdog. He caught my stare. “Been in Bangladesh three weeks. A hotdog is all I’ve prayed for.”

A group of US soldiers, dressed in fatigues, dropped their bulky camo duffels inside the loose circle they’d formed. Along with casual stances, several wore blank expressions. A few scanned the crowd disinterestedly, and one looked flat-out terrified.

It gave me chills to watch them. As we thoughtlessly went about our busy, often frivolous activities, these men and women lived in a world we couldn’t imagine, experiencing horrors lingering only in our forgotten nightmares. And the same war had been raging for so long the average American took little notice unless something truly spectacular happened. I met Pete’s eyes.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, kissing my cheek. He strode over to the troop and inserted himself like a quarterback, shaking hands with each of his players. As they came alive, the soldiers began chatting animatedly. Pete said something, and the entire group exploded with laughter. I watched in sheer fascination as my husband—*man, it was weird saying that*—worked another magic feat.

After much backslapping and half-hugs, he slung his arm around the terrified kid and pulled him aside. Placing his hands on the boy’s shoulders, he spoke private words to him. By Pete’s stance, I could tell they were very heartfelt, and the soldier listened intently, nodding vigorously several times. Eventually, he straightened his spine, and a smile slithered across his pale face. Pete patted him hard on the back then shook his hand in an incredibly dignified manner. My heart swelled with pride.

“Where are they going?” I whispered.

“The thick of it,” Pete replied. “God bless ’em.”

Unexpected Turbulence

“Alright, now let me tell ya what I’m plannin’ to do to you once we’re settled in the hotel,” he whispered, a sudden and brilliant smile lighting his face.

Evidence had confirmed that the tender, wondrous, and in all ways perfect wedding night he’d foreseen some nine months prior was merely the figment of a dreamer’s imagination. Though, I suppose, even prophecies have a certain margin of error. “Please,” I replied, breathless with anticipation.

He brushed my cheek with his lips and nipped my earlobe. “First, I’m gonna—”

“Beverages?” the perky flight attendant asked from out of nowhere, jolting us both. Pete shifted in his seat.

“What?” I asked, dazed.

“What would you like to drink?”

“Um, uh...do you have Fresca?”

“Sure.” Her smile was bright and far too sunny for this...well, sunny morning. “And for you, sir?”

“Whatever my lovely bride’s havin’ will be just fine,” he replied, staring at me hungrily.

Her eyes lit. “Are y’all on your honeymoon?” *Atlanta-based crew.*

“Yes, ma’am. Got married last night.”

“Well, congratulations!” She handed over our cups, and then said, “May I see your boarding passes, please?” Pete obligingly fished them from his pocket.

“Why do you need our tickets?” I bristled.

“Oh, I just need to check something.” She left the cart to the other attendant and disappeared. A moment later, the intercom squawked. “May I have your attention, please? The captain and crew of Flight 3420 would like to congratulate our newlyweds, Mr. and Mrs. Walsh. Please give them a round of applause.”

Cheers erupted from the already reveling passengers aboard this vacation charter. “A reminder, lavatories are located at the front and rear of the aircraft.” Boisterous laughter and whistles echoed off the cavernous fuselage.

“How embarrassing,” I muttered, hiding my face in my hands. Pete, on the other hand, was shaking with laughter.

“Please follow me,” the possibly evil flight attendant said, grinning smugly. She opened the overhead compartment and Pete seized our carry-on bags.

I glared at her, but hopped up and followed Pete as we “scused” ourselves through the cabin to the front of the plane. “Here ya go,” she said, ushering us into two oversized and very cushy first class seats. Mimosas and buttery biscotti were offered by another smiling face.

“This is nice,” Pete said, reclining his seat to stretch his long legs. “Too bad it’s not an overnight flight. I hear those open all the way out.”

“Is that so?” I said.

“Uh huh. If I’d known we’d be sittin’ up front, I would’ve taken you to China instead.”

“China, huh?”

“Yeah. Great Wall, Forbidden City. Plus, it’s a *real* long flight, I hear.”

“I’ve heard that, too.”

“Maybe we’ll go for our first anniversary.”

“Hmm.”

I removed the travel magazine from the seat pocket and started flipping through it. An intercom announcement woke me some time later. We were instructed to fill out the paperwork being distributed, so we could pass through customs.

“Look,” Pete said. “We get to check the family box.” His eyes literally glowing, he lifted my hand and kissed my ring. “We’re officially a family.”

“Family,” I repeated, smiling. I wasn’t just a “me” anymore; I was an “us”.

He began filling in the blocks. Suddenly he turned to me, his expression the very definition of mischief. “So, which one of us should I put down as *Head of Household*?”

I snorted and closed my eyes again. “Knock yourself out, big man.”

By the time pens were collected and drinks served, I’d fully given up on sleep. Pete had taken my magazine and was reading an article about an up-and-coming Napa Valley chef. He glanced over at me, and from out of nowhere said, “Ya know, we’re not technically married.”

“I believe Mr. Dupree would say differently. Are you having second thoughts?” The Babs issue had neither been discussed nor resolved. Regardless, my heart began racing.

“Well...I am havin’ thoughts.” He raised an eyebrow and smiled salaciously. “But they’re of the *primary* nature.”

“What are you talking about?”

“See, the thing is, according to Catholic Church, a marriage isn’t finalized until it’s been consummated.”

“Ah. Therein lies the problem with your argument. We’re not Catholic.”

“Well, there’s the whole bible thing.”

“What bible thing? Are you about to unload some chapter and verse on me? Because if you use the word obey, I’ll—”

“Okay, well, it’s tradition, anyway. I mean, how can we be officially married if we haven’t even experienced one another?”

I looked to the heavens then back at him. “Did you get into my Xanax while I was sleeping?” I snatched the magazine from his hand and flipped to an advertisement for duty-free handbags. *Gucci. Very nice.*

“Do ya wanna?” he asked.

“Wanna what?”

He nodded to the illuminated lavatory panels. “Ya know...consummate?”

“Are you serious?”

Eyes scorching, he nodded and sank his teeth into his lower lip. I squirmed, considering the very real possibility that he wasn’t kidding. I glanced around our section; the flight attendants had disappeared.

Pete gently took my face in his hands and kissed me deeply. My insides unfurled like a morning glory. “You go first,” he whispered. “And I’ll knock when the coast is clear.”

“And if we’re caught?” I asked.

He smiled wickedly. “What are they gonna do, throw us off the plane?”

“You’re a freak,” I said, unable to suppress my smile.

“I’m pretty sure ya already knew that.” Then he looked at me quite gravely. “Susan, if I don’t have ya soon, I’m gonna lose my mind.”

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The lavatory was your standard London phone booth. Pete knocked lightly. I scooped back, straddling the little toilet as he squirmed through the door. His expression mirrored that of a teenager about to commit a minor felony. “I can’t believe we’re doing this,” I hissed over the loud fan.

He slid the lock in place, pulled me against his chest, and then cradled my head as he ran his tongue up my neck. “Drivin’ to the airport, I could barely focus on the road.” He sucked and nipped

back down the path he'd just made. "Every time you reached in your purse to check your phone, I wanted to do this." His hands followed the contours of my shoulders and arms, before taking the business bypass to my breasts. I arched against his hand, and when he rubbed his thumb across my nipple, I nearly convulsed.

"And when you crossed your legs..." His fingertips slowly travelled up my already spread thighs and under my light cotton dress. "And ya crossed 'em an awful lot..." he whispered, his warm breath seeping straight into my brain. He grazed my panties, following the lacy seam. I moaned softly. "I wanted to do this..." He met my eyes and firmly pressed his thumb against the center of my sexual universe. I gasped.

"I do love that sound," he said, his lips finding mine. His tongue slid into my mouth at the exact second his fingers slid into my body, both moving at the same leisurely pace.

I groaned against his mouth, and he replied in the same language.

Lifting me up, he set me on the tiny countertop, deftly removing my panties and unzipping his fly in one swift move. His rock hard erection popped out like a jack-in-the-box. My shoulders against the small mirror, I braced my arm against the paper towel dispenser and my elbow against the tissue slot, hoping neither would break as he entered me.

He sank in slowly and deliciously, and I sighed in ecstasy.

"And I *really* love that one," he said.

He began moving with determination, and I had to reposition myself several times to keep from slipping into the shallow metal sink or sodomizing myself with the blunt faucet.

Suddenly, a scratchy voice filled the heated space. "This is your captain speaking. Looks like we've got some rough air up ahead. Please make sure your seatbelts are securely fastened."

"Oh shit," I yelped as the airplane hit an invisible pothole. Pete lost his balance and slammed into the opposite wall. At some point during his miscalculated return, I head-butted his chest and fully lost

my leverage. He caught my flailing self by wrapping his arms around me.

“Y’alright, Susie-Q?”

I nodded, wide-eyed.

Just then the plane pitched again, this time tossing us against the door. “Oh, Lord, we’re gonna have to hurry this up. Hang on.”

Anchoring my legs around his waist, he positioned himself again and rammed inside me. I squeezed tighter, crossing my ankles to secure our connection. Slightly concerned we might crash, I was only partly invested in the task of losing myself.

My energy had just begun building when Pete exploded inside of me. I focused with all my might on the sensation of his violent throbs, letting them work their magic. My insides seized up; this was it. The plane listed sharply to the right, and suddenly the door sprang open, sending us sprawling into the aisle.

Horror-filled, I looked up and into the eyes of half the plane’s passengers. After a solid beat of stunned silence by all parties, I scrambled to my hands and knees and backed into the stall. Pete crawled in right behind me.

I glared at him. “This one’s on you.” I snatched my panties off the rubber floor and shimmied into them. “And I’m not leaving this damn bathroom until the plane lands.”

A prim knock was followed by a concerned voice. “Is anyone hurt?”

“We’re fine, thank you,” Pete responded cheerily.

“I’m so relieved. I’m sorry, but you’ll need to return to your seats as soon as possible.”

Pete stood and zipped his shorts. Then he reached down to help me up. “I hate you,” I seethed, taking his hand.

His eyes glimmering with humor, he said, “Well, you’re stuck with me now, Mrs. Walsh, ’cause our marriage is officially consummated.”

To the oh-so-soothing sounds of lewd catcalls and laughter, my ten-foot walk of shame might just as well have been ten miles. I

slithered into my seat and hid my face behind a catalog. Pete flipped back to his magazine article and continued reading as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

A few minutes later, without looking up, he murmured, "I wonder if we get membership cards."

Gaping, I punched him in the arm, then I turned my face away and gazed out the window. Tiny islands floated in the cobalt sea beneath us, and large cotton plumes, rising to unearthly heights, glowed in the brilliant sunshine. The Plexiglas window was warm to the touch, promising the tropical paradise we'd paid for. When the cabin pressure began changing, I rooted through my purse for a piece of gum, handing a second to Pete.

Our landing was altogether uneventful, but as the plane docked at the gate, one of the attendants appeared at our seats and handed Pete a bright-yellow plastic bag. "This is from the crew. Hope y'all have a wonderful honeymoon!" She then quickly left to assist an elderly couple.

Pete peered inside. "Well, isn't that nice?" He held up a bottle of Champagne with a note attached. Reading it, he grinned furiously. "Well, that didn't take long."

I snatched it from his hand.

*Congratulations on your marriage, and welcome to the "Mile High Club". Hope you enjoyed the turbulence.*

*-Your captain and crew*

"I'm going to die," I muttered, my cheeks surely as red as a clown's nose. Pete retrieved our stowed bags, and, since we were now first class passengers, we got the hell off the plane before the hecklers could rally. Pete thanked the crew on our way to the door, and I smiled tightly, refusing to make eye-contact with the cheery flight attendant looping, "Have a nice vacation! Have a nice vacation!"

*The Price to Pee*

If I ever thought North Carolina was hot and humid, I was sorely mistaken. Nearly frostbitten from the airport's air-conditioning, we were enveloped in a dripping thermal blanket, set on high as we stepped outside. After the atmospheric shock waned, Pete set our load of baggage onto the sidewalk and disappeared back into the building, leaving me fanning myself under a smoldering sun. He returned a few minutes later, carrying a cute, floppy, wide-brimmed hat and two bottles of ice-cold water. "Wedding gifts," he announced, kissing my nose as he adjusted my hat.

Joining the herd of colorful tourists, we passed a lengthy row of large coach-type buses and climbed aboard the brightly painted one our tourist company representative directed us towards. It was mercifully cool, and we claimed two crushed velvet chairs near the back.

"Well, so far, so good," Pete said, collapsing. He exhaled deeply, propped his head against the cushioned headrest and smiled at me with great satisfaction. He kissed my hand and said, "I love you, Susan Walsh." Then he pulled the bill of his brand new Mexican ball cap down and closed his eyes.

Though equally worn, I was also extremely excited. I'd been to Mexico once before with my demon ex-boyfriend, but hadn't paid

any attention to my surroundings. I mentally spat to exorcise Ryan and that memory then leisurely ran my eyes over my husband's beautiful form, wondering if fate, or some mindless cosmic accident, had thrown us together and eventually landed us in front of an altar. *Susan Walsh*; how oddly wonderful that sounded.

After looping around a clover-leaf of entrance and exit ramps, the bus rolled out of Cancun and headed south towards the *Mayan Riviera*, our personal destination. The loudspeaker crackled to life, and a man standing beside the driver spoke to us in heavily-accented English, repeating, I assume, the same spiel in several other languages. He shared the history of the region and expounded upon the multitude of attractions we didn't want to miss.

The parched landscape was dotted with scrub brush similar to that of home, but far less verdant under this furious solar blaze. We passed dilapidated ranches and sparkling car dealerships. Billboards littered the highway, advertising every possible item one could want: watches, jewelry, dolphin shows, lobster dinners, exotic dancers, and sightseeing flights. About an hour later, the bus entered the town of Playa del Carmen, navigating its tight streets. Shriveled men sat on overturned buckets, roadside, and unkempt dogs ran freely. Women, their ebony hair wound tightly into buns, carried overflowing baskets of laundry. Colorful shops and open-air restaurants lined the sidewalks.

The bus stopped in front of a modest hotel, and several passengers pulled their bulging bags from overhead compartments and waddled down the aisle. Once their suitcases had been unloaded from beneath, the bus pulled onto a wide and beautiful highway. The emerald and viciously manicured dividing island was a parade of sculptured shrubbery fashioned into bird and animal shapes. I'd never seen their like. I grabbed Pete's arm to wake him. He mumbled something that vaguely sounded like *I love you*, and then promptly fell back into a soft, rhythmic snore.

We passed a large stone sign with the word *Playacar* etched into it. The bus pulled onto a bumpy, but new-looking cobblestone drive,

slowing several times for exaggerated speed bumps. We stopped at an impressive barricade, and the driver spoke with the guard. The metal bar lifted, and we passed through, slowing for yet another series of speed bumps. The bus came to a hissing halt in front of a gorgeous resort boasting a thatched roof entrance bracketed by rustic wooden columns. Staff, dressed pristinely in starched white uniforms, rushed to aid the passengers' descent. Suitcases were unloaded, and the guests were ushered inside.

This same scene was replayed approximately fifty times over the next two hours. I had no idea there were so many resorts in Mexico. I also hadn't seen any signs for Tulum yet and was getting concerned that we were on the wrong bus.

Past Playacar, the elegant shrubbery disappeared, and the median was once again garbed in yellow crabgrass and stretches of sandy dirt. By this time, with no wifi and nothing to read, I was absolutely bored, ravenously hungry, and I totally had to pee. Plus, a kernel of resentment towards Pete, who was still soundly sleeping with a damned peaceful smile on his face, was sprouting, nourished by the fact that I had to bear this burden alone.

"Excuse me, señor," I called out. "Can we stop for a bathroom break?" The few remaining haggard-looking couples nodded emphatically as well.

"Si, señora." He rapid-fired some Spanish to the driver, and within minutes, we pulled in front of a rundown gas station. Several Mexicans dressed in soiled clothing listlessly lounged on the shaded porch. Dust billowed into the air as we scrambled from the bus. It was good to stand.

Greeted by bored faces, a man pointed towards a whitewashed cinderblock building in the back, onto which the word *baño* was painted in faded red letters. I hurried toward the señora's side and nearly crashed into a squat woman barely four feet tall. Blocking the entrance, she held out her hand.

I'd left my purse in the bus, so I had nothing on me. I gave her the international sign for *No thanks, I gave at the office*. She shook her

head and pointed to another sign. It read in plain English: Bathrooms \$1.50.

"I have to pay to pee?!" I exclaimed. "That's crazy."

The woman behind me said, "I don't care how much it costs, I've gotta go," before pushing past me. Digging in her oversized purse, she shoved a wad of bills at the woman and scooted inside. The other ladies in line began scrounging for money as well.

"I can't believe this," I growled. "What a total rip-off." I glared at the driver, casually smoking a cigarette, and stomped back into the bus. Pete's legs were now stretched out on the armrest in front of him. I nudged them with my foot.

"Huh?! What?" he said, his eyelids popping open. "We're here already? That didn't take long."

I rolled my eyes and held out my hand. "I need money." Pete had all the pesos in his wallet.

"Sure, Susie-Q. Already shoppin'?"

"Definitely not." He doled out currency, and I turned on my heels and marched back to the bathroom. I handed the woman a ten.

She shook her head and handed it back. "American."

"Oh for fuck's sake." I marched back to the bus again. The others were filing on, and I had to wait for them to settle before I could pass down the aisle.

"They only want American," I said. "Just hand me my purse."

Sitting up, he peered out the window at the barren landscape. "What'd you find to buy here?"

"Relief." Just then, the bus lurched onto the highway. "Hey, wait! I didn't get to go."

The announcer guy shrugged and said, "Sorry, señora, we are on a tight schedule."

I muttered a string of obscenities as I crawled over Pete. "Did you know," I said, turning to him in a huff, "that you actually have to *pay* to pee in Mexico?"

"I did not," Pete replied solemnly. Then after a moment, he got

one of those demonic smiles on his face. “Ya want somethin’ to drink?”

*Let the Pins Fall Where They May*

It appeared that our resort was the very last one before crossing the border to friggin' Brazil. Once past the gate, the bus pulled onto a wide circular driveway flanked by short, perfectly spaced palm trees. It came to a hissing halt at the bottom of what looked very much like the Lincoln Memorial.

The driver shook the tip can, and I glared at him. Of course, Pete pulled out a few bills and said all kinds of nice things. I turned back and grumbled, "I'll meet you inside."

Sprinting up the expansive marble staircase like Rocky Balboa, I skidded to a halt at the entrance, looking frantically in all directions. My eyes connected with one of the staff. She simply smiled and pointed.

The bathroom was lavish by anyone's standards, and I fully appreciated its air-conditioned splendor while leisurely washing my hands. The walls and countertop were fashioned of golden marble with dark, heavily lacquered, teak accents. Taking a deep, cleansing breath of the lightly perfumed air, I walked back into the reception area.

The grand hall, with its soaring ceiling and monstrous iron chandelier, showcased gleaming floors of the same dark wood as the bathroom. The brilliantly white walls contrasted handsomely with

the rust-colored upholstery. Pete stood under the pinnacle, holding two glasses of champagne. “Here, my beautiful, darlin’ wife, welcome to paradise.” We clinked glasses, and he kissed me tenderly. “Our bags are on their way to the room. You wanna take a look around the place?”

“Let’s.”

I took his arm, and we walked outside to the curved veranda. It was truly a sight to behold. The beautiful stone walkway stretching out in front of us was surely the length of a football field. Dotted down its center were several joyfully gurgling fountains. Lovely landscaping, set in geometric patterns, decorated the lush fescue on either side. Not a single blade of grass seemed out of place.

A bounty of three-story stucco buildings, each graced with a series of romantic iron balconies, swept away to either side. Uniformed staff, the color theme apparently tan and pale yellow, hustled busily from one structure to another. Brightly dressed pedestrians meandered in a dreamy fashion as if thoroughly entranced.

What was perhaps the most beautiful thing of all, however, was the extraordinarily turquoise water in the distance, its gleaming vision making my heart skip beats. “This is spectacular!”

Pete smiled broadly. “I hoped ya’d like it.”

We slowly descended the curving stairs, my hand grazing the twisted railing. The sun was vicious, but a playful breeze eased its sting. We passed several restaurants and gift shops. One was filled with ceramic figurines and every manner of *Tulum*, Mexico-embellished trinkets. Another was devoted completely to jewelry; silver and gemstones glinted through the plate glass window. A third vended beach items—sarongs, sunglasses, blow-up toys, and the like.

The pool lay before us as we continued wandering hand-in-hand towards the sea, swept up in the resort’s enchantment. A giant kidney-shaped pool deck offered wide, welcoming stairs descending into blue liquid, rivaling the very sea itself. Music played loudly; a

random mix of Calypso and American pop. People floated around a thatched-roof island, serving up festive drinks and much beer. Giant palm trees, laden with green coconuts, separated the pool area from the glorious white sand beach. Though the sparse waves merely hinted at ocean, the liquid itself was alive and dancing.

Pete and I kicked off our shoes and squeaked through the hot sand to the water's edge. We looked towards one another and let out the kind of sigh that says everything in the world is right. He took my face, and in front of God and everybody, kissed the living daylights out of me.

"Wanna check out our room?" he asked, nuzzling my nose.



"Oh, this is gorgeous!" I whispered, entering the spacious bridal suite. Staged in resort theme, its huge, dark-framed bed was made up in crisp, white cotton. Gentle netting draped the headboard and puddled on the marble floor. I lay back on the plump comforter and closed my eyes. Heaven.

Inhaling deeply, my lungs filled with a fragrance so pure, so intoxicating that it was a living thing. I sat up and gasped. "Lilies?"

"Uh huh. I wanted 'em waitin' for ya when we arrived." He stepped away from the large dresser to expose what was, simply put, the contents of an entire flower garden. I flew into his arms and he spun me around in circles.

"You are the most amazing man I have ever met. Make love to me!"

His eyes positively smoldered, but just as our lips connected, a knock on the door interrupted our building inferno.

"Señor y señora, welcome to Tulum! Your bags?"

"Si, gracias," Pete replied. He pointed, and the man went about setting up our suitcases on folding canvas stands.

"We have mucho activities, and a meeting has been scheduled with your personal concierge at seven o'clock. Si?"

“No si,” I interrupted. “We’re on our honeymoon. We don’t need activities.”

Pete smiled at me and slipped the man some money. “Gracias and have a nice day.” He then put the “do not disturb” sign on the outside door handle and locked us in.

“Now where was I? Oh yeah, I believe I was about to make love to my wife.” He walked around the room slowly. “The question is, where.”

“The bed works just fine for me,” I said, patting the mattress.

“But we haven’t finished the tour. Ya might change your mind.” There was mischief in his eyes, which, at the moment, I cared nothing about.

I pulled my dress over my head and dropped it on the floor. “Make love to me now.”

His eyes raked over my form, and his breathing increased. “Oh, I plan to. Over and over, until ya beg for mercy. But first, you’ll want to see this.” He crooked his finger, and I floated towards him.

He stepped into the next room and I followed. My jaw dropped open at the sight of the gargantuan bathroom; the shower was large enough for a family of twelve to use at once. He raised an eyebrow and asked in a voice steeped in seduction, “Don’t ya wanna freshen up first?”

“Like never before,” I murmured.

He turned me so I faced the gold framed mirror. “Your hair is lovely, but I’m afraid it needs to come down.” He then planted rows of kisses around my neck.

“Later,” I panted.

“Right now.”

“Pete—” I whined.

A pin dropped into the sink with a tiny ping. Having suffered through Dottie’s persecution, I knew there were at least three hundred more bobby pins poking into my skull. “This will take all night. Come on, Pete, you’re killing me.”

Biting the tip of his tongue in that hungry way that launched

me into sexual orbit, he continued his task, ignoring me completely. Another pin fell; this time on the counter. He bent down and sucked the skin near my shoulder into his mouth. My core literally percolated. “Ya know, I was denied the night I wanted. I won’t be denied again.”

The first strand fell. He held it between his fingers, studying it. “You’ve got the most beautiful hair. It curls at the ends and brushes against your chest when you walk. It does terrible things to me. Let me show ya.”

He slowly unclasped my bra, letting it drop to the floor. He then pulled the curl taut, placed the tip in his mouth, and sucked on it. Meeting my eyes in the mirror, he brushed the wet tip back and forth across my nipple, painting it. I inhaled sharply as it pebbled.

Pulling out another pin, a second strand fell.

“Please—” I pleaded.

He wet its tip and dragged it down my spine, inciting a riot of goosebumps. “And your back curves in the loveliest way.” He planted kisses down the path my hair had traced, and then continued his journey. When he reached the base, he hooked his fingers in my panties and slowly pulled them down. “And your tight, perfectly shaped butt...like two halves of a sweet, sweet apple.” He gripped my hips solidly and took gentle, teasing bites. I moaned. He ran his tongue down the back of one leg and traced the other with a wet finger. “Oh, how I love these. Spread ’em for me, darlin’.” I did, and he relieved me of my panties.

“Now where was I?” he murmured, standing. He met my eyes in the mirror, his pupils fully dilated. “That’s right, your hair.”

My groan was a mixture of frustration and carnal desire. I couldn’t tell you where the percentages lay, as they vacillated constantly.

His smile was fully wicked as he pulled out another pin. He ran it down my sternum and drew circles around each nipple and then my bellybutton before dropping it on the counter.

“Please—” I whimpered.

“Sweetheart, you can beg all ya want. And ya will. But this hair comes down.”

His warm hands landed lightly on my neck, and he began rubbing it with lazy circles. The circles widened as his palms drifted across my shoulders and down my arms, boiling the blood underneath. “Your skin. It’s like the finest silk. So soft. Especially right here.” He grazed the outer edges of my breasts with his thumbs. A quivering mess, I arched, desperately wanting his hands on them. He chuckled darkly and continued his descent to my waist.

I can promise you I couldn’t be wetter if I’d just waded from the ocean, and my knees were seriously considering buckling under the weight of this torture. I made a true effort to scowl at him. He was utterly enjoying this, and he would pay in spades.

“Your hair. I keep forgettin’.”

Two more pings, and another piece escaped. At this point, I regretted not having worn a damn ponytail to the wedding.

He rested his hands back on my waist. I was starting to look like Medusa, my hair a nest of snaking curls.

“Ya have such a tiny waist. I can fit my fingers all the way around it.” His squeezed in demonstration, and then his hands relaxed, his fingertips sliding southward. “And your hips...such beautiful curves.” He pivoted my body and nipped at one. Then he skimmed his nose across my belly, his tongue leaving a trail of moisture right above my pubic line before he nipped the other. “You taste delicious. And I haven’t come near to the dessert course yet. Well, maybe just a little taste.” He slicked a finger through my wetness and licked it. “Mm. So sweet.”

“I give,” I said breathlessly. “Whatever you want, it’s yours.”

He turned me back towards the mirror. “Well, there’s the matter of these last curls, ya see. And there are an awful lot of pins left.” He tutted. “This may take a while longer.”



There was no lip separating the shower from the rest of the floor. The door and two walls were clear glass from top to bottom. The others were fashioned in pale marble. To further torment me, he turned on the shower, but blocked the entrance. The room quickly filled with steam, the lilies' rich perfume riding the swirls of moist air.

Wound so tightly I was ready to come without any provocation, I harnessed my pent up frustration and focused it all on retribution. "You've had your fun," I breathed. "Now it's my turn." I grasped the hem of his shirt and lifted it over his head, but didn't remove it. I licked one of his nipples and then blew on it. When it pebbled, I clamped down hard with my teeth and teased the nub of skin with my tongue. I then let go and lightly ran my fingernails over his ribs, making sure to hit every ticklish spot. With his head and arms trapped in the sleeves, he jerked furiously.

"Squirm all you want, boy, but if I had a whip right now, I'd beat you with it." I roughly unbuttoned his shorts. "Let me have a look at what I paid so dearly for." When he sprang free, he was flippin' enormous. Clearly, his evil assault had taken its toll on him as well.

"I'll give ya more than a look," Pete promised, finally escaping his bondage. His voice was deep and husky, and his eyes glowed fiercely.

I grasped his shaft in one hand, and smeared the milky tear over his head with my fingertip, drawing endless circles on the silky skin. "Yes, you will." When I replaced my finger with my tongue, he moaned and thrust his hips forward. I pulled back and stood. "But not yet." I smirked smugly, raised an eyebrow, and proceeded to lead him into the shower by his erection. "Do keep up, dear," I taunted.

The showerhead was a giant square, set flush against the ceiling. Rather than a spray, water simply fell onto us like a heavy spring shower. Under the deluge, we were slick and alone in a rain forest. Pete hoisted me onto his hips and pressed my back against the wet marble. "I will have you." His eyes locked on mine. "Now."

"Ahh," I sighed as he entered me. I raised my arms, carelessly bracing them against the wall behind me, and savored the luscious movement. Enveloped in a fine mist, our mingled moans, the

soothing songs of chirping birds filtering in through a tiny screened vent, and the sound of pouring rain took my mind to places it had never been. Alone, I was everywhere and nowhere; together, we were one entity, alive and dancing. As our movements grew frantic, I buried my face in his neck, short gasps my only source of air. We finished quietly, and a peace I'd not known in months spread over me like a great blanket.

“I love you,” Pete whispered.

“I love you,” I said, kissing his soft, wet lips.

After a very thorough washing, Pete was partially erect again. “I know it sounds kinky,” he said, drying me with a thirsty towel, “but I want to make love to you in an actual bed.”

*Barbaragate*

I awoke to gentle kisses. Smiling dreamily, I looked into the twinkling green eyes that would forever fascinate me. “We’ve got some serious choices to make after breakfast,” he murmured, running his lips down the length of my stomach. “Then we’re hittin’ the beach.”

After fully enjoying the amenities of our bathroom, I lumbered to my suitcase.

“You are one lovely woman,” Pete said, watching me dress.

“I am one starved woman,” I replied, kissing him soundly. “But I think I’ll save you for dessert.”

As we followed the terracotta-tiled hallway, tiny lizards scampered into the tropical foliage. A brown-skinned woman in a tidy maid’s uniform furiously swept the steps. She offered us a bright morning smile as we stepped past.

Pete offered me his elbow, and we strolled, carefree, until the smell of food pulled us to a welcoming portico. Met at the door by an army of cheerful faces, we were seated at a table covered in brightly colored cloth and topped with silverware and overturned coffee cups.

The large dining hall’s ceiling soared, coming to a point under a thatched-style roof. The morning light spilled through its high set windows, bathing the room.

“Buenos días,” our waitress said. “Coffee?”

“More than you can possibly imagine—I mean *si*. And *agua*?”

She laughed. “Coffee and water coming up. And for you, sir?”

“The same, please.”

Almost instantly, a man rushed over, carrying a sweating pitcher of water and a *carafe* of steaming coffee. I sipped greedily on the rather fantastic elixir. The waitress returned with a basket of rolls, and said, “Please help yourselves to the buffet.”

A world of choices presented themselves: eggs, sausages, smoked salmon, refried beans, fried potatoes, cold-cuts, a salad bar, cereal, all types of cheese, French toast—anything. I loaded up on yogurt and various breeds of melon. Pete opted for the traditional male route of meat, eggs, and more meat. We circled the Mayan pyramid of pastries with unapologetic awe.

“To married life,” Pete said, tapping my coffee cup.

“To us,” I returned.

I was famished in an inhuman way. Returning with seconds of a far less healthy nature, I ate until I was near exploding. “I’m so going to pay for this later,” I muttered, tearing off a piece of chocolate croissant.

Changing into our suits, I threw on a coverlet, and we headed to the beach. Lounge chairs in perfect rows lined the shore. We grabbed thick brown towels from a nearby stand and claimed two chaises under the playful fronds of a large palm tree.

“Drinks?” a uniformed waitress asked, shuffling through the sand in white tennis shoes. Pete ordered *piñas coladas*, and we decadently drank the frozen cocktails far too early in the day.

Winking, he said, “There’s fruit in it, so I’m considering ’em brunch.” Not two sips later, he set his glass in the sand and met my eyes sincerely. “Okay, I can’t wait a second longer.” He pulled me to my feet, and we scrambled into the warm, crystal water.

Unlike the turbulent Atlantic, we could see to the bottom no matter how far out we swam. Nearly phosphorescent sand reflected the sun from the depths, making the whole ocean glow brightly.

I threw myself into Pete's arms, and we floated effortlessly in the extremely salty water.

When we finally sought shore, lifeguards were busy dragging out bright yellow sea kayaks, small catamarans, and a host of windsurfing boards. Several jet skis floated in the water inside a roped off area. "We're doin' all of that," Pete remarked as we found our chairs. "But first, let's take care of business."

"Alright," I said with a humored smirk.

"There are about a thousand excursions we can take, some Mayan ruins nearby, and an eco-amusement park, called Xcaret, that's got river caves you can ride through and a heritage show in the evening. There are also beach horseback rides, sunset cruises, helicopter tours, parasailin'... The sky's the limit." He had fully loosed his inner child.

His voice faded into a lovely lilting sound as he excitedly rattled off about twenty more activities. I was perfectly content lying on this cushion, drinking tropical drinks, and listening to the palm branches clatter woodenly in the ever-present breeze—and would have been so for the entire week.

"So what's it gonna be?" Pete finally asked, pulling me out of meditation.

"Pick the ones you most want to do, and I'm with you," I replied.

"As you wish. I'll be back shortly."

Closing my eyes, I breathed in the ocean air, scented with various brands of sunscreen, and drifted off into a lovely dream.



"Twelve?" I choked out at lunch. "You signed us up for *twelve* excursions?"

"Ya told me to pick the ones I most wanted to do."

"Yes, but we're only here seven days."

"See, I've got this all figured out," he said, laying out his utterly ridiculous plan.

“No, I am not going deep sea fishing with you!” I interrupted. “I’ll be in the spa getting a massage, thank you very much.”

“Aw c’mon Susie-Q, I know how much ya love fishin’,” he said, winking. “Alright, a couples massage instead of fishing. But we are definitely goin’ cliff divin’!”

“Sure thing,” I responded with much eye-rolling.

Early the next morning, we wandered the ruins of a nearby Mayan village. The rock pyramids and ancient tumbledown structures edged a high cliff. I shot about a thousand pictures, while Pete dutifully read every sign.

Standing on a large outcropping of black rock, I stared out at the miracle that was the Caribbean Sea. He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” I remarked.

He nibbled my ear. “Yeah, and the ocean’s pretty, too.” I turned to find him looking at me in the most love-filled way. “I am such a lucky man,” he whispered.

His golden hair, tugged deliciously by the wind, and his luminous eyes, reflecting the sun’s pure light, reminded me once more that he was more god than man. “Me, too.”

“Wait, you’re a man?”

“Shut up,” I said, kissing him. *Alright, a goofy god, but still.*

We braved lunch at a small cantina in the tiny village of Tulum. After some rather awesome quesadillas, we wandered the street-lined shops. Pete pulled me into a store hawking sarongs, bikinis, and fairly slutty clothes. “What do you think of this dress?” he asked. It was white, super short, and even on the emaciated plastic model, skin tight.

“Seriously? So not my style.”

“I bet you’d look great in it, though. Try it on.”

“Ew. No.”

“C’mon, Susie-Q. Model it for me.”

From his expression, this request was fairly non-negotiable, so I shrugged. “Since we’re on our honeymoon...” I took the flimsy thing

into the dressing room and slid it on. "See? Hookers R Us." I turned in a circle.

"Man," he said, whistling softly. "Your butt looks fantastic. Absolutely kissable."

"You think?" I turned, straining my neck to see in the mirror.

"Yeah. Know what I'm thinkin'?" His low, seductive voice left me squirming with erotic thoughts. I would totally wear this for him in our bedroom.

"What?" I asked breathily.

"It'd look even better covered in sequins, and maybe if ya had a little veilin' in your hair."

His smile grew huge, and I gasped. "You saw the picture?"

"Pictures," he corrected.

"Pictures?!"

"Tina texted me about ten. Ya looked you were havin' a *really* good time." Then he smirked and cocked an eyebrow. "Don't think your party was as quiet as ya let on."

I dropped my shoulders and sighed. "I don't even remember half of it." Then I narrowed my eyes and poked his chest. "What about *yours*?"

"Nothin' to tell. Went to a couple of bars. Got stupid drunk."

"And then what?"

"That's it."

"No women involved?"

"Nope."

"No strippers?"

"Not a one."

"No late night *rendezvous*?" I hissed.

He scrunched his golden eyebrows. "Where's that comin' from?"

"Just answer the question!" I spat, fighting back the angry tears that threatened.

He threw his arms around me. I fought to free myself, but he held on tight. "I don't know what you're talkin' about, but absolutely not."

I did think about comin' to Anita's and climbin' in your window. Does that count?"

"Babs. I'm talking about Babs!" I pushed hard on his chest, and he let go immediately.

"*Babs?* What about her?"

Sure, I was implicating myself, and maybe we'd have a discussion about personal privacy at a later date, but at the moment, I didn't care. "Babs' proposition?"

He looked supremely confused, but then again, he was a very good actor. Finally, he laughed. "You've been busy, haven't you?"

"Did you or did you not meet her before, during, or after your bachelor party?"

He shook his head no. "Susan, Babs is a sad lady. When she drinks too much, she lets her fingers do the talkin'. Me, Jimbo, anybody she ever dated, probably."

"She dated *Jimbo*?"

He sighed. "She dated *everybody*."

"So, you have no feelings for her?"

He shook his head, his expression turning rather grave. "The only feelin' I have for Babs Fisher is pity."

"What about when I was gone? When we split? You didn't turn to her for comfort?"

"I didn't turn to anyone for anything. I didn't talk to anybody I didn't have to. I was dead inside. You had my heart. You always would." He wiped an errant tear from my cheek. "You always *will*." Then he took my face in his hands. "Did ya not hear my vows? I meant every word." He kissed my forehead and shook his head. "Every single one."

"Are you mad about the pictures?"

He smiled genuinely. "One, I know Anita a lot better than you do. That whole excursion was just payback for some of the things I've done to her. Two, after all the weddin' plannin', I imagine ya needed to blow off some steam. Three, ya looked amazing." He gently touched his lips to mine.

“Nothing happened!” I blurted out.

He raised an eyebrow. “And *four*, I have complete faith in you.” He tipped my chin and looked deeply into my eyes. “You need to have the same kind of faith in me. I’m not goin’ anywhere. *Ever*.”

When I stepped out of the dressing room, sans hooker garb, he placed a book in my hand.

“What’s this?”

“The Bible.”

“The *Bible*?” I looked around the gaudy little shop. “Where did you get a bible?”

“The lady behind the counter. I noticed one sittin’ on the shelf behind her. When I asked to borrow it, I believe she decided I was havin’ a religious moment. Gave me this, too.” He held up a white plastic rosary. “I’m not convinced *Hail Marys* are in order at present, but I imagine I’ll need this at some point.” He draped it over the Bible and placed his hand on top of both. He then looked at me quite soberly and repeated his wedding vows. When he got to the “I’ll be faithful to you” part, he stopped and looked at me pointedly before continuing.

“I’m sorry I was jealous,” I said as we climbed into a scary-looking taxi.

“I’m sorry to break it to you, Mrs. Walsh, but you’re gonna have to prove it when we get back to the room.”

“Mrs. Walsh still sounds so odd.”

“Get used to it, sweetheart.”

*Ham Sandwich of Death*

"I can't believe you talked me into this," I grumped as we climbed into a cramped van. "I'll snorkel, but I am not jumping off a cliff."

"We'll see."

After meandering down a path peppered with birds and insects of varying degrees of terror, we came to a placid lake. A peaceful and lovely place, it seemed innocuous enough, however, the cliff above looked some hundred feet high. I glanced at Pete and mouthed, *No way in hell!* He flashed a challenging smile as our excursion guides dispensed gear.

"Okay amigos, enjoy."

With flippers for feet, we waddled like penguins to the small dock. Pete winked and pushed off as we'd been shown during yesterday's coral reef excursion.

The still and shaded cenote was chillier than I expected and altogether different from the ocean's rampant wavelets and brightly colored sea life. Instead, the fish here were silvery and ethereal. I followed Pete into a shallow cave opening, where light danced in exaggerated geometric patterns off its limestone walls.

He ripped off his mask. "This is fairly awesome, don't ya think?" His excited voice echoed oddly off the dome above.

"It does not suck," I said, grinning madly.

“Did ya see that big eel?”

“Eel?” I squealed. “I’m out of here!”

Just as I scrambled onto the dock, our guide said, “Okay, amigos, time to go. We’ll visit a private beach next and have lunch.”

The group boarded the stifling van, the heat fully evaporating the water from our skin in seconds. We turned off the highway onto an unmarked dirt path that was quickly swallowed by jungle overgrowth. Emerging in front of the ocean, blinding noonday light bounced off the windows of a deserted-looking building set on a rocky point. We grabbed a pitiful-looking picnic table, and as the men unloaded cargo and dispensed boxed lunches, the guide explained the area’s unique geography.

“This is where the caves end and the cenotes spill into the ocean. Once you finish eating, you can snorkel in this special ceremonial water.”

Without the forest’s protection, it was scorching hot, and I felt my skin searing. Ready to eat the lid itself, I opened the lunchbox to discover a warm ham sandwich, chips, and a gooey cookie. I regarded the sandwich skeptically. The limp lunch meat, soggy bread, and single wilted lettuce leaf had clearly been incubating in the smoldering van for hours. Looking at Pete, I raised my eyebrows. “I’m pretty sure this is going to kill us,” I whispered, noticing the guide and crew weren’t eating.

He shrugged and ripped off a large bite. “Probably, but we’ll surely die of starvation otherwise. We’ll down shots of tequila when we get back. That stuff’ll kill anything.”

After my last experience, I’d vowed never to drink straight tequila again. I still remembered the night—well, sort of remembered it—when I’d returned from Philadelphia, beaten and broken, and had drunk myself into a mindless stupor. Eventually, I’d been thrown over someone’s shoulder and hauled out of the bar, kicking and screaming. I smiled to myself, thinking of my failed attempt at seducing the beautiful blond-headed man now seated beside me.

That seemed both ages ago and only yesterday. "I'll stick with rum, thanks."

Entering the cloudy water, we were strongly cautioned to take care, as the openings were tight and the current strong. Our guide then launched into a sad story about the man who'd once owned this property: forsaken by a heartless woman, the forlorn lover had swum into one of the small caves, never to return—or some such garbage. When he mentioned ghosts, I stuck my head underwater and looked for my own cave.

"Last stop, amigos," the man exuberantly announced. "The sacrificial cliffs!"

Pete raised a taunting brow, his toothy smile nearly splitting his face.

"Not doing it," I said, crossing my arms.

"I'll pay ya."

We parked in front of a nearly hidden path, and after a short walk through the dense forest, discovered another cenote. This one was not nearly as clear, and only vague sunlight dappled its surface through the foliage. We swam around for a bit, working up our courage—well, they worked theirs up. I wasn't stupid enough to hurl my body off a cliff.

Pete pulled me into his arms, his need echoing mine. With his deliciously tanned skin, richer by the day, his rock hard body—and I do mean all of it—rubbing against mine, and the hungry look in his eyes, I became fairly dizzy with desire.

"Best sex of your life, if ya jump," he whispered, nibbling my ear while pressing his pelvis into mine.

I sank my teeth into his lower lip in threat. "No."

"You can pick the position." He ran his thumb across my bikini top, discreetly grazing my oversensitive nipples. I gasped. "Any way ya want," he continued.

"No," I said weakly.

"I'll be your slave."

"No," I whimpered as his hand traveled south.

“Are ya absolutely sure?” he said, before kissing me so deeply and so thoroughly that I forgot I was even in Mexico. I looked into eyes that burned, wanting him like the shimmering air.

“Just so you know, I hate you,” I said.

His lips curled up into a Grinch’s smile, and he towed me to the dirt shore, grasping a large tree root to pull us out.

“We are ready!” Pete announced to the cheering group already lined up to jump.

“Death is coming for us,” I muttered.

After watching five people take the plunge, it was our turn. I stood at the cliff’s edge, realizing it was very much higher than it had looked from the murky water. “What if there are rocks?” I asked, burying my face in Pete’s chest.

“They wouldn’t bring us somewhere where we could get hurt,” he replied.

“Did you not see lunch? I doubt they care whether we live or die.”

Pete snorted. “Enough stallin’, Susie-Q. Are ya goin’ of your own will, or am I tossin’ ya over?”

“What? No! I’m, I’m not doing it.”

“You promised.”

“I hate you’ is not a promise. It’s a factual statement.”

“For better or for worse,” Pete said.

“Until death do us part,” I retorted.

“We’ll go together.”

“I need you to know that I’m divorcing you if we live.”

He grabbed my hand, counted to three very quickly, and then I was screaming my bloody head off. The splash was epic. When we surfaced—still alive and everything—my smile was irrepressible.

“Again?” he asked, eyes twinkling with anticipation.

I snorted. “I still hate you.”

After seven more jumps, the group leader called us down, and we grudgingly clamored back into the van. The return trip was fairly quick, and Pete’s head was between my legs twenty minutes later.

“Oh, don’t stop—ever!” I moaned, promptly seizing up in a shattering orgasm.

After we caught our breaths, Pete looked up at me and said, “Again?”

“I still hate you,” I replied, grinning.

*Retched Honeymoon*

The next morning, I awoke and promptly vomited.

“Y’alright?” Pete asked, poking his head around the bathroom door.

“Stupid ham sandwich,” I muttered.

After a few sips of water and a handful of Pepto-Bismol chewables, I felt every bit myself again.

“Let’s try and get a little breakfast in you.”

Though my hunger threatened to overcome me, I nibbled cautiously while grumpily watching Pete devour an entire feast. We then wandered to the beach; our morning ritual. I felt immensely better after my fist banana mama, and was able to eat lunch without any gastric consequences; food poisoning averted.

“*Sweet Home Alabama*, again?” I crinkled my nose as the song blasted through the poolside speakers. Every American’s ear perked up, and there was a collective “Turn it up!” at just the right place. “They play this song every single flippin’ day.”

“Must be time for water aerobics,” Pete replied.

“Huh?”

“It’s the staff’s cue. The songs tell ’em when to start the next activity. ‘Sweet Home Alabama’ means water aerobics.”

Sure enough, as soon as the song ended, a man, dressed in white

pants and a flowered shirt, picked up the microphone and said, "Alright everybodyyyyy. Water aerobics. Whoop whoop!"

I stared at Pete, unblinking. He shrugged. "I pay attention." Then he grinned. "I've also noticed how especially fine you look in that bikini top—all your tops."

"You think so?" I said, grinning.

"Uh huh. Full and round. Gorgeous." He leaned across the chair and kissed my cheek. Then he fake-yawned. "Boy, all this sun bathin' has worn me out. I could sure use a nap. I bet you could, too." I made a scoffing sound, and he raised a rogue's brow. "Women have needs," he said, echoing a long ago conversation. "You, especially."



"I've never seen so many shades of blue in my life," I remarked, leaning over the catamaran's netting. It was mid-afternoon, and the sun was casting beams that reached to the depths of the ocean floor.

"Careful ya don't fall in," Pete said, wiggling even farther over the edge. "I think my favorite is that one." He pointed to a shade I'd only ever seen in a Crayola sixty-four pack. "Or maybe that one!" We whooshed over a motley scheme of ever-changing depths, yielding one hue after another.

"This is so awesome," I yelled into the strong breeze quickly ushering us down the shoreline.

"I can't believe we're goin' home tomorrow."

"Me either. It's been amazing."

"Best honeymoon we've ever had," he said, nudging me with his shoulder. "Are ya feelin' alright?" he asked a few moments later, his face the very picture of concern.

"Yes. I told you, I'm totally fine."

I'd thrown up at least twice a day since eating that damned sandwich. I didn't feel ill; I'd throw up, chew on some Pepto-Bismol, then I was good to go.

"This is startin' to worry me."

“Look! A dolphin?” I exclaimed, pointing in some random direction to break his train of thought.

After rinsing in the restaurant’s bathroom that evening, I wiped my mouth with a wet paper towel and returned to the table. I’d made it through a whopping two bites of manicotti.

“Did it again, didn’t ya?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“I’m fine,” I snapped.

“You’re pale as a ghost.” He touched my forehead with the back of his hand. “Clammy, too. You’re seein’ a doctor as soon as we get home.”

Scuffing my sandals on the walkway leading to our room, I sighed mightily.

Packed before dawn, we set our suitcases outside the door for pick-up and took our last stroll on the beach. Mounting a lumpy coral outcropping the size of a two story building, we settled ourselves on a smooth place and listened to the waves tumbling over one another. I lay my head on Pete’s shoulder as we watched the sun conquer the horizon. “I don’t want to go home.”

Turning to me, his expressive eyes shone with unfettered emotion. “You are my home now. Wherever you are, that’s where I’ll be.” He lifted my hand and kissed it tenderly.

Grudgingly, we returned to the resort. I stuck my nose in a yellow vining flower and inhaled its honeyed fragrance before entering the bustling restaurant. The beauty of this place was surreal—like it couldn’t truly exist in our realm. And though I’d never deny North Carolina’s majestic glory, this was simply other. Pete took my hand and smiled in clear understanding.

“We’ll come back next year for our anniversary. And the year after that.” He smiled sweetly. “It’ll be our special place. Yours and mine alone.”

The bus ride back took exactly as long as it had coming. The only difference? This time, Pete was wide awake. “I don’t remember this part. Did we stop here before?” He repeated at least once every ten minutes.

I rolled my eyes and pulled my brimmed hat over my face.

*Typhoid Mary*

"I'm carryin' ya over the threshold properly, or we're not goin' in."

"Fine. Whatever." After an exhausting day of travel—*not* in first class this time—all I wanted was a quick shower and, say, twenty-four hours of sleep.

Setting me down at the entrance to our bedroom, he said, "I'll get our luggage. Be right back."

Crunching dried rose petals like autumn leaves, I padded to the bathroom, retched, and then squirted a giant glob of toothpaste on my brush. Feeling much better with clean teeth, I yawned cavernously, and then screamed bloody murder.

Pete tumbled into the room, thoroughly alarmed. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?!"

"Ook ah ma hongue," I garbled, pulling out my tongue with fingertips. "Iths ack!"

"What?"

"Ack! Ook a ih." I crossed my eyes, trying to see without the mirror.

"I don't understand."

I let go of my tongue and screeched, "My fucking tongue is black. It's *black*! I've caught a disease in the bloody third world. It was that

ham sandwich. What was the name of that tour company? I'm suing them before I die!"

Pete disappeared, returning quickly with a flashlight. "Let me see." He shone a light down my throat. "Yep, it's definitely black."

"That's frigging helpful. Call 911! Tell them to wear hazmat suits. Oh, Pete," I said, tearing up, "we'll be quarantined. Show me your tongue." It was perfectly pink. "I don't understand. You ate one, too."

He pulled out his phone and tapped the screen a few times. Rapidly scanning as he scrolled, his frown slowly melted into a smile. Suddenly, he burst out laughing.

I stamped my foot. "This is life or death. What's so damn funny?" His face was red, and he seemed unable to speak. "Peter Everett Walsh!" I yelled, kicking at him.

"It appears ya have a case of the Pepto-Bismol blues—or blacks, in your case." He snorted out another laugh. "According to *physicians.com*, for some people, namely you, the bismuth deposits on your tongue and turns it black. It says it's common." I snatched the phone and scanned the article.

"Well, I threw up again, too. So ha, I am dying!" His mirth fled, soberness backfilling it.

"I'm callin' the doctor first thing in the morning."



I stretched languorously. "Mm, it feels good waking up in our own bed."

"Yeah, it does." He rolled on his side and wrapped his arms around me.

I glanced at the bedside clock. "Ugh. Honeymoon's over. I've got to hit the office and embrace the nightmares that await."

Gorgeous, with bed hair and golden stubble, as he pulled me against his chest, my internal temperature rose ten degrees. He smiled in a way that said *I will have you now*. Just as our lips touched, my stomach lurched. I raced to the bathroom, slamming the door

behind me. Other than some nasty tasting bile, nothing came up. I swallowed two capfuls of mouthwash and checked my tongue.

Pete knocked then entered. After an accusing look, he said, “Your face is pale. Why don’t you head back to bed for a little while? Work can wait.”

“I feel perfectly fine, barring my stupid tongue. This is just gross.”

He sighed and left me to my toothbrush.

“Does it look any better now?” I asked, walking back into the bedroom.

I heard Pete say, “Okay, thanks much,” and then to me, “what’d you say, sweetheart?”

I stuck out my tongue. “Does it look better now?” He engulfed me in his arms and kissed me, running his tongue over mine in a sensual caress. I pushed him away. “Ew! Stop it. I’m disgusting.”

Laughing, he tried to kiss me again. “I like your tongue, no matter what color it is.”

“Freak.”

“How’s the stomach?”

“Just dandy. Now let me get dressed.”

He had dry toast and a poached egg waiting for me when I entered the kitchen. “You need to eat a little something before ya go.”

I rolled my eyes. “My diet starts today. My skirt is actually tight.”

He walked around me, leisurely running his hand across the contour of my butt. “It looks perfect to me.”

“You’re blind.” I quickly ate, kissed him goodbye—*lips only*, and grabbed my keys.

“Oh, Susie-Q,” Pete said, his voice following me down the stairs, “your doctor’s appointment is at one o’clock. Do you want me to come?”

“Of course, not. I’m perfectly fine,” I lied. “And I can make my own damn appointments, thank you.”



“Susan Wade?”

Grabbing hold of the nurse’s arm, I dragged her back through the door. “Listen, I caught something on my honeymoon, and it won’t go away. I have a disease! I want tests!” She shook her head and led me to the scale. When it displayed a number six pounds too high, I gasped. “That can’t be right! Your scale is broken.”

“Scale’s just fine, honey,” she said with a snort. “Sit down here on the table, and let me take your blood pressure.” She cuffed my arm and stuck a thermometer in my mouth. “Well, you don’t have a fever.”

“And my tongue is black!” I quipped indignantly.

“Open,” she said, jamming a tongue depressor in my mouth. “Why Lordy, it’s black as night. What’ve you been eatin’, child?”

“I told you, I have a disease!”

“Doctor’ll be in shortly.” Stepping out, she left me alone with my rather impressive imagination.

Other than an insurance mandated wellness check and a prescription refill, I’d had little reason to see a doctor since my return to North Carolina. After a light knock, a rather handsome man strolled into the room. “I’m Doctor Jordon. It’s nice to meet you...” He glanced at the chart, “Miss Wade.”

“It’s Mrs. Walsh, now. I just got married.”

“Well, congratulations.” He offered a genuine smile, and then tapped his chin. “Walsh. Where do I know that name?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Seriously? Probably a third of your patients are Walshes. They’re everywhere!”

He laughed. “You’ll have to forgive me. I’m new to the area. I’ve only recently joined the practice.”

“Oh? Where are you from?” I asked in pure North Carolina fashion.

“Massachusetts, originally, but here via Emory.”

I snorted. “At least Atlanta’s broken you in a bit. Still, you have some surprises waiting for you.”

“So I’m learning.” He grimaced slightly, but then quickly put his happy doctor face back on.

Emory had an impressive medical school. “Were you last in your class or something?” I said, eyeing him dubiously.

“Third, actually. Why do you ask?”

“You’re in nowhere, North Carolina”—*silent on the Duh*—“Is this some kind of scholarship fulfillment deal?”

He barked out a laugh. “No, my wife’s from the area.”

“Oh. Well, she’s probably related to my husband then.”

“I’ll ask. Now, what brings you in today?” He flipped through the scant paperwork.

“I caught a disease in Mexico and I’m dying,” I said flatly.

“Dying, huh?”

“Yes. See?” I stuck out my hideously black tongue.

“Hmm.” He stuck another nasty-tasting tongue depressor in my mouth and flashed his light-thingy down my throat.

“Sthee!”

He chuckled. “Somebody’s been chewing Pepto-Bismol tablets. This reaction is really quite common.” I narrowed my eyes and scowled at him. “I see you’re also complaining of nausea.”

“Yes. I ate a rancid ham sandwich during a snorkeling excursion, and I’ve been puking ever since. I’m planning on suing.” His lips twitched. “This isn’t funny. I’m seriously ill!”

“Tell me a little more about the nausea.”

“I’m just going about my business, and then suddenly I’m retching.”

“Any diarrhea?” I shook my head no. “Stomach cramps?” I shook my head again. “How do you feel after you vomit?”

“Perfectly fine.”

He asked several more questions that clearly had no relevance whatever, and then said, “When was your last period?”

“It was...um. Well, it was before the wedding, I know that. Things have been very hectic.”

“I imagine so.”

"I'm on the pill. It should be in my chart," I said, craning to see what was written there. "What does my period have to do with anything, anyway? Look, I've done my internet research. Don't you get it? I have the black plague! I'm sure it's highly contagious, and I'm probably spreading it everywhere I go. You realize you'll be held responsible when the CDC finds out you've ignored the situation and they have to quarantine all of Eastern North Carolina. Do you want that on your head, mister? I'm quite certain it will ruin your career. I'm Typhoid friggin' Mary, here."

He smirked as he wrote probably mean things in my chart. "I'll send in the nurse to take blood and urine samples."

"That's more like it," I huffed.

I handed her the filled cup, and she thanked me by stabbing me with a needle. After a million minutes ticked by, feeling my life-force slowly draining from me, the nurse returned, beaming for all she was worth. "The doctor wants to see *yew* in his office." I followed her bouncing form down the hall, wondering why the hell she was suddenly so happy. Maybe she had another victim to stab.

Diplomas hung boastfully behind his desk. I studied them and their dates, suddenly feeling every bit of my thirty-one years. Dr. Jordon whisked into the office. "I have good news for you, Mrs. Walsh. You are not dying. We'll have the full report back in a few days, but in the meantime, congratulations. You're going to be a mother."

And that's when the room went as black as my tongue.

*The Beginning of the End*

I awoke to the stench of ammonia and a bevy of hushed voices. Waving the smell away, I tried to sit up. When I took in the room, I realized I was on the couch in Dr. Jordan's private office. Finally gathering my wits, I remembered why. Panic gripped me in its jaws, and I frantically met a nurse's calm eyes. "You didn't call my husband, did you?"

"Not yet. But I was about to."

"Don't," I said. "Please don't."

With a cold compress on the back of my neck and the room still spinning, I rocked back and forth on the couch, mumbling to myself like a crazy person. Once I'd slurped the entire contents of the juice box forced upon me, the doctor returned. "How are you feeling?"

"Well, not pregnant!"

He chuckled to himself. "I'd like to tell you I've seen worse reactions to the news, but I'm afraid I'd be lying." I gave him a jaundiced look. "Mrs. Walsh, while experiences vary, morning sickness typically begins around week six."

I gasped in horror. "*Week six?!*"

"Without an ultrasound, I can't pinpoint the exact date. But since you began experiencing nausea last week...does week seven sound about right?"

“I can’t be seven weeks pregnant! I just got married and I’m still on the pill.”

“Do you remember missing any days?”

“Well...” I thought back. Seven weeks would be back in March, right after Quarterlies. I’d forgotten to get a refill before leaving, and had run out midway through the week. Then there was Pete’s birthday, but I’d refilled it the following Monday. “Only a few, but I was out of town for most of that time. We only had sex a couple—*seven?*—“times before I got my refill.”

“It only takes one strong swimmer.” And if anyone was a good swimmer... “Surely you’ve noticed the changes.”

I glared at him as I thought about it: enlarged breasts, the mood-swing business, the hurling every flippin’ time I turned around...Oh God! “I am not pregnant,” I stammered. “I want a second opinion!”



“What’d the doctor say?” Mona asked, all perky, when I stamped down the hall.

“I’m not dying, unfortunately.”

“That’s good news. Did they give you any medicine?”

“Nothing useful.” I scowled, thinking of the pre-natal vitamin samples tucked in my purse.

“We’re still comin’ over tonight, right?” she asked. “I can’t wait to see the pictures!” She nearly squealed with a jubilation I did not share. “What can we bring? Strawberries are in season. Why don’t I make shortcake?”

“Sounds great. Listen, I’ve got some work to do.”

“Course, ya do. What with the weddin’ and honeymoon and all, you’re probly way behind. I’ll leave ya to it then. Oh, and I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

Once she closed the door, I dropped my forehead on the desk and had a nice cry. Okay, it was more a tantrum—an epic one, actually—but it was immensely cathartic. I’d quietly locked the office

door, hit the remote until my speakers were blaring Vivaldi, and then knocked everything off my desk. Papers went flying, pens soared through the air like poison darts; my desk plate left a very nice divot in the wall. I'd then dropped to the floor and put my head between my knees, simply trying to breathe. Finally, I curled into the fetal position and helplessly sobbed: sobbed for marriage, sobbed for my future, sobbed until I had nothing left inside me but a cold, leaden ball. My life was ruined, all because I failed in the trivial, yet monumental task of taking a stupid pill.

I never imagined doing this, but in this very dark hour, I picked up my phone and hit speed dial.

"Mom, I'm in trouble..."



"Are ya all cured?" Pete asked as I tossed my keys on the table. He was cooking for an army, and it smelled...rather noxious, actually. I raced to the bathroom.

"No better, huh?" He was standing in the doorway, wearing a canvas apron and a serious expression.

I wiped my lips with the hand towel then drank great gulps of water. "I'm seeing a specialist next Monday. It's the earliest they could get me in," I responded, not quite meeting his eyes. "I'm going to take a shower."

I examined myself in the spray. I wasn't showing or anything, but my boobs were big—like, plastic surgery big. I shook my slightly jiggly stomach. I'd attributed my weight gain to too many piñas coladas by the pool, but...holy crap! I was going to get fat! Really fat! Like, ginormously fat! Worse, Pete was going to find out.

I dressed in a non-clingy sheath and followed the voices of my dearest friends.

"And then she knocked Piper right in the head, jumpin' for the bouquet." Mona giggled uncontrollably. "Hey, Susan!" she then chirped. I forced a smile.

“Dinner’s about ready, y’all,” Pete announced. “Grab a seat, and I’ll pour the wine.”

I took a neat sip, and then privately freaked. I wasn’t supposed to drink. Then: Oh crap! Did all that Mexican rum hurt the baby? Will it come out deformed? I lost my grip on the glass, and it toppled over, white wine turning the tablecloth translucent. Mona hopped up with a yelp and ran inside for paper towels.

Pete set the bottle and the appetizer platter on the bench and, after everyone held up their plates, whipped off the tablecloth like a carnival magician.

“Okay,” he said, as we all resettled, “let’s try that again.” He set a fresh glass in front of me and picked up the bottle.

“Um, Pete. Could I have some water instead?” With a rather odd expression, he nodded and disappeared.

The dish was gorgeous; the channel bass decorated with thin strips of ginger and lemon grass. Much to Pete’s utter joy, a large Harris Teeter grocery store had recently opened in Morehead City, and it amazingly carried real, actual food, along with the standard staples of Sex Wax, tourist t-shirts, folding chairs, and boogie boards.

He heaped a large portion onto my plate. “I made it special for ya, Susie-Q. I know it’s your favorite.”

His perfect face was painted with tenderness, and at that moment I knew I was surely the luckiest woman walking on the planet. Of course, when he found out I was pregnant, that tender expression would turn horror-filled and he would leave me. I sighed deeply, imagining none of this was real, that there wasn’t an alien creature growing inside me; a demon poised to destroy my life.

“It smells just wonderful,” Mona gushed. “It’s my favorite, too.” Jimbo looked at her adoringly. She was the one who wanted this. To her, pregnancy would be the ultimate joy, the perfection on top of a perfect marriage. I’d wished this for her. No, I wished this on her! *The Devil’s curse!*

Taking my hand, Pete said, “Let’s bow our heads. Dear Lord,

thank you for this delicious food and these dear friends. Please bless us and keep us whole. And dear Lord, please bless my precious wife—a gift I don't deserve, but will treasure as long as you'll let me live." I heard a faint feminine snuffle and smiled as Pete finished with a solid "amen." Blessed didn't begin to describe the gift I'd received. But then I remembered this thing inside of me and wondered once more if God hated me, if this was a cruel joke; giving me something precious then snatching it away. I felt lightheaded and gulped a large sip of ice water.

"Alright, eat up, everybody," Pete ordered.

"Mm mm," Mona murmured. "You've outdone yourself. I sure wish I could cook like this."

Pete looked expectantly at me. I scooped up a large forkful of foul-smelling fish and popped it in my mouth. It tasted so vile I could barely swallow it, my salivary glands squirting liquid into my mouth like a fountain. My stomach seized up, and I raced to the railing, spewing vomit all over Myrtle's hood. Based solely on my feelings towards that ugly piece of crap truck, it would have been the ultimate in satisfaction, however, before I could even muster a smile, a second explosion of projectile disgust shot from my esophageal cannon.

Pete rushed to my side and held back my hair. "Sweetheart!"

"Don't. Ever...insert gag...Make...add dry heave...That...stringy dripping spittle glob...Dish. Again!" I wilted onto the bench lining the expansive deck. Pete marched to the table with purpose, picked up the platter, and promptly dumped its entire contents onto the row of azalea bushes bordering the house.

Before I could mutter thanks, Mona pressed a wet napkin to my forehead and made soothing sounds like a mother to her young. "Let's get ya inside. It's hot out here and ya probly need to lie down.

Watching the blur of the ceiling fan blades a little later, a tear ran down my temple. Its twin followed. My life was over.

*Second Opinion*

Carteret General Hospital housed the brand-spanking new *Brady Birthing Center*. A modern structure, its rounded glass foyer protruded out like a pregnant elephant. I hadn't mustered the courage to tell Pete the department in which the specialist worked, or that the specialist was really just your average, run-of-the-mill Ob-Gyn.

My palms were sweaty as I met my soon-to-be ex-husband at the hospital's entrance. Cleverly, I led him on a circuitous route through the building's interior before entering the bank of birthing center offices through a side door. He didn't seem to catch on right away, but when he surveyed the waiting room filled with bloated women, anxious men, and parenting magazines carpeting every table and couch, his expression blanked.

Scurrying to the counter to sign in and have my insurance card scanned, I returned with a clipboard and pen. To his credit, he did not say one word, but rather snatched up a magazine and began flipping through it, essentially hiding his features. I was in a panic, but any immediate drama would be tempered by our public surroundings and Pete's Southern manners. Tears, which had been held under the restraint of my iron will for hours, began breaking free, and I had trouble breathing as I checked the *yes* box for family

history of cancer. I nearly lost it completely at the *when was your last period* question; the answer terrified me.

We were led back to a spacious room. Pete chatted away with the pink-clad nurse as she rolled a thermometer over my forehead and cuffed my arm with a blood pressure apparatus. After glancing through my paperwork, she asked general questions about my family history—the same ones I’d just flippin’ answered, and then handed me a Dixie cup and escorted me to a generous bathroom.

As women lack the garden hose with which men come conveniently equipped, successfully urinating in a small paper cup is challenging on a good day, but with hands shaking and tears dripping, the whole enterprise had become especially daunting. I placed the cup on the back of the toilet as instructed, and slipped out, pretending none of this was real.

Pete raised an eyebrow when I returned, but remained silent as I changed into the stupid cloth gown, tying it up the front. It was ten sizes too big, and I was struck with terror that it might soon fit. I climbed onto the table and spread the tissue sheet over my waist and legs, all the while wondering if I could hide underneath it and pretend Pete wasn’t there. I stole a glance. His face was once again hidden behind a parenting magazine, and I wanted to die, or for him to say something...or yep, for me to just die.

A faint knock on the door announced Dr. Adams. He was a pleasant-looking man in his late forties, with light brown hair and a warm smile. He shook our hands in introduction, flipped through papers that had miraculously become a thick chart, and then spoke. “So, we’re here for an ultrasound, I see.”

“I’m not pregnant,” I blurted out. “I’m just...well, not pregnant. I have a stomach issue from eating rancid ham in Mexico, and my regular doctor said I needed an ultrasound. Evidently, you’re the only office in town with this equipment.” *Untrue, but still...*

He smiled. “Yes, Dr. Jordan sent over your information.”

“Oh,” I said, looking at my lap. I swear to you, Pete chuckled. I whipped my head around and glared at him. His face dove behind the

stupid magazine with the stupid happy family picture on the stupid glossy cover.

“Well, shall we?” the doctor asked. He rolled a tan cart beside the examining table. “We’ll be doing this transvaginally, so please scoot down to the edge and place your heels in the stirrups.”

“Transvaginally?!” Mortified, I said, “It’s a stomach issue. Is this really necessary?”

The doctor looked over his rimless glasses, his blue eyes twinkling. “Yes, Mrs. Walsh.”

Pete snorted, and I narrowed my eyes. I had no words for that walking sperm bank.

I scooped my butt down the table, crinkling the paper liner, and prepared to ride the invisible stallion. On the list of shit women have to endure, this tops it: legs propped open, straddling the shoulders of a complete stranger, with a huge and fearsome lamp illuminating every errant strand of hair and who only knows what else down there.

Dr. Adams produced a thick, round wand, sheathed it with a condom, and squirted clear lubricant on the top. “Okay, this may feel a bit odd. Just relax. It won’t hurt.”

How the fuck was I supposed to relax with a cold plastic dildo moving around inside me, and the man responsible for this whole situation now leaning over the doctor’s shoulder in complete fascination? With the slightest pressure on my abdomen, I suddenly had to pee. This had become a fairly regular problem. It was like I had to go to the bathroom every five minutes. And it had been exactly twice that time since I’d filled the little cup.

The large computer screen showed a black blob resembling Jupiter’s spot. Inside that blob was a funky gray shape, looking vaguely like a deformed hourglass.

“What the hell is that?”

“Oh, sorry.” He pressed a button, and we were assaulted in surround sound by what I could only describe as sheet metal rippling in the wind.

"That, Mrs. Walsh, is your baby."

"I don't have a baby."

"He started measuring the object and clicking things on the monitor. "Eight weeks. Hmm, that would put conception on, or very near—"

"My birthday!" Pete exclaimed. The biggest smile I'd seen in our whole lives together erupted on his face. He looked at me like he'd just singlehandedly won the World Series. "I never in a million years thought you could top last year's present, but ya just did."

My lips peeled up over my teeth, and an honest to goodness growl ripped from my throat. "Wipe that damned smile off your face. You did this on purpose!"

Pete did not respond. Frankly, I think he was in such a state of blissful joy that he was dazed and blinded to reality. I wanted to strangle him.

Turning back to the monitor, I asked, "What's that fluttering thing?" It appeared the blob had swallowed a butterfly.

"Your baby's heart. That's the sound you're hearing." Pete and I gasped simultaneously, his eyes flooding with childlike wonder. "These are the arm buds, and here," he continued, pointing to two stumpy shapes, "are the legs—or the beginnings of them. Two arms, two legs. Perfect." Pete sighed as if he'd been holding his breath.

All of a sudden the alien thing moved. Pete inhaled a week's worth of air and then stared at the image like he'd just glimpsed heaven. The blob twitched again.

"What a vibrant little one. Moving already." Dr. Adams' face beamed with pleasure at this bizarre—okay, maybe amazing, but really fucking scary event.

Pete touched the screen, his fingers lingering over the tiny fluttering heart. He turned suddenly, his eyes glowing like the August sun. "Susan," he whispered reverently.

"Don't Susan me! This is *your* fault. And stop looking at me like I'm the flippin' Virgin Mary!" I snapped, as tears began streaming down my temples.

Pete was by my side in an instant. He showered my cheeks, my eyes, my lips with tender kisses, and then wiped my stray tears away. "You are every bit as special."

"Let me just check your cervix and ovaries," Dr. Adams said quietly, surely used to such behavior. "Your cervix is a nice length." Pete and I returned out attention to the monitor as the screen changed. "There we are. This is your left ovary. That's where the egg was released."

"It's a leftie," I muttered, jerking my quivering chin towards Pete. "Figures."

Pete's eyes misted, and I reached up and traced his wet lashes. "That's my baby growin' inside you. I'm gonna be a daddy." An unhindered grin unfurled. "Consider my world officially rocked."

After a gentle pat on my shoulder, followed by a pure male-bonding congratulatory moment with Pete, Dr. Adams left the room, his lab coat flowing behind him like Superman's cape.

"Why aren't you upset? In fact, why don't you seem surprised at all?"

"Susie-Q, ya don't grow up around a pile of women and not learn every detail about all things female. Anita was the worst of 'em all, too. Breast feedin' Taylor right in Mamma's livin' room with half the family sittin' there watchin'. Let's just say, I could've taught sex ed. class myself."

He laughed outright then, pressing his forehead against mine, said, "You've had all the signs. I just wasn't payin' attention." He untied my hospital gown and cupped my breasts. "These are larger and more sensitive. And the throwin' up and feelin' just fine afterwards..." He kissed the top of my head, nuzzled his nose in my hair, and then inhaled deeply. "And when ya came home from the doctor last week, lookin' scared and confused and not wantin' to talk about it...well, that's when I knew."

"What if I'd had cancer or something? What if—"

"You would've told me that. My mamma and your daddy both died of it. You wouldn't've waited one second to tell me and ya know

it.” A tendril of sadness threaded his soft smile. “Besides, you’re not allowed to die.”



Once clothed and seated on the generous couch in his office, I scanned the certificates, artwork, and pictures of Dr. Adams’ family. *Five kids?* The dude took his profession seriously. Nodding at his diploma, I said, “Duke. I guess that’s okay.”

Pete squeezed my hand. “He’s ranked eighth in the state in obstetrics.”

“And you know this, how?”

Pulling out his phone, Pete tapped the screen. *The American Society of Obstetrics* website popped up, touting Dr. Adams’ virtues. He shook his head in mock reprimand. “You don’t think I’d trust just anybody to take care of my wife, do ya?”

All smiles, Dr. Adams entered the room and sat in the wingback chair nearest us. Crossing his legs, he began what sounded like a well-practiced spiel. “Many women feel agitated and emotional as their pregnancy journey continues.”

“Then I think you’ve been pregnant since the day we met,” Pete interjected with a snort. Dr. Adams whipped out an impressively scolding look before continuing, and I decided right then that I liked him.

“Susan, your body’s going through drastic changes, and you may feel uncertain about what’s considered normal, especially in terms of your emotional well-being. It’s important to discuss your feelings with a close friend, your partner,” he said, glancing at Pete, “or me for reassurance.” He then ticked off a series of directives, tips, and suggestions, ending with one last “congratulations”.

Pete and I left the birthing center hand-in-hand. “You’re not goin’ back to work, are ya?” he asked, tilting his head to one side.

I felt an overwhelming need to rush back to the office and beat Mona silly with my briefcase for casting that baby curse on me. She’d

definitely been dabbling in the black arts. “Why, what did you have in mind?”

“I’d just really love to wrap my arms around you and hold ya for a little while.”

After such an interminable stretch of guilt, anxiety, and unbidden waves of terror that he’d freak out and leave me, the thought was delicious. “I’ll race you home.”

“Oh no. No more racin’ for you.”

*Quarterlies from Hell*

It was perhaps the worst flight of my life. Though we had no turbulence, the seat beside me was blessedly vacant, and my morning sickness had waned, I was miserable for a different reason: I was starting to show.

The taxi dropped me at Saks, and I accosted the first salesperson I found. “I need a new suit. *STAT!*”

Considering how many meals I’d hurled back up, you’d think I’d be skeletal by now, but no. Evidently every molecule in the lower atmosphere had decided to attach itself to my body. After going up two friggin’ sizes, I found something that was acceptable: all black and as slimming a cut as possible. In the shoe section I nearly wept. My legs—my perfectly sculpted legs—looked thick even in rock star heels.

The hotel room mirror showed me things I did not want to see. My cheeks were fuller—no, they were fat! And though Pete and Mona insisted my skin actually glowed, all I saw was chipmunk. I touched up my make-up and repositioned the bright scarf designed to further distract the onlooker. Resigned, I headed for the INTech Plaza.

Squirming and burdened with the constant need to pee, I was trapped in an overfilled conference room with several hundred of

my nearest and dearest...and Kirsten. So certain everyone would question my condition based on garb alone, I considered slapping a giant scarlet *P* on my blouse to kick off the scandal in style. By the time I stepped on stage to deliver my presentation, I was sweating terribly, the inadequate air-conditioning making matters worse. I hid behind the podium as best I could, and once finished, hustled back to my seat, hugging a folder to my chest.

As with all Quarterlies, there was food everywhere you turned—*thank heaven above!* Normally, I steered clear of pastries and the high caloric nonsense, but today I all but elbowed my way to the front of the line, prepared to devour the entire smorgasbord.

At the sound of a censorious hiss, I stopped mid-bite and glanced up at the man I once called lover.

“You used to be the hottest piece of real estate in this company. Now look at you.” He unloaded a truly disgusted grimace. “Don’t they have gyms in South Carolina?”

I wiped brownie icing from my lips and said, “Bite me, Ryan.”

“I would, Baby, but...the cholesterol.”

“You like them milk-fed, if I recall. Any new interns in your life?”

His eyes roamed over my cleavage and now almost D-cup breasts, and a carnal smile crossed his lips. “At least your tits look good.”

“Sexual harassment, *Baby*,” I sneered in retort.

A very attractive, waif-like creature sauntered by, giving him the kind of look that promised rude things behind locked office doors; I used to be her. I cringed as he openly compared us. Smirking, he shook his head once more. “God, what a waste.” Then he trotted along behind her like the dog he was.

I won’t lie; that hurt—more than I wanted to admit. Ryan’s opinion of people was based solely on looks, and it was quite possible that the only reason he’d hung onto me for so long was because of mine. And while the knowledge that I now repulsed him should have made me feel vindicated in some bizarre way, I just wanted to cry. I stared at the half empty plate of carbs and calories with disdain. Though Pete wouldn’t let me diet if I tried, I couldn’t anyway; the

beast demanded food. I crammed the remainder of the brownie in my mouth with a newfound appreciation for compulsive eating disorders. Its sugary goodness didn't completely cure my depression, but the Band-Aid sure felt nice.

Grace Newman, in the form of a savior, dropped into the chair beside me. She gave me the same once over Ryan had, and then threw her arms around me and squealed. "When are you due?"

"Shh! December," I whispered, horrified.

She looked at my plate knowingly. "Oh, I remember those days. They didn't make enough food. How are you feeling?"

"Like a blimp."

"Well, that part's only going to get worse, but it'll be so worth it in the end."

"I'm embarrassed to be seen. Everyone's judging me."

"So? Let them. Half the women here are snakes; the others wish they had your glow. You are glowing, you know. You have the beautiful aura of motherhood. Is your husband bursting with pride?"

I chuckled. "He thinks I'm carrying the Christ child."

"Men are so like that."

"And he keeps telling me I'm beautiful, but I know he's lying."

"Sounds like you've got a keeper. Believe him, Susan. Pregnancy agrees with you."

Snorting, I fanned myself with my wilted napkin.

"Yeah, I remember that, too. Sometimes I felt like I was going to spontaneously combust—and that was winter. You must be dying."

"I am. And living in the South isn't helping matters."

"I hadn't even thought of that. How horrible. I hate to break it to you, but my hot flashes actually got worse after pregnancy. Maybe your next district will be cooler."

"Oh, I'm not changing districts."

"Susan, when you take maternity leave, they replace you. You know that. Remember how it was for me?"

It had been a train wreck. She was assigned a district far from her family, and then, through a strange chain of events—one that gave

me superstar status—she was offered a district so close to home, she could easily commute. The thought of putting Pete and my future monster through that kind of nightmare made me shiver; North Carolina was home now.

“Grace, I’m not taking maternity leave.”

She laughed. “Of course you are. You’ll need time to bond with your baby, regain your strength, and embrace motherhood. It’s a very important time in your life. Plus, those last two weeks are killers.”

“I’m not required to take leave, right?”

She gave me a bizarre look. “Technically not, I suppose. But you’d be crazy not to.”

“I’ve got plenty of vacation saved up, and I can work from home some. It’ll be fine.”

Her eyes fizzing with mirth, she laid her hand on my arm and unloaded a knowing smirk. “Good luck with that, sweetie.”



I didn’t stay for the mixer. I’d been away from Pete four nights, and an empty bed in a ritzy hotel was no substitute for a rock-hard body that hogged the sheets. As nausea retreated, my sexual drive advanced; I wanted Pete savagely.

I’d never been so happy to see signs for Atlantic Beach in my whole life. I raced across the bridge and squealed the tires as I accelerated onto Hwy 58, nearly blinded by the neon lights of Wings tourist shops—all three locations within a block of one another. By the time I passed mile marker three, I was nearly salivating. When I broke through the overgrown scrub, Yukon bushes, and line of attack mosquitos guarding our property like Sleeping Beauty’s castle, my headlights fell on Pete’s beautiful form. Leaving the car running, I flew into his arms.

“How was your trip, sweetheart?”

“Shh!” All business, I stuck my tongue in his mouth and slid my hand down the front of his cargo shorts, firmly rubbing my palm

against his crotch. His expression's direct translation: *Please, God, let me not be dreaming*. Dragging him up the stairs was like tugging on a feather.

"Lord, I want ya, Susie-Q," he said through kisses. "Are you feelin' up to it?"

I didn't even bother answering. I just unzipped his pants and yanked them off his tight hips, underwear and all; his t-shirt landed on the lampshade

He began a sweet seduction, but I stopped that shit cold in its tracks. "Sex now, foreplay later."

*WTF?*

I had no idea what time it was, though considering we'd finally called it quits around four in the morning, I can promise it was quite late. I wandered onto the deck, alternately sipping freshly brewed coffee and the gently salted air.

My eyes immediately fell upon a breakfast feast. Wearing only bathing suit trunks and flip flops as he scrubbed the white hood of his company jeep, his muscled back rippled and flexed under skin blessed by sun's early summer kisses. When he hopped off the tire and bent to squeeze the sponge in a sudsy bucket, I swallowed hard to keep from drooling.

At my rather poor attempt at a bawdy construction worker's whistle, his head shot up.

"Mornin', Susie-Q. You sure look fine."

"I sure feel fine, if not a little sore."

He cockily grinned up at me. "Sore, huh?"

"Very, happily, blissfully sore." I bit my lip as scenes from last night replayed themselves in full Technicolor. Crossing his arms, he leaned against the truck with a satisfied stance. His shoulders barely crested the hood. And that's when it hit me: either his jeep had overdosed on steroids, or that wasn't his jeep. I leaned over the railing to get a better look.

“Whose car is that?”

He walked over to the faucet and took an unnecessarily long time turning off the water. “Well...it’s a surprise.”

“A surprise?”

“Nice, huh?”

Anita and Memorial Day went together like Anita and the Fourth of July, or Anita and Labor Day. Honestly, if there was a national holiday to celebrate, she was all over it, and a trip to her riverfront house promised an epic party with much alcohol and a whole lot of boating. Plus, she liked ginormous cars, and this SUV was very ginormous. I couldn’t imagine a better time for her husband to surprise her with it than when she had a huge audience.

Hot pink was a lifestyle for her, but when it came to cars, red was the nearest thing. But as I thought about it, white would certainly show off her new, nearly blinding, hot pink Graphics Shack car magnets. Kirk had thought of everything.

“Anita will love it,” I said, looking forward to being on the inside for once.

Pete stared at me for a moment with raised his brows. Then he said, far too suggestively, “I sure could use some lunch. I wonder if you’re too—”

“Sore?” I finished, smiling coyly.

Pete’s thunderous steps were followed by tender kisses to my neck and shoulder. His voice was deep and sexy as he spoke in my ear. “Ya know, we don’t need to be in any hurry to get to Anita’s.” He slowly unbuttoned the white dress shirt I’d found lying on the floor and cupped my breasts, clearly enjoying their ever-increasing girth. “I’m certain we won’t be missed for quite a while.” He pulled a nipple into his mouth, and I shuddered as sensations raced down my spine to the center of my sexual universe.

“Maybe we could go in a...little while,” I stammered breathlessly.

As the third orgasm ripped through my being, Pete’s breath exploded, his personal throbbing driving mine to infinity.

“I love you so much,” he said, kissing my ear before collapsing.

Utterly replete, I sighed. I could never hear those words enough. For anyone to love me the way he did was a gift I'd never deserve, but I'd learned that grace was funny that way.

"I'm not squishing ya, am I?" he suddenly asked, quickly propping himself up on his elbows. He'd asked the same question at least four times last night.

"Not even close."

"You'll let me know, right?"

"I'll let you know." I wrapped my legs tightly around him, pulling him deeper within me.

Eventually, Pete rolled onto his side. As always, I felt a twinge of loss as our physical connection broke. I looked into his placid eyes; a calm green lake. He brushed my temple and cheek.

"I'm glad you're startin' to feel better." His hand gently spread across my abdomen. I tried not to think of my figure's continued degradation, of softness rapidly replacing hard-earned muscle. "I'd bear this for you if I could."

I covered his hand with mine. "Will you promise to love me when I'm a blimp?"

He snorted, and then with serious eyes said, "Susan, I will always love you. *Always.*"



Once showered and dressed, Pete carted our boating paraphernalia towards Anita's new toy. He touched some hidden button, and the hatch lifted soundlessly.

"I'll race you to New Bern," I said, opening my little Audi's door.

"I thought you could drive this down."

I'd never driven anything that big before. I'd be a sports car girl until the day I died, but I was always up for a challenge. I shrugged my shoulders. "Sure, I'll give it a try. But if I scratch it, you're taking the blame."

He threw back his head and laughed. "I don't think so."

I tossed my fob to Pete. "Treat Lucy with all the love and respect she deserves." I had named my silver beauty in honor of Pete's Southern eccentricity. He christened anything owning a motor—or even a motherboard, with some stupid female name. Our stainless refrigerator had as of yet been spared such indignities, but it was only a matter of time. Unlike Myrtle, his ill-favored pick-up truck, or Bessie, his rather attractive boat, at least the name Lucy was somewhat normal.

I stepped up on the Clydesdale's running board. "This thing is like a tank."

"By design," he murmured.

I settled behind the wheel, feeling very much the munchkin, and searched for the seat adjust...and the mirror adjust...and the steering wheel lever...and all other manner of moving parts that would allow me to actually see out the windshield. As I fastened the seatbelt, Pete climbed into the passenger's side.

"What are you doing?"

"Gettin' in."

"Why?"

"Would ya rather I walked?"

I snorted. "Maybe. Is there something wrong with my car?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Then how are we planning to get home?"

He seemed to think on it for a moment, and then said, "Why, we can catch a ride back with Mona and Jimbo."

Anita's parties were renowned, and we tended to enjoy ourselves to the point of needing a spare mattress, couch, or plot of carpet on which to pass out. However, in my current state that would not be the case. "If you're planning on drinking yourself into oblivion, you do have a designated driver, you know." *A really pissed off one who would simply like to have a beer on occasion.* Seriously, was that so much to ask?

"Well, I missed you somethin' awful last week, and I thought we might use the trip to talk. We were kind of busy last night...and this

morning.” When he brought my hand to his lips and kissed it, heat simmered in my veins. Whatever hormone my body was suddenly kicking out, I needed to bottle and sell. This shit was an aphrodisiac so potent it might just save the black rhino from extinction. Plus, Pete’s voice was just downright sexy, and listening to it for the next hour sounded delicious.

“Okay, fire away. Hey, there’s no key. How do you start this thing?”

“Push down on the brake then press this red button.”

“That’s different.”

“Convenient, too. You can leave the key right in your purse.”

Rather than roaring to life like Myrtle, the engine started almost silently. “Okay, now what?”

“Press this green button for drive, or slide back this little tab for reverse.” When I engaged the latter, a video screen complete with a digital runway pattern, popped up. “See, ya don’t even have to worry about hittin’ anything. Almost like a computer game.”

“Amazing.”

After maneuvering around our parking area, I pointed the monster towards the long driveway and, under the assumption that it weighed several tons, stomped on the accelerator. It rocketed towards the road like a bullet. “Whoa, didn’t expect that.”

“Pull onto the highway, and I’ll show ya a trick.”

Once cruising past houses and shops, Pete pressed yet another button, and the word *sport* appeared on the dashboard in blue. Almost instantly, power surged through the engine, and suddenly the behemoth accelerated like a sports car.

I grinned at Pete. “Loving that feature!”

“I know, right? It’s got a nine-gear transmission and all-wheel drive. You couldn’t squeal the tires on this model if ya tried. Plus, you can drive it on the beach and not even notice the difference.”

“Anita’s gonna love this.”

“I imagine so,” he said quietly.

I started telling Pete about my week—repeating much of it, since

we'd spoken on the phone at least once daily. "Oh, and Beth knows I'm pregnant."

"So, I can tell people now?" His smile went supernova. Thus far, with the exception of a very elite few, my pregnancy was top secret. From everything I'd read—all the stories of heartbreak and loss, I'd learned it was best to wait until the first trimester had fully passed in case something went wrong. In a matter of days, Pete would be free to shout it from the rooftops, and let me tell you, I was planning on wearing hearing protection that day.

"No, my little sperm donor, you may not. She just knew. I suppose my chubby cheeks, fat butt, and the sheer amount of food I ingested gave it away. Beth doesn't miss much. Wow, these seats are really comfortable."

"Cushioned leather, adjustable lumbar support, plus they're heated *and* air-conditioned."

"For real? This is like driving the space shuttle. I feel so tall. I can see everything. No wonder Anita likes sitting up so high."

"Ya like it, huh?"

"For a monster SUV, it's awesome," I said as we flew passed Havelock. His hopeful expression made me smile. "You want one, don't you? It's probably time to trade in your jeep, anyway. I'm sure Coastal Architecture could use the write-off."

"That's a thought."

"I wonder how much one of these costs."

"A *lot*. But worth it."



Tiny American flags hung from every mailbox on Possum Trot Road. Once past the cave-like entrance to Anita's private drive, yellow ribbons dotted the verdant jungle like exotic birds. With an impressive family tree heavily seasoned with war veterans, several cousins currently serving overseas, and those, like Pete's father, who'd fallen in peacetime, yellow seemed more than appropriate.

Of course, when we emerged into the wide plot of land I affectionately called “The Anita Compound,” red, white, and blue took over, coloring every square inch not currently occupied by parked vehicles. Balloons, tied to anything that didn’t move, bobbed lazily in the light breeze. The basketball goalpost was wrapped in a thick cord of lights that would blink those same colors from dusk to dawn. The fireworks show promised to be even more spectacular than last year’s.

I smiled to myself. There was no way it could be; not for us, anyway. Through intermittent kisses, Pete and I had watched it from the dock last year, more awestruck that we were once again in each other’s arms than by the bright colors reflecting off the glassy cove. That night was in all ways perfect.

“Where should we park this beast? Do you think Kirk wants it in the driveway?”

Pete’s expression blanked for a second, but then he said, “That’ll work.” I pulled in beside Anita’s cherry red, heavily chromed, super-sized pickup truck.

“Well, look at this fancy thing,” Anita said, smiling hugely as we slid out. “When did y’all get this?”

Because it was clearly a surprise, I decided to go along with whatever bullshit Pete spouted.

“It was just delivered Wednesday,” he replied. *Ah, nice and evasive.*

“Isn’t it wonderful?” I gushed, winking at Pete.

He smiled zealously and nodded. “It sure is, Susie-Q.”

Her eyes flicked from Pete’s to mine, and she grinned toothily. “I thought you liked sports cars, Susan.”

“Me? I’d never own anything else. But this...this drives just like one, doesn’t it Pete?”

“A Maserati on stilts.”

She ran her hand across the bumper greedily. “Lord, I’d love to have me one of these. If my husband parked this in my driveway, why, I’d just die. Now that’d be what I call treatin’ a woman right. Don’t you agree, Susan?”

“Completely.”

“I’m gonna talk to Kirk. It’s about time to trade in my ride.” She patted her truck like a horse, and then said, “C’mon, y’all, it’s hotter than sin out here.”

We followed her into the heavily air-conditioned foyer, immediately consumed by a swarm of relatives and friends. After backslaps and hugs from many, Kirk handed Pete a beer, grimaced, and then grumbled something about dragging some boy behind his truck. Said boy, a very attractive teen with jet hair and piercing eyes, couldn’t keep those baby blues off Taylor. He tracked her every move, practically salivating, while, unbeknownst to him, a truly dangerous predator tracked his. Pete winked at me and mouthed, *Young love*.

Anita placed a drink in my hand. Her “Anita surprise”, guaranteed to knock you flat on your ass, as it had me several times before, was akin to pink toxic waste. One sip would surely kill the creature growing inside me.

“Try it, Susan. I added something new to my secret recipe. See if you can guess what.” I looked to Pete for a quick save, but he’d already fallen into deep conversation with Kirk.

I, um...you know what? I think I’ll start out with water. My stomach’s been acting up lately.” *No lie there.*

“Yew want a Bud Light? That’ll settle it right down.”

“Just water, please.” She raised an eyebrow and gave me a full Mayo Clinic cat scan before returning with a giant glass of ice water.

“Let me know when you’re feeling ready,” she said, taking a substantial sip of her patented concoction. “I definitely want your opinion.” Then, turning on a dime, she yelled, “Tina! Didn’t see yew there, girl!”

Tina greeted her warmly, and then looked at me like I was a disease. I was still pissed about her Facebook bachelorette party posts, and she was still pissed about my being pissed. Business as usual, I suppose. I offered her a fake smile; high school all over again.

After a wonderful boat ride down the Trent River—one in which I hadn’t hurled even once, we gathered on Anita’s generous deck

for the traditional feast of grilled hot dogs, baked beans, and fifteen kinds of chips. I was busy stuffing a third hotdog into my mouth when John Stevens, ruler of Eastern North Carolina's domestic car empire, plopped down in the folding chair Pete had just vacated.

"How're ya likin' your new car?"

"What new car?"

"The SUV? I don't deal in foreign makes, but I'd do about anything for Pete, and I know people over in Raleigh, of course."

"You mean Anita's new car?" I corrected.

A confused look mottled his features. "Kirk's got his eye on a F-150, but he ain't made me an offer yet. He thinks I'll drop the price if he hems and haws enough." He snorted out a laugh. "That ain't gonna happen. No, your car's as fine as they come," he continued. "It's next year's model. Couldn't be more loaded with features. Soon as it arrived, my buddy parked it in his showroom 'til Pete could take possession. Got three offers the first day. Your husband sure treats ya right."

"Wait! You're telling me that thing is *mine*?"

He laughed loudly. "Well, yeah. Who else's would it be?"

I swear to you, steam poured out of my ears like a train engine. "Pete Walsh!" I screeched, hopping up.

"Yeah, Susie-Q"

"We need talk. *Now!*" His happy and slightly inebriated expression bled into one ready for war.

John shouted, "I didn't ruin the surprise, did I?"

Pete crossed his arms and nodded.

"Sorry, man. Thought you'd already told her."

Anita burst out laughing. "Yeah, me, too. Susan, he got you good."

I took a very deep breath and let it out slowly, channeling a moment when I didn't want to murder my husband. "He sure did," I said, offering them both a tight smile. Then I gave Pete a scorching glare, sternly pointed to the screened door, and then marched inside, across the great room, and right out into the front yard.

“You, you bought me that *thing*!! What the fuck, Pete?”

“Susie-Q,” he said, in his most placating tone.

“Don’t ‘Susie-Q’ me! You know what? Don’t even talk to me.” I stomped down the driveway and then stormed back again.

“Let me get this straight. You bought me a car without talking to me first. A super expensive, luxury SUV. How could you possibly think I would want this? It’s like, it’s like—” I gasped and covered my mouth. “It’s a mommy-mobile. You bought me a *mommy-mobile*!!” I sputtered. “Why didn’t you just stab me in the heart with a damn minivan—or worse, a station wagon?”

“I debated the wagon,” he responded—quite casually, I might add. “It sits lower, though, so you wouldn’t be able to see out as well.”

“How dare you!” I hissed. “How dare you force a car like that on me? Take it back! I won’t have it!”

“Ya will,” he said flatly, assuming his *I’m not budging an inch* pose.

“I won’t,” I snarled, assuming mine. “This is an abomination!” I scowled at the SUV and rocked back on my heels, failing to find any rhyme or reason to Pete’s warped thinking. “*Why?*”

“It’s safe. It’s the safest car on the road.” His face flushed. “The very safest!”

“My car’s safe.”

“It’s fine, but this one’s better.” He followed me on my next trek to the road. “I need you to have this.”

I turned on him. “You ‘need’ me to? How could you do this?” My eyes brimmed with hot tears. I was still crying at the drop of a hat, which made me just so flippin’ happy. “We’re partners now. We make decisions about big purchases together. We didn’t need a new car, and even if we had, I can promise *that* thing would not have made the short list.”

He looked mildly chagrined—no, not even that. Then he huffed in exasperation and stared off into the overgrowth. “I knew this would happen. I knew we’d go round and round about it for months. I’d win in the end, I promise ya that, but in the meantime, I’d be

worried sick every time ya got behind the wheel. Worried about your safety. Worried about the baby.”

I snorted derisively, but then paled. He'd never worried about my safety before. My arms erupted in goosebumps. Was this a glimpse of my future? I was the light in his eyes—the one who put that struck-stupid grin on his face. But once this child was born, would I be relegated to a glorified nanny—someone whose sole purpose in life was to raise his offspring? Would I become...my mother?

Shoulders slumping, I numbly walked back inside and mounted the stairs to the most remote room in the house—the one which Pete and I had shared the first time he brought me here. When I opened the door, I was sucked into a hormonal maelstrom. Taylor was half dressed and under “the boyfriend”, who was wearing a pair of swim trunks, loosened at the waist. He hopped up as if those trunks were on fire, and she dove for her tank top.

I glared at the boy as Taylor hurriedly put herself back together. “Miss Susan—” she whimpered, her terrified eyes pleading for discretion. At that moment, I really didn't give a crap what they were doing, as long as they did it the fuck somewhere else.

“Scram,” I ordered, slamming the door behind them. Flopping onto the overly-used mattress, I curled into a ball. I was going to lose him. I would lose him to this thing growing inside me. *It* would become the love of his life. I let loose and sobbed mightily.

“Susan,” Pete whispered, pulling me into his chest. He kissed the top of my head repeatedly. “I'm so sorry I made ya cry. I thought you'd be happy once you got all the yellin' out of your system.” I tried to push him away, but he locked me in his arms and continued showering me with kisses. With nowhere to move, I finally sank into his chest and wept openly.

Eventually, he pulled back to look at me. “I love ya more than anything in this whole world. I'll protect ya to my last breath. Don't ya see? I'm just tryin' to keep ya safe as possible. That's all I want. You. Safe.”

His expression then became deeply grave. “You don't know how

many nightmares I've had about your wreck. You can't know what it did to me, seein' you in that hospital bed hooked up to those machines, your face all bruised, your ribs cracked. And to've crawled through that car, all twisted and mangled, glass everywhere, the roof caved in. It didn't even have side airbags," he said with disgust. "It put the fear of God in me. Right in me. And lately, those nightmares have come back with a vengeance. If anything ever happened to you..." He sighed. "Just...just drive the car. Do it for me."

"And the baby, right? Don't forget the baby," I whispered, still stinging.

"For me."

He found my lips and kissed them gently. "You hold my heart in your hands. You hold my very soul," he whispered, taking a ragged breath. "I hope ya know that."

Fresh tears welled, spilling down my temple and onto the soured sheets.

Just then, the door opened, and a giggling Tina, towing John Stevens behind her, burst into the room. "What the hell are y'all doin' here?" she demanded.

I eyed them both. "We could ask you the same."

Pete stood and helped me up. "It's all yours. C'mon, Susie-Q, I know a better place." I wiped my tears on his t-shirt, and then followed him downstairs. The light was fading, and there was a thrill of excitement in the air. The fireworks would begin soon. We headed for the deck to find my purse.

"Where've y'all been?" Anita asked, looking over my surely disheveled self.

"Makin' out," Pete replied with a wink.

"Oh. Well, y'all grab a seat somewhere. Fireworks'll begin shortly." Eyeing me, she then said, "Susan, yew look like yew could use a drink."

In a momentary lapse in judgment, I took the pink concoction she offered and swallowed a giant gulp. A loud gasp rose above the chatter.

“Susan, the baby!” Mona screeched.

Silence. Except the teens splashing around the dock below, pure, unadulterated silence.

Pete’s face lit up like the evening’s pre-game show, and Anita let out an echoing whoop. I whipped around and gaped at my best friend, who was now covering her mouth with both hands. Beer foam dripped down her husband’s hand and onto his shorts as he shook with unbridled laughter. And guess who was suddenly the man of the bloody hour?

Pete was tugged into a melee of back slaps and congratulatory hugs, while I stood aghast, the butt of yet another joke. I decided right then that I hated this deck. And thanks to my new vat of simmering hormones, my indignation quickly dissolved into tears.

Let me tell you, nothing brings women running like a good fit of tears. I was surrounded by females, hugging me, tutting over me, and asking all kinds of highly personal questions. I periodically shot daggers at my very proud, soon-to-be a daddy, evil, buying me a stupid car I did not need, wretched husband. He dodged most of them, but then turned fully to me, his grin fading. *I’m sorry*, he mouthed.

*I hate you*, I mouthed back.

Pete slowly swam through the sea of well-wishers. Just as he reached me, Anita’s whistle pierced the air, stilling us. “Alright, y’all, pay up!”

Men dug out their wallets and slapped tens, twenties, and fifties on the condiments table. Anita tallied the bills, glared at Mike Herring, who grudgingly handed her a Ben Franklin, and then stacked the money into a neat pile.

She climbed up on the bench behind her and spoke like a state senator. “As all y’all know, it’s a rare day when I lose a bet.” She grinned smugly at the crowd, making eye contact with each and every loser, and then hopped down, crossing the deck, and placed the wad of cash in my hand. “Susan, Pete, this is for the baby. Congratulations!” She popped up on her toes and squeezed me

tightly, and then punched Pete in the arm. "And that's for not tellin' me sooner."



A golden glow spilled from the rising garage door, and the security lights tripped as we neared the house. I parked the monster beside my Audi, amazed that the damn thing even fit inside.

"I suppose you expect me to sell Lucy," I snipped. In my choppy sea, I was still riding waves of anger, embarrassment, and general pissedoffedness. That car had been the only light in a time of great darkness, and I was loath to part with her. Especially for this tank-sized, plush leather, air condition-seated, rolling environmental disaster—*eco-mode be damned!*

"Of course not. I'll drive her," he said softly.

I plummeted from the height of the driver's seat and met Pete at the trunk. He ducked under the rising hatch and began pulling out our junk. I draped the damp towels over the picket fence and returned for the small cooler.

"I got this, sweetheart."

"I'm not made of china. I can help."

"It's my job to take care of you." I rolled my eyes. "And I like my job," he added, pecking my cheek.

I was about to climb back on my *you are domineering and manipulative* high-horse, when something struck me as off. I walked over to the empty space that should have been filled with something ugly. "Pete, where's Myrtle?" I quickly glanced around the property, but my arch-nemesis was nowhere to be seen.

He set our large canvas tote on the cement, but didn't answer.

"Pete," I said, touching his shoulder, "Where's Myrtle?"

"We didn't need four cars," he said, kicking an errant shell into the grass, "so I sold her."

My arms fell limply to my sides, and I gaped at him in utter shock.

"You sold her? You sold the love of your life?" I was simply dumbfounded.

"She...well, she just wasn't practical anymore."

"She's never been practical! She's fifty years old, has no shocks, is poorly aligned, and completely falling apart. But you love her!"

"I know."

"You couldn't have gotten any money for her. I know she's an antique, technically, but not a nice one."

"My cousin's been wantin' her for some time. He likes restorin' old cars. He'll take good care of her, and she'll stay in the family. Unless he sells her," he muttered, his face darkening even in the floodlights. "It's fine."

A gray sadness overtook me suddenly. Things were changing too quickly. "I didn't get to say goodbye," I whispered.

At that, he burst out laughing. "You mean ya didn't get to kick her one last time. Oh, c'mon, you are not cryin' over Myrtle." He wiped a stray tear and pulled me to his chest.

"I can't help it. She...she holds memories."

"Not pleasant ones. Not for you, anyway," he said, still chuckling.

"We rode in her on our first date."

"That wasn't a date, and you know it."

"It was kind of a date. I've known her nearly as long as I've known you," I retorted.

"You've hated her nearly as long as you've known me. I tell ya what, tomorrow we'll go over to Sammy's and you can say goodbye properly. How's that?"

"Deal."

"Why are you still cryin'?"

"I don't know," I snuffled.

Pete picked me up in his arms and kissed me solidly. As he carried me up the stairs, I said, "I suppose we could name it *Myrtle Two*."

"That doesn't seem right, somehow." Then a wide grin spread across his face. "Ya know, I was thinkin' that if we have a little girl, maybe we could name *her* Myrtle."

I threw my head back and laughed. “You are so messed up.”

He gently laid me on the bed and kissed my neck. “Yeah, but you love me, anyway.”

I snorted. “Unfortunately, I do.”

*So, a Girl Walks into a Bar*

It was late in the day when I left Charlotte. Globally tired, I had a solid six hour-drive home. Mom's house was only ninety minutes away, so I steered The Beast—the name I'd finally settled on, towards I-40, set the cruise control, and engaged the extra lumbar support to ease my aching back. I knew I still had a long road to travel before this pregnancy thing was over, but already it was sucking the life from me.

When I pulled into the driveway, her car was gone. With the hidden key, I let myself in, and after a large glass of disgustingly sweet iced tea, collapsed onto my old bed. The sweet perfume of late summer roses wafted in through the open window, reminding me of childhood. The next thing I knew, I was being gently shaken.

“Susie, are you alright?”

“Huh?”

“Pete called. It got late, and he was worried.”

I looked into her eyes for a full moment. “Mom, he's changing.”



Nibbling candied pecans in the sunroom, I slid the glider back and forth in time with Mom's creaking rocker. “That sure is some kind

of automobile,” she finally remarked, breaking our companionable silence.

“It’s just one of a thousand things. I’ve got nearly four months to go, and Pete’s already obsessing over the baby’s safety. Last week he started babyproofing the house. He bought gates for every room. He regularly beats himself up for designing our home with so many flights of stairs. There are two car seats waiting in the garage, and that beast out in the driveway—? It has the most safety features of any car available. I’m surprised it’s not bulletproof, though considering his current state of mind, it probably is,” I muttered. “And did he pick its color for some rational reason, like, maybe it’s my favorite? *Nooo*. He chose white because it’s the safest *color* on the road. He showed me the flippin’ studies! I’m telling you, Mom, he’s completely lost it.”

Because she adored him, I fully expected her to champion his cause. Instead she remained silent, a deep frown creasing her profile. Finally she spoke. “Men change around babies. They’re the fathers, the...creators. Some lose sight of reality and take their responsibilities well beyond proper limits.”

I knew she was speaking of my father—a man who’d stopped at nothing to indulge and protect me. His zeal had irreparably marred a marriage that could have been filled with love. I shuddered at the thought of how my mother had suffered.

“Pete isn’t Daddy. He would never—”

“Don’t underestimate what a father is capable of. No matter how much you think he loves you, he’ll likely love that baby more.”

“Mom, he *does* love me.”

“Course he does. All I’m sayin’ is keep a watchful eye.”

I wanted to be angry with her for underscoring my naïveté, but I realized that wasn’t her primary intention. She was reaching out, and I needed that right now—needed a friend, a confidant, a sage. With a shock, I realized I needed *her*.

“I loved your daddy, and I always believed that one day he’d realize it and love me back like he had when we were datin’, but that never happened. Even after you left home...” Mom sighed mightily and

became quiet again, the squeak of her rocking chair the only sound in the room.

“Pete’s a good man,” she finally said. “It’s clear he plans on taking care of you, but remember, you’re livin’ in his world down there, with his relatives and friends surrounding you. If things get bad, we both know whose side they’ll take.”

Was I shocked by her warning? Absolutely. Was it valid? I thought about those last few days in Havelock before I’d left him and moved to Ohio, and how the entire community had jumped to his side and treated me with blatant hostility...yes.

“I’m here,” she added quickly. “You can come home anytime you need to. I’ll protect you. You know that, right?”

I nodded.

“You need more tea.” She hopped up and disappeared from the room.

I never thought this day would come—never even considered that this woman, who had birthed and fed and scolded me, would become something other. But here she was, speaking to me as a friend, and I was thunderstruck.

Breakfast was a quiet affair. With abandon, I devoured the feast she’d laid out—one she’d clearly gotten up before dawn to prepare. I’d always resented her ways, hated the prickle of guilt she dressed everything in. Now I wondered if my feelings had been self-imposed, and perhaps what I’d viewed as martyrdom was actually a simple act of love.

I gently hugged her goodbye. “I’ll try to get home more often.”

“I love you, Susie. Drive safe.”

“Love you, too, Mom.”

My lips quivered when I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw her wiping her eyes. I finally understood why.



If I’d ever needed a drink, now was the time. Though I’d physically

left Quarterlies in Philly, the echoes of Kirsten's disparaging remarks still reverberated within me, and the judgmental looks hurled from all directions had left nearly visible bruises. We were a highly vain lot, forever scanning one another for flaws, intolerant of weakness. And now that it was apparent to anyone with eyes that I was unquestionably pregnant and, quite frankly, slovenly because of it, to the bulk of them, I'd become just...sad.

What irked me even more than the relentless questions about when I was taking leave—evidently, North Carolina had become a hot commodity, or at least a viable stepping stone—was the right the curious felt they had to rub my stomach as if I'd suddenly become a happy golden Buddha statue.

"Whisky, neat," I ordered.

Hunter gave me a blazing smile as he slid my amber salvation across the counter. I reached for it longingly, but a steel arm shot out, stopping the drink in its tracks, sloshing half a dram over the glass' lip. I glared at Jimbo.

At this point, the *Pete's Gonna be a Daddy Society* watched me like a hawk. One wrong move and the news exploded in all directions like a violent tsunami. I'd already met too many raised blond eyebrows, and I expected yet another set any minute.

"Club soda," he barked. "Are you just stupid, boy?"

Hunter, eyes widened to the whites, nearly ran into the soda dispenser. Unsure of what he'd done to piss off his boss this time, he timidly asked, "Do ya want a twist of lime with that?" He glanced at Jimbo rather than me, wincing as if waiting to be smacked.

I shook my head then met the proprietor's stubborn, crystal blue eyes. "This is a bar, you know."

Jimbo's lips turned up in an arrogant smirk. Without looking at Hunter, he growled, "How many times do I need to tell you? She's cut off for the foreseeable future."

"I wasn't aware you even *knew* the word 'foreseeable,'" I hissed, crossing the uneven floor while muttering mean things into my pointless drink.

“So, I need to start planning things out for when you’re on maternity leave?” Mona chirped, all sunshine and blue skies, as I wormed onto the cushioned bench, trying to get comfortable.

“I already told you, like, a thousand times, I’m not taking leave.”

“Well, ya have to. You’ll need time to recover and such. *Everybody* knows that.”

“I’m taking two weeks of vacation. That’s all I’ll need.” She slipped on her reproachful look—the same one she wore every time we visited this topic. “Mona, if I take it, I’ll lose the district. The head of HR and I discussed it in detail this week. INTech’s legally required to offer me paid leave, but I’m not legally required to take it. Besides, from all I’ve read, giving birth doesn’t have to be a big deal. You go in, have the baby, stay home for a week or two, and then you’re good to go.”

She made a scoffing sound.

“What?”

“I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“Sure it is. Look, I exercise, I’m healthy...it’ll be fine. I’ll work from home when I can, and bring the baby to the office when necessary. Besides, I can’t afford to take time off. I’ll be giving birth three weeks before year-end meetings. Rumors of cutbacks are already floating around, and I need to come out swinging. Missing budget negotiations would severely handicap the district, and I can’t let that happen again. We’ve suffered enough.” Then my demon surfaced, and I smiled broadly. “Unless *you* want to go in my place..?” Her horrified expression said it all. “See?” I said smugly. “No choice.”

Just then Pete nudged in beside me. “So, whiskey, huh? Last time it was, let me see...vodka tonic, right?”

“A girl can dream.”

“You’re gonna get Hunter fired.”

“I’d like to get *Jimbo* fired,” I muttered. Mona’s giggle fizzed like my drink.

“Jimbo’s the only one here keepin’ you out of trouble.” Mona nodded with her own brand of satisfaction. She’d put Jimbo on so

high a pedestal I was surprised he could even breathe at that altitude. Of course, his only saving grace in my book was that the pedestal he'd set her on was in outer space.

"My choices aren't anyone's concern, but mine."

"They're mine, too, I'd like to think," he retorted, raising the brow I fully expected.

"I'd *like* to think I was CEO of INTech, but that doesn't make it so, now does it?" I quipped, still annoyed by what I'd come home to earlier that evening.

Pete hadn't done anything as audacious as buying me a stupid car. No, this week he'd only transformed one of our guest rooms into a full-service nursery, complete with bassinette, crib, rocking chair, Winnie-the-Pooh-themed wallpaper with matching curtains—*handmade by one of his aunts, of course*—and a mobile that played the movie's theme song. I had pleasant visions of strangling him in his sleep with said mobile. Adding insult to injury, I didn't even like Winnie-the-Pooh.

Mona quickly changed topics before the bloodletting began. "We need to set a date for the baby shower."

A roomful of estrogen-charged, baby-crazed women did not sound appealing in the least. "Can't we have it after the baby's born?"

"No! Ya have to have it before. There's a lot of stuff you're gonna need, and you surely won't be able to go out and shop for it after the baby arrives." She pulled a small planner from her purse. "First, are y'all gonna find out the gender?"

I arched a brow. "Have we met?" I asked, sticking out my hand. "Hi, I'm Susan Wade, control freak."

"Walsh," Pete corrected.

"Whatever," I snapped. "Of course we're finding out the sex."

Pete made a coughing *bullshit* noise, and I glared at him.

My husband loved surprises almost as much as I hated them. He was hoping we'd wait until it was born and celebrate accordingly. Well, he could hope on. We were supposed to have the exam at week eighteen, but I'd been so busy with work and getting ready

for Quarterlies that I'd rescheduled twice. The doctor had strongly advised me not to put it off any longer, and unfortunately, Pete had been in the car with me when he called.

"The ultrasound's Wednesday," he said, returning my look with an air of belligerence.

"Yes, it is," I said to Mona. "I'll call you as soon as *we* find out."

"Okay, then," Mona said, flipping pages. "How does the first Sunday in October sound? If you're gonna find out—oh, and I so hope it's a girl," she gushed, "then, that'll give everyone plenty of time to buy the right color or knit her somethin'."

"And I guess I'll have time to repaint the nursery," Pete grumbled.

Even if he chose to leave the room during the ultrasound, I was going to find out, and then taunt him with it! Why? Because this whole pregnancy was his damn fault. *Stupid sperm, stupid men, stupid Winnie-the-Pooh!*



Pete's office hadn't changed one bit since we'd met...with one glaring exception.

"Hi, Susan." Laney's smile was nothing short of miraculous.

"Wow. You have teeth!"

"Your observations never cease to amaze me," she snarked.

"It's just...you look so different."

She raised one shoulder, trying, I assume, to regain the aloof, perma-grump expression for which she was famous. I gloried in the fact that she was failing miserably. "Were you in Washington this weekend, by chance?"

Her smile grew brighter.

"How's Lexi?"

"Fantastic." Another word I'd never heard her utter.

"Please tell her I said hello next time you see her."

I tiptoed down the hall and peered into Pete's office. He was standing at his drafting table, hunched over a scroll. The sunshine

spilling from the ceiling's skylight crowned his golden waves as it always did, casting the very image of an angel. But rather than the unholy looks he used to give me when he caught me staring, his smile now matched the vision.

"Hey, sweetheart."

"I was wondering if you had a date for lunch," I said.

"Well, ya know, I'm a very busy man." He yelled up the hall. "Hey, Laney, do I have a lunch appointment today?"

"I'm not your fucking secretary!" she yelled back.

He grinned at me. "I might just have an opening. Why do you ask?"

"I rarely mix business with pleasure," I said, twisting my hair around my finger, "but I find you attractive. I was just thinking we might...date."

He shook his head. "That's a nice offer, sweet pea, but I'm already married."

"Married?! You knock me up and *then* tell me you're married?"

He set down his mechanical pencil and kissed me with smiling lips. "Ready to go?"

"Are you?"

"Not in the slightest. You sure you don't want it to be a surprise?"

"Not how I'm wired. You don't have to come if you don't want to."

He wrapped his arms around me. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

*Modesty*

“You okay?” I asked Pete. He’d been uncharacteristically quiet during the short drive over. And though his hand was wrapped tightly around mine, his mind was elsewhere.

“I’m just.... We’re gonna find out a lot today. I’m—it’s gonna be okay. It’s all—everything’s gonna be just, just perfect.”

The doubt in his voice, the anxiety... He wasn’t alone. Though I wasn’t in the high-risk zone, yet, I wasn’t twenty either. There were real concerns, and the percentage of developmental issues was certainly higher.

“Absolutely perfect.” I tried to smile reassuringly. “It will be.”

“The heartbeat’s nice and strong,” Dr. Adams said.

Once an hourglass shape with a little blob inside, the current image looked exactly like a real baby—okay, an alien baby, but still.

Dr. Adams continued running the wand over my gooey stomach. His eyes scrutinized every millimeter of the large screen. Occasionally, he frowned and moved the probe around a specific area again, applying a slight pressure. Then he would freeze the screen and capture the image. We were up to file number fifty-two.

The frown finally fled his features. “Mr. and Mrs. Walsh, your baby’s skeletal structure looks great.” Pete let out the breath he’d

been holding since we entered the exam room. Mine was in concert. Our eyes met. His had misted.

Pete cleared his throat. "So, everything's fine?"

The doctor switched the monitor off and removed his gloves. "Everything's just perfect."

"And the sex?" I asked.

Pete stiffened, but said nothing.

"That's the only problem."

Our heads snapped up.

"Problem? I thought you said the baby was perfect?" I had spent far too much time on the Internet. My imagination being what it was, I had explored sites I probably shouldn't have, such as *worldsweirdestdeformities.com*. I mentally flipped through those images.

"Your baby's structure is perfect, Mrs. Walsh. I just can't tell the gender."

"I don't understand. I thought this 3-D imaging thingy was supposed to be state of the art."

"It absolutely is. But your child's position is obscuring its genitalia." He smiled brightly. "Evidently, your baby is being rather...modest today."

Pete snorted loudly, and the doctor offered him a healthy smirk. "If your child turns out to be a girl, modesty isn't such a bad attribute."

Pete's eyes bugged, and he looked like he'd just been socked in the stomach. "If the Lord gives us a girl, and she's anything like her mamma, I'll be serving twenty-five to life behind bars." He jumped back as I swung at him.

I then jiggled my stomach like a crazy eight-ball. "Get the wand back out. I need to know."

He shook Pete's hand and patted my shoulder. "We can try again at your next appointment, if you'd like."



Yellow and green. Everything thus far had been either yellow or flippin' green—all with gift receipts, so I could exchange the lot for the proper color. *When I knew what that was.*

The women of Eastern North Carolina were none too pleased that my baby had been uncooperative in the striptease department and, of course, they hadn't hesitated to tell me so.

"Those shower invitations were like somethin' out of a magazine. I don't think the Princess of England or Wales, or whatever she is, had any prettier! Nearly as nice as Susan's weddin' ones."

"Why, thank yew, Dottie," Anita replied. "Since I didn't know the sex and all, I had to go neutral. I sure would've loved it if I could've done 'em up right in pink." She then shot me a scathing look as if this was somehow my fault.

"Open mine next," Hilda demanded. Hilda was Pete's second cousin, once removed. She was as gruff and opinionated as ever, and I'm still sure it had something to do with her hair's chemically tightened curls.

"Two baby blankets. How lovely," I exclaimed, though dying inside. I couldn't wait until this whole spectacle was over. My cheeks literally ached from forcing so many smiles.

"Made 'em myself," she boasted. "Course I had to sew a blue and pink one, so it took twice as long. I barely got 'em done in time." Then she eyed my rotund abdomen. "You're not havin' twins, are you?" *Seriously?*

"No, Hilda. Just the one."

"Well, I guess you can save the other for your next baby. That way, I won't have to go to all that trouble again."

Punch spewed out of my nose as I sputtered, "My *next* baby? Oh, that's not happening!"

A hush fell over the room, followed by a whole lot of tutting. Charlotte, Jimbo's mother, spoke softly, yet firmly. "Susan, right now a second child scares you, but if the Lord gives you another, I know you'll be grateful for it." That was not a comment, but rather an order. Charlotte and God were tight.

Further, that woman could lay down guilt nearly as well as my mother. Charlotte and her sister, Maggie, had been blessed with only one child each: beautiful boys who grew to be stunning men. Pete's mother's childbearing years had been cut short by the death of her husband, while Charlotte's by a husband who should have been put to death. After Pete told me the story, I prayed Jimbo didn't one day hunt his daddy down and slit his throat with that wicked military knife he used for hacking bait. I'm positive a North Carolina jury would simply look the other way.

After a moment of awkward silence, the room exploded with well-meaning—*snort*—advice.

"Susan, ya ought to have another one soon as you can. You don't want your baby to be lonely. Just 'cause you grew up that way, don't make it right," Hilda snarked.

*Oh no she didn't!*

My mother doled out a glare cold enough to cause frostbite. "As Charlotte said, you take the gifts you're given. My daughter turned out as perfect as they come. Not only is she beautiful, she graduated with honors from one of the finest schools in the country, *and* she's become a very successful businesswoman. You have a son and a daughter, isn't that right?"

Hilda nodded uncomfortably.

"Well, how have they fared?"

Mona, who sat to my left, playing gift stenographer, hid a smile as she scribbled.

Hilda's son, Dale, had left—aka failed out of—technical school after one semester, and her daughter, now twenty-five, was on her third marriage. *Bam!*

Wearing a scowl that fit her face like a glove, she stood and said, "I need some more punch. Anybody else?"

"I'd love some," I said with a toothy smile.

Mona squealed when I opened her gift, and the gaggle erupted in zealous oohs and ahhs. "It's got about everything you can imagine on it, includin' cup and insulated bottle holders. It's a car seat and a

carrier that'll convert to a regular stroller when the baby's ready to sit up. There're even compartments underneath for your purse and all your things. We got the nice thick wheels, so it'll roll smooth as glass. Jimbo and I tried out every one. I sure hope you like it!"

"It's a thing of beauty," I replied. "I'll use it every single day." *That I'm not using one of the five Pete had already purchased.*

"Open this one next," Anita, who had claimed the coveted job of package chooser, ordered, placing the study square box in my lap. While Dottie ran any show she could get backstage access to, this shower had been scrupulously organized by Anita. Mona's only real contribution had been to supply the date and compile the registry list. It's not that she wouldn't have done it all, it was more she was overtaken by a whole pride of alpha females.

"That wrappin' sure is fancy," Sarah, bank teller extraordinaire and Mona's second best friend, remarked. Her baby boy was cuddled in a blanket, sleeping like...well, a baby. He'd barely moved all afternoon, and I was beginning to wonder if she'd slipped some sort of sedative into his bottle.

I pulled off the bow and tore through the wrapping paper to the indignant gasp of Pete's Aunt Amelia, Anita's mother, who had labored to meticulously refold every gift bag and scrap of paper for future use. Lifting the lid, I removed the card.

*Susan, you are an embarrassment to womankind.*

x

L

I broke the florid Saks seal and dug through the tissue paper. Who else would send me the most expensive diaper bag on the planet? After my laughing fit subsided, I held up the black Prada masterpiece for all to see, and then handed it to Mona. Horrified gasps erupted from the large circle.

"*Black?* Who on earth gives somethin' black to a baby?" Dottie sneered.

I passed the card to Mona with a smile. She gave me an odd look. Holding Lexi's actual name sacred, I whispered her nom de plume.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, suddenly awestruck. She traced the note with her fingers, as if the sentiment had been printed in platinum. “Y’all it’s from *her*.”

Gasps of a wholly different kind rose towards the rafters. Mona looked lovingly at the gift, and then carefully handed it to Sarah, who wiped her fingers on her dress before touching it.

“Hurry up and pass it on,” Dottie snapped. After thoroughly scrutinizing it, she said, “Now, I don’t remember seein’ this one at Belk’s.”

Jayne met my eyes and burst out laughing.

“Everybody knows Belk’s don’t have any stores in New York City,” Hilda hissed, jerking it from Dottie’s grasp.

“Daphne Fontaine lives in Washington, and probably not,” I said.

“Who knows what kind of selection those stores up north have. Poor thing probably didn’t even have a color choice.” Hilda rooted through the bag’s cavity, and her face fell. “Guess her people forgot to send you her latest novel. I’ve been on the library’s waitin’ list for weeks. I’m gonna die if I don’t read it soon.”

“Oh, it’s *good*,” Mona said. “*Real good*.” The proud recipient of an advanced signed copy, she beamed at me.

Hilda passed the bag over her mother-in-law’s sleeping form. While I had only vague suspicions about Sarah’s child, I had none whatever about Miss Vera. I *know* Hilda had slipped her sedatives. She snored contently as the leather strap grazed her nose before landing in Ginger’s hands.

“This is nice, Susan. I’d like to buy one for my niece—in pink, of course. How much do you think a bag like this’d cost?”

Though I was thinking, three of The Beast’s car payments, I simply shrugged.

“If it’s from her, plenty,” Dottie answered for me.

After opening the last of the presents, Anita announced, “Cake time!”

The ladies hopped up and then fidgeted in line as Mona doled out slices. Only one woman other than me remained seated. Belva

Sue scooted beside me and whispered, "I'm sure you'll have cake left over, but you can freeze it." She waved a hand as though the two-tiered white chocolate masterpiece she'd created meant nothing. Then her eyes lit. "I baked a bourbon pecan pie for you and Pete. Shelled the pecans myself."

"That was very kind. I hope I get at least one slice before he eats it all."

Belva Sue laughed. "Your husband's my favorite customer."

"If you weren't already married, I'm afraid my husband would have proposed to you instead of me."

The rotund woman smacked my hand. "Susan Walsh!"

After the last of the party guests had departed, my mother appraised me. "You look awful tired, Susie. Why don't you go lie down, and I'll fix you some supper."

Though Pete loved cooking for company—or anybody, really, the Intercoastal Waterway had seemed the perfect place for Jimbo and him to hide from the estrogen cloud, and I didn't expect either of them to return before dark.

"Thanks, Mom." I had been especially tired and achy the last few days. I suppose it was normal, but the irregular twinges of pain were wreaking havoc on my concentration at work, and that bothered me greatly. "A little nap sounds great."



I have no idea what Mom made for supper, as I'd slept right through it. I only woke when Pete crawled into bed and began stroking our baby's bulge. He couldn't keep his hands off my belly. He rubbed it, sang to it—which was rather painful to endure, kissed it, and talked to it incessantly. And when it kicked, his personal earth moved. He was so struck with sheer wonder and pride, it was impossible not to get caught up in his excitement.

"Did they wear ya out today?"

“It was a bit overwhelming,” I replied, stifling a yawn. “Did you catch anything?”

Seafood and I remained on poor terms, but Pete was storing it up in our large garage freezer in hopes that this too would pass. I know he ate fish for breakfast, lunch, and supper when I was out of town.

His soft chuckle sent a slight tremor across the mattress. “Jimbo did. My luck’s all used up on the baby right now.” I placed my hand over his. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he whispered, gently kissing my shoulder. “Are ya hungry?”

I snorted. “When am I not?”

“I’ve got just the thing.” Pete disappeared down the stairs and returned with a piece of pecan pie.

“How much is left?” I asked as he fed me a forkful.

“A little. Your mamma got into it.”

“Uh huh.”

*Peace Summit*

I laboriously climbed the stairs Monday evening, vaguely wondering if Pete could install an elevator. Nursing yet another splitting headache, the bold evening light hurt my eyes. Though the air had cooled, I was certain I'd spontaneously combust at any moment.

"Does it feel hot in here to you?" I asked Pete, collapsing in the recliner I'd fully hijacked.

"Sweetheart, I'm wearin' a sweater. I think your oven's just baking on high."

"Speaking of, what smells so wonderful?"

"Zucchini-carrot bread," he replied, grinning.

"Yum," I exclaimed, making a face. Though my former self was notorious for skipping meals, in my current state I was neither able, nor, thanks to Pete's meddling, allowed to do so. He was on a mission to infuse me with every nutrient known to man, and by any means necessary. He'd become a prenatal vitamin Nazi, and any dessert he made now was either fruit or vegetable-based.

"I'll make you a smoothie. That'll cool ya off."

"Could you please make it not green?"

"But kale's a superfood, darlin'!"

After supper, I wilted into bed. My dreams were all over the board, from zombies, to triplets, to zombie triplets. Sweat-drenched,

I staggered downstairs for a tall glass of ice water. One glance at my phone told me my night had ended. I pulled out my laptop and began pounding out emails. When my vision blurred, perhaps two hours later, I logged out. I noticed the light had changed.

Watching sunsets had always been a religious thing for us. It was a rare evening when we missed one, and if the weather conditions promised something spectacular, we exchanged our deck chairs for the boat. But sunrises over the sound were equally stunning: a startlingly unique daily gift of color and mood. This morning's sky was already flirting with magnificence. A lewd pink draped the firmament like lacy lingerie, and in a few short moments, the fierce and fiery orb would breach the horizon and lustfully shred the delicate material into jagged streaks of an even richer color. I threw on Pete's sweater and grabbed my camera.

The October breeze was crisp and quite refreshing. Gulls chasing fishing boats squawked in raucous banter, their silhouettes tiny tears in the sky's tapestry. Though my eyes stung from the light, I raised my lens and began shooting.

Pete was slowly transforming our home into an art gallery; every wall was now graced with at least one of my photos. The first I'd given him would forever remain in his office, but I imagined soon enough, colorful skies and reclusive herons would be replaced by the ever-changing expressions on our child's face.

After pouring a cup of coffee, I popped the chip into my computer, excited to see the results. Somewhere around the fifteenth image, I realized there had been a very long stretch of silence in these early hours—or rather, a lack of movement. Morning was an especially active time for my baby. It would begin its daily workout by tap-dancing on my bladder, then it moved to field goal practice during breakfast, followed at last by Olympic high-diving while I showered. Today? Nothing.

Pete's sunny, *life is beautiful!* morning smile disappeared instantly when our eyes met.

“Something's wrong. I can feel it! Something's very not right.”

“Tell me, sweetheart.”

“The baby hasn’t moved in hours,” I said, pacing in worried circles, clutching my stomach. “It’s probably nothing, right? Tell me it’s nothing.”

He hopped on his laptop and began typing. “Could be nothin’.” He skimmed several articles in rapid succession. “I’ll be workin’ from home this morning,” he announced super casually. “Why don’t you do the same, and we’ll have a nice leisurely breakfast.”

Just then my phone pinged; another flippin’ email. I glanced at it and shook my head. “I’m slammed today.” I took several steps toward the stairs and the quick shower that awaited me, and then looked back at Pete, tears welling in my eyes. “Why won’t it move?”

Pete steered me to the kitchen table and replaced my lukewarm coffee with juice. “Eggs and bacon. This is not a request.”

“I don’t want to eat. I just want it to move!” I rubbed circles on my stomach, and then jostled it.

“I’ll be right back.” Pete flew upstairs. Returning moments later, a phone pressed to his ear, his smile had returned. “Thanks again. No, I will.” He chuckled and tossed his phone on the counter. “Anita says this is absolutely common.”

*Anita says this, Anita says that.* Anita had given birth exactly once. She barely knew more than me. And with her questionable words of wisdom, all was right again in Pete’s world. Well, not mine. “Anita is not a friggin’ doctor!” I hissed, slamming the powder room door in his face. I plunked down on the commode with force. As soon as I finished peeing, Google and I were going to have one of our heart-to-hearts.

After wiping off, I glanced at the wad of vibrant, ruby-colored toilet paper and screamed in horror. Pete ripped open the door.

“What’s wrong?!” I held up the evidence, and his face paled. “We’re goin’ to the doctor. *Now!*”

After gingerly buckling me in, he pressed the speaker button on the steering wheel and said, “Call Dr. Adams.”

The car cheerily replied, "Calling Dr. Adams." The phone rang in surround sound.

"Hello, Dr. Adam's office. Could you hold please?" A sweet voice said.

"No," Pete growled. "My wife's bleedin' and we're comin' in."

"I'm sorry, what's the name?"

"Walsh," Pete curtly replied. "Susan Walsh."

"Oh, okay," she replied. After some rustling, she returned to the phone. "She's not due in for another week, and the doctor's very busy today. I can maybe squeeze ya in around four."

"You'll squeeze us in right now." His tone was chillingly lethal.

"Um...well, okay. I'll tell him."

It was a side of Pete I'd never seen. Sure, we fought and yelled in our own version of domestic bliss, but even when he was genuinely angry, he'd never sounded like that before. And to a woman? Had I not been completely onboard with his attitude, I would have called him out. In this case, however, crazed alpha-male was practically a turn on.

After a very thorough examination and a several deep-throated noises, Dr. Adams looked up at us from between my legs. "There are things we need to discuss. After you're dressed, we can talk in my office." Before he left, he opened a sleek metal drawer and pulled out a maxi-pad. "You may want to wear this."

Side-by-side on the couch, Pete rubbed his thumb over the base of mine—an unconscious habit meaning one of several things: I want you, I love you, I'm here for you, or, in this particular case, I'm fucking freaking out. Dr. Adams breezed in with a no nonsense gait and shut the door. He seated himself in the wingback chair closest to us. Rather than settling into his typical posture—back against the chair, legs casually crossed—he leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs.

"Here's the deal..."



“Bedrest for how long?!” Pete and I said in unison, both our faces white with shock.

“For the duration of your pregnancy, I’m afraid.”

“But, but that’s two months away!” I stammered.

“Slightly less, but yes. It may feel like a long time—”

“*Feel* like a long time? What am I supposed to do, sit around watching TV and eating bonbons?” The doctor raised his eyebrows pointedly, and I gasped, my panic-stricken voice shooting up another octave. “I don’t have to actually *lie* in bed the whole time?” When the doctor nodded, Pete covered the bottom half of his face and cast his eyes heavenward.

“Look, I’ve never had high blood pressure in my life. Can’t I just do meditation or yoga or something?”

The doctor shook his head no.

Suddenly fear struck me like an arctic-born icicle, and dark spots began a taunting dance before my eyes. “I can’t take two months off work. They’ll replace me!”

Pete laid a reassuring hand on my back. “Surely they’ll just fill your spot temporarily.”

Knowing differently, I turned back to the doctor.

“Are you absolutely, positively certain I require bedrest?”

“I absolutely am,” he said without the least trace of his normal good humor. “Preeclampsia is a life-threatening condition. Complete bedrest is the only way to keep you and your baby safe. The alternative is to spend the remainder of your pregnancy hospitalized.”

Pete looked directly into my frightened eyes. “She’ll do *exactly* whatever you say, doc.”



When Pete pressed the ignition button, I burst into tears. “This is a nightmare. I will absolutely lose my district. Do you understand what this means?” When Pete didn’t respond, I grabbed his face

and made him look at me. “I *will* be transferred. They’ll give me no choice!”

Too many emotions crossed his features before he corralled them. He exhaled deeply. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“We’re at it! As soon as I tell Bob, that’s it. He’ll send a permanent replacement, and I’ll no longer run North Carolina. I won’t even find out where I’m being transferred until I return to work. How do you think I got Ohio? Beth lost Pennsylvania when she went on maternity leave, and when she returned, they gave her Ohio. That’s when World War Kirsten erupted and the shuffling began. The battle I’m in for when the time comes...it’s not one I can win.”

Pete’s upper lip disappeared, and he stared out the windshield for a long moment. “Then you won’t go back,” he said softly.

I gaped at him. “What did you just say?”

“Let’s talk about this at home.” He pulled out of the space. The Beast’s collision warning sensor beeped frantically, and a horn blared. Pete slammed on the brakes. I was bounced against the headrest and then thrown forward. The locked seatbelt cut into me so hard I yelped. He hopped out and raced to the passenger side. “Oh darlin’, I’m so sorry. Are ya okay?” He ran his hands down my head, shoulders, and belly.

“Just drive,” I said darkly.

We were silent on the short trip home. My temples throbbed, and Pete’s jaws were clenched, the muscles ticking as he ground his teeth. I stared out the window as we crossed the big bridge, my emotions a variety of flavors: fear, anger—no, blind rage, a sense of helplessness, honest sorrow; all swirling.

When the car came to a halt in front of the house, I crossed my arms. “Speak.”

His eyes had become hardened gems. “I said, if they try to transfer ya, you’ll just quit your job.”

My mouth worked, but I couldn’t seem to form discrete words. I looked around the car’s cavernous interior while replaying his directive, reviewing his expression, analyzing the set of his chin and

posture, searching for the deeper meaning, for misinterpreted or alternate words to the ones I'd heard—some proof that he was actually sane, that he hadn't just turned into my father right before my eyes. The mere concept, the audacity, the—

Suddenly, I hauled off and slapped him across the face.

His eyes flared, and he covered his cheek. When his shocked expression faded, he said in a low and controlled voice, "I'm gonna step out of the car now. When you've calmed yourself, I'll help ya up to bed." He firmly shut the door and stalked to the water's edge. With his back to me and his head dropped, he wasn't projecting the predictable image of war chieftain ready for battle. No, for once, he simply looked like a man—one who'd just royally fucked up.

Two years ago, I'd left him. Left him for a job I thought I'd wanted more than anything in the entire world. It turned out that what I'd wanted so desperately wasn't what I needed. I'd sworn never to leave him again, but what was the alternative when the dust settled? I'd worked too hard for far too long to walk away from the very beautiful career I'd built. And yet, sitting mere yards away was the nearly perfect creature I'd pledged my heart to before God, Himself. I felt a sudden aching in my soul—one reminiscent of a pain so great and ripping it had nearly torn me in two.

Just then, the baby kicked forcefully; the newest player on the board. At first, I breathed an exalting sigh of relief, but then frowned. Inside my body lived the catalyst, the very entity that could be our undoing. I realized right then that my choices were very limited, and from this point on, my decisions weren't simply mine to make. No, I had inadvertently become part of a trio. Now, there was the greater good to consider.

I extracted my gigantic self from the gigantic car and waddled to the fairly gigantic shoreline. The turbulent water nearly matched the deep gray color of our house, and the cool, damp wind furiously spun the nautical weathervane perched atop the lighthouse. *Red sky in the morning, sailor take warning*, I thought grimly. I should have paid more attention to the signs.

“I’m sorry,” I finally said, touching his arm. “I don’t know what came over me, but I never intended to actually hit you.”

After a moment, one corner of his mouth lifted, and he looked at me through troubled, but twinkling eyes. “It was a damn solid one, though. And well placed. I think ya actually bruised me.” He then took my face in his hands and kissed me gently. “I love you so much, Susan. I know this feels like a death sentence to you, but in time we’ll get it figured out. Our lives are changin’ so fast it’s hard to keep up.” He smiled then and lifted my quivering chin. “But if we hang on tight to each other, we’ll get through this. The other side’s gonna be a thing of beauty. I know it.” He wiped a stray tear from my cheek and pulled me to his chest. We stayed that way until I involuntarily shivered. “Now, let’s get you up to bed, and we can talk more, later.”



For the remainder of the day, Pete and I danced around the subject of my career like it was a cobra ready to strike. In those few words, he’d crossed more lines than I ever imagined he could. Frankly, he’d betrayed a side of himself I wasn’t aware existed. I would return to work after our child was born, and there was no way he’d stop me.

I sent him to his office the following morning for no other reason than to give me space. It was far easier to hate him from a distance. Of course, he was back at noon with food.

“I wasn’t sure what ya wanted, so I went to El’s Drive-in and got you one of everything.”

I rummaged through the bags—yes, there were two—and no lie, instead of vegetables or a wheatgrass smoothie, I discovered a double cheeseburger, two fully-loaded, chili-dripping hot dogs, three pieces of fried chicken, onion rings, hushpuppies, which, oddly, I’d been craving throughout this pregnancy, and a chocolate milkshake; a thinly veiled peace offering.

I patted the mattress. “Sit and help me eat all this.”

“I ate on the way over. I just wanted to make sure you had what ya needed.”

I met his eyes boldly. “I need to work.”

He sucked in his upper lip, and we stared at one another for a full minute. Finally, he sighed in defeat. “Want me to get your laptop?”

Over leftover fried chicken that evening, Pete and I struck an accord, stating that throughout the process of making the decisions our future demanded, we’d do so by treating one another with love and respect. *And basically with me not slapping him anymore.*

*Tattoos and Six Packs*

Morose, I lay on my back the next two days, staring at the bedroom ceiling—my primary view for the remainder of my pregnancy. All sunny and bright when he was home, as soon as Pete left for work, I'd cry my eyes out for an hour or so then yell at people on the phone, which helped slightly.

The evening of day three, Pete stepped into the bedroom, looked me up and down, then pursed his lips. "You wanna tell me what's goin' on?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, all chipper.

The bed dipped as he sat. "I'd be about out of my mind by now if I had to lie here on my back day after day. Yet, you seem to be takin' it awfully well. 'Course, the puffy eyes and red nose tell a different tale."

I exhaled mightily. "I'm afraid to call Bob. I'm afraid of this thing inside me. I'm afraid it'll ruin us—or I will. I guess I'm just plain afraid."

He stroked my cheek with the back of his hand and then kissed my forehead. "We'll not be ruined, no matter what, but at some point, you're gonna have to play the cards you've been dealt."

The following evening, I didn't bother hiding my emotions. His face dropped as soon as he walked into the bedroom. He laid the

bouquet of flowers on the dresser and wrapped me in his protective arms while I fell to pieces.

“I called Bob,” I choked out.

“I figured as much.”

“As of Monday, I’m no longer North Carolina’s District Manager.” I buried my face in his chest and sobbed until I ran out of tears, finally collapsing fully on his damp shirt.

Throughout the weekend, he only left me for a quick trip to the grocery store. I’m not certain I wasn’t on some sort of suicide watch. Mona dropped by with blackberry cobbler. After setting a serving on my nightstand and pulling a chair beside the bed, Pete left us to talk.

“It’s going to be a huge adjustment,” I said, sighing.

“Well, babies always are.”

“I don’t mean the baby. I mean work.”

“Oh that,” she said, waving her hand dismissively.

“You don’t care who takes over?”

“Course I care. I just can’t do anything about it, so I don’t see the sense in worrying, yet. Oh, I brought you a present.” She hopped up and scurried from the room, returning moments later carrying a large box.

“I know you’ve read every magazine and catalog I’ve sent over at least ten times by now, so I thought ya might like something you can really sink your teeth into.” She held up a book. The cover was graced by some weightlifter’s slick chest.

I raised my eyebrows. “A romance novel?”

“Not just any romance novel. It’s book one of Daphne Fontaine’s *Firestruck* series.”

“Firemen?”

“Oh yeah. And this one’s just great. See, Blake lost his sister in an accident when he was just a little boy. It was all very sad. But then he saves this woman...” She placed her hand over her heart and sighed. “Well, I won’t tell you any more, except it’s one of my very favorites.”

I made a concerted effort not to laugh. “Thanks. I’m sure I’ll enjoy it.”

“I know you will, so I brought over the whole boxed set. Also, here’s her *Brothers in Arms* series. It’s real good, too.”

Once she’d emptied the box, my comforter was littered with half-naked men with bulging tattooed pecs and rolling six-packs. In fact, a couple of those “firefighters” were packing whole cases. I stared analytically at one of the model’s stomachs. It had to be Photoshopped.

“These ought to last ya a week or so. I’ll bring some more over next time I visit.” She leaned over the bed and gave me an awkward hug. “I’m so sorry you’re laid up like this. I know it must be awful.”

A tear slid down my temple. “Pretty much. And all I can think about day in and day out is who’s taking my place.”



“Are you kidding me?” I screeched.

“Susan, the decision’s been made.”

“This will be the worst disaster in modern history! What will happen to my people?”

Pete did not look pleased as I ranted into my phone. I’m sure my blood pressure was hurtling towards the space station.

“Bob, this is...this is *wrong!*” I sputtered. “It’s cruel and it’s wrong.”

After a long silence, he said, “I know you’re not thrilled, but my choices were limited.”

“Not *thrilled?* Oh, I’m a hundred miles west of ‘not thrilled.’”

Once we disconnected, I looked at Pete’s very pissed off expression, surely mirroring my own. “I’d better call Mona.”

Breaking the news to my omniscient best friend was unnecessary. The angry kitten I’d once known was sharpening her fully adult claws, and she no longer mewed, but flat out roared. She didn’t actually speak when she answered the phone. All I heard was a feral panting sound.

“Mona?”

She took a giant breath, then another, and finally said in a

harnessed tone, "Susan, I can't form words right now. I'm gonna have to call ya back." The line went dead. Dead like the way I knew Kirsten would leave my people. Dead like the way my heart felt.

"She's not taking this well," I said, meeting Pete's eyes.

He took the phone from my hand and sat beside me. "We need to talk." His somber tone matched his expression.

"Okay?"

"This is all very upsetting, I know. But you are walking a very fine line between health and the emergency room. You will have to back away from this."

"But—"

"No buts, sweetheart. You can't afford not to. Remember what the doctor said. It's bedrest here or in the hospital."

I raised up on my elbows to better glare at him. "Are you threatening me?"

"I'm statin' facts. I love you and I vowed to protect you. I can't do that if you're gonna stay in the thick of this. Your job there is over for the time being, and there's nothing that will change that. Mona's a big girl. She can take care of herself." He cocked his eyebrow. "Better than you give her credit for."

I fell back on my pillow and sighed. "I don't know how to let go."

"I know ya don't." His face then lit mischievously. "I hate to do this, but what's it gonna be, firemen or Navy SEALs?"

I burst out laughing. "Um...firemen."

He studied the cover. "Looks like I'd better hit the gym. And maybe the tattoo parlor." I snorted as he handed the book to me. "Seriously. I could run down to Havelock and have 'Susie-Q' scribbled over my heart." He placed my hand there, his eyes soft and sincere. "It's already written on the inside."

I pulled him down over me and kissed his lips then the center of his unmarred chest. "You'll regret it when I divorce you. Now go to work."

He left the room, but then poked his head back around the doorframe. "No more calls, okay?"

I nodded.

“No more emails, either.”

I huffed.

“Ya know I love you, right?”

I smiled. “And I love you.”

About ten minutes later, my phone pinged again. I was up to seventy-three waiting emails. My finger hovered over the little envelope symbol. Just then my phone vibrated. I read the message and snorted.

*And no texting. Unless it's to me. xox*

*The Devil Came Down to Havelock*

She was scheduled to arrive October thirty-first; the day dedicated to her kind. Due to my predicament, and moreover Pete's moratorium on INTech communiques, I was saved from the vile task of onboarding her. Besides, a seared crispy-black veteran needed little guidance. Relinquishing North Carolina's reigns was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. People depended on me, and I was serving them up to Satan.

My dread grew daily. I wanted to be in the office the day she arrived. I wanted to hiss and curse her in proper welcome. I wanted to somehow defend what was mine: my people, my building, my memories.

Her stilettos would mark the floor on which Pete and I had made love. Her shadow would darken the window I'd looked out so many times, waiting for Pete's ugly pickup truck to enter the parking lot. She would surely remove the door's little bells—the ones that not only reminded me of Christmas, but of Pete's dramatic arrivals and departures during those first precious months we'd fought. She was going to destroy what I loved with her cancerous touch.

Having little else to do, my mind drifted to my first day in what, at that time, I'd deemed my little slice of purgatory. Sitting in the break room with Mona, I'd collected information that would scare me to

death, drive me forward as if a pack of wild beasts was chasing me. And who had I called for advice? Who had I run to for help? The one sabotaging my career. The one enlisting my own lover to fuel her evil scheme.

Surveying my beautiful bedroom, I couldn't help but reflect on my life as it presently stood; view the past with the clarity only its future can provide. Had Kirsten been the friend I believed she was, had my lover been faithful, then I would never have found my way here. I wouldn't be able to look out my very own floor to ceiling windows and see the simple miracle of water. I wouldn't have people in my life who would do literally anything for me. But of greatest importance, I would never have met the man for whom I would very gladly sell my soul. The one whose child I now carried. The one who taught me how to love.

Perhaps I was especially sentimental today because Pete was clearing out my office, packing my personal items in boxes. How easy it had been last time I left—how little from the building I had taken. And from Ohio, even less, though it should have been the opposite. Now my walls held pictures, diploma and awards, and on my desk, the shell he once claimed would find its way home; it had. A part of me lived in that building, and I hoped it chose to haunt her. I hope it turned poltergeist and tormented her. I smiled at the thought.



On the thirtieth of October, First Baptist Church of Havelock convened an emergency prayer meeting on Mona's behalf. After her soul was good and prayed for, she and Jimbo dropped by for a casual visit.

Mona wore a perky smile as she sat primly in my bedroom chair. She glanced at the stack of books on my generous nightstand and giggled. "You've been busy."

"Oh yes," I replied as Pete set an overly-filled glass of Chardonnay

beside her. "I like *A Smoky Affair* the best so far, though *Five Alarm Love* is great, too."

At first, reading her work had been merely an academic exercise. Knowing Lexi's sexual preference, I was curious to see how she'd pulled off thirty-one flagrantly heterosexual *New York Times* #1 Bestsellers. That curiosity had slowly given way to fascination, and *finally*—and somewhat embarrassingly—to obsession. They'd also been the perfect cover for *Operation Kirsten*.

"I brought you Daphne's policeman series," she said, pulling a book from her canvas tote. "This one's real steamy." Pete snorted as he descended the stairs.

"I can't wait to read it!" I said loudly.

When the sound of male laughter exploded from the kitchen, Mona promptly slumped, her carefree expression fleeing with her posture. "I don't know if I can do this." She stared out at Bogue Sound, its surface reflecting the pale pink sky. "I'm near scared to death."

Strategies for Mona's survival had dominated my thoughts for days. I flipped through the novel's pages until I found Kirsten's most recent emails, cut into bookmark shapes. Scouring them, I hissed, "Witch."

"They're awful," she moaned. Kirsten was already gouging the district with her manicured claws. I couldn't imagine the legacy she was leaving behind in North Dakota.

"Okay, when she walks in the door tomorrow, this is how you're going to approach her," I said. "You remember how coldly you acted towards Clark Shanahan when he first arrived?"

"I was not cold!"

"Yes, you were. I want you to turn glacial. Stay as emotionally detached from Kirsten as you possibly can. She knows we're friends, and she'll toy with you just to get to me. Don't give her a way in, because the moment you show any weakness, she'll eat you."

Mona visibly quivered. "Oh dear Lord."

"You're great at your job. Don't let her take that from you."

I'd talked to Bob extensively about her situation. I'd never been so forceful in lobbying anything in my life, and would use every favor ever owed me to create a protective shield for her. But in all honesty, I worried about her endurance.

"You need to hide your emotions behind a professional mask. Work hard to keep it on."

Though Kirsten's skin was sheathed in iron, the South's climate could eat through anything. I was banking on the locals to make her ineffective; she would rub absolutely everyone wrong, anyway. And thanks to Mona, my entire collection of business cards was squirreled away, and I was poised to begin my single-handed smear campaign. My hope was after a few weeks of butting up against Eastern North Carolina's brick wall, she'd either move her operation to Raleigh, or spend ninety per cent of her time in Philly like she used to.

Suggesting I cease and desist all work-related activities was like telling Pete the marlin were running but he wasn't allowed to fish. Cursed with a bright and curious mind that had been forbidden from obsessing over anything of relevance, I was restless and bored. I had to do something other than watch bad TV, read trashy novels, and online window shop. And not twenty miles from my house was ground zero for work gossip, aka Mona, and moreover the subject of it. I wanted in.

"What's she wearing?" I demanded as soon as Mona answered. Perhaps a more thoughtful lead off question might have been *How's your first day going?* or *Are you still alive?* But no, I was a right-to-the-point kind of girl.

"Let me see...a cream skirt that looks like it's made of snakeskin or something"—*Chloe, most likely*—"and matchin' shoes"—*Manolo Blahnik, or possibly Chloe*. "Her blouse is the prettiest orange I've ever seen"—*Chloe's signature color*. "It's sleeveless and cut real low in the front. I thought Gene was gonna have a heart attack when he saw her," she giggled. "Couldn't quite make eye contact with

her...um...eyes. I don't really think it's proper office attire, but I guess it's probly fittin' up at corporate."

"Yes. Handbag?"

"It looks to be snakeskin as well."

"Pure cream?"

"Well, no. It's got several different patterns sewn together."

"Strap?"

"Brown leather."

The ensemble totaled nearly five-thousand dollars retail. I coveted Kirsten's wardrobe—openly coveted it. She had no mortgage, no husband, no children, no real expenses. Hers was a life of empty self-indulgence. I'd never come close to affording her style, but I'd kept the knockoff business fluid until I made her salary grade. By then, other than my pathological shoe fetish, I'd all but stopped caring. And after moving back...well, my life wasn't empty anymore.

"Damn, it's Kirsten's Chloe day. She is in a mood."

"Well, she's been yellin' since she walked through the door. I put my mask on first thing like you told me. I practiced about an hour last night in the mirror. Jimbo thought I'd lost my mind. I keep tellin' myself there's a nice person under all that anger. I'm gonna start prayin' for her, best as I can."

I sighed internally. Mona embodied a purity few on this planet could understand. I know I couldn't.

"I felt right embarrassed when I ran out to my car a little while ago. My Honda looks a sad sight between hers and Jayne's. I think I'm gonna start parkin' it down at the end where I used to."

I'd never seen her car. There was no need to visit Rhode Island, and when she was in Philly, she just took cabs. "What's she driving?"

"Well, I don't know. It's real fancy, though."

I huffed. Mona's car knowledge equaled my baking expertise. "Take a picture."

"I'll try to at lunch."

As it was only ten, I grabbed the latest issue of *Vogue* and flipped through it. Yup, python was in and splatted across Saks' two-page

center spread. Though nearing retirement age, Lexi's mother was still fashion editor. She decided which designers would be featured; she chose what the rest of us would eventually wear. I snorted, thinking of Lexi in that pink hat at my wedding. She was still rebelling, though in a more sophisticated way.

By ten-thirty, I'd turned to counting seagulls. These last few weeks would be the longest of my life.

When my phone vibrated, I lunged for it—well, as much as a ten ton walrus in cotton sheets can lunge. Though the image was blurry, to an expert in cars—aka *moi*—I recognized it instantly. “A Jaguar,” I sneered at the lamp—yes, I had taken to talking to the furniture. And it wasn't just any Jag, it was the 5.0L XJR in *ingot*, of all colors. Sexy enough to give Ryan a hard-on. MSRP: \$127, 000. How did I know this? My buddy, Google, told me.

And knowing her, it would have every single upgrade possible. How the hell much money did that witch make?

“Hey, sweetheart. I brought you lunch,” Pete said, as he mounted the stairs. I shoved my tablet under the covers and tried to look innocent.

One glance at my face and he raised an eyebrow. “You're not workin', are you?”

“Shopping,” I replied quite truthfully. “Whatcha got in that bag?”

Pete had stopped trying to shove vegetables down my throat and settled for semi-healthy. “Grilled chicken sandwich and sweet potato fries.” *Okay, still a superfood, but fried, so that didn't count.*

He sat in the chair beside me and slowly unwrapped his sandwich. I realized he looked slightly unsettled.

“Are you alright?”

“I'm not altogether sure,” he said, tearing off a large bite. “I've always believed in God, but I wasn't so sure about Satan. Well, not until today, anyway.”

“You met Satan?” I scoffed.

“Or one of his high ranking officials.”

“Really? Where were you?”

“Mona called. Seems when I cleaned out your office, I missed a couple of things. She said she’d run ’em over after work, but since I was on my way back from New Bern, I just dropped by.”

“And you met Kirsten,” I surmised.

He nodded slowly. “I’ve never hit a woman in my life—never even thought about it, but I had a strong urge to today. I knew she’d treated you badly, and that you hated her. I just thought—” He stopped and gave me a confused stare. “You and that creature were actually friends once?”

I chuckled hollowly. “Best friends.”

“Best friends...” He shook his head in disbelief. “Well, no wonder you were so miserable when we first met.” I smiled ruefully. “I might be goin’ to church Sunday.”

I snorted. “Or we could just call a priest.”

“Anyway, here.”

Ragged edges curled over the sides of the manila folder. I unfolded one of the oversized sheets and gasped. Sightlessly staring back at me was Pete’s pixelated face, eyes gouged out, holes blemishing his features. “Aww. Target practice.” I touched the braille-worthy paper. “This was the very first one.” I gingerly flipped through the rest as if they were the Dead Sea Scrolls. They’d become progressively less pockmarked over time, until the last had no scratches at all. By then I’d fallen in love.

He laughed. “I can’t believe you kept them.”

“I kept a lot of things.” I thought of the box in the back of my closet and how hard it had once been to look inside.

He softly kissed my lips. “Me, too.”



As the days wore on, I fixated on Kirsten, the sole target of my perverse fantasies. In glorious moments, I imagined the whole town of Havelock rising up against her with torches and pitchforks. I’d awaken from my lovely recurring dream of rolling her limp and

rotting body into the Great Dismal Swamp with a big smile on my face. I prayed she would fail miserably and be fired, and that it would somehow make the cover of *Business Week*. One especially dark daydream involved her car being hit by an errant short-range missile launched from Cherry Point.

It was all fine and good until the day Mona called, sobbing.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Reeves!”

Service rep scenarios flipped through my mind. “Did he have a wreck?” I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed.”

“Worse. Kirsten fired him.”

“Fired him?!”

“Uh huh. She told him he wasn’t making his numbers.”

“That’s bullshit. He’s not breaking records, but his contract sales have been absolutely fine.” I grabbed my laptop and logged into my district files. “Password invalid?” I checked caps lock and retyped. The same message appeared. “What the...Mona, I’m locked out of the system. She’s blocked my access.” If I couldn’t get to the data, then it was my word against hers. “I’m calling Reeves.”

“Okay,” she sniffled.

Reeves picked up on the first ring. “You heard?”

“What the hell? Pull up you spreadsheets and reports. Print them all out so you have hard copies. She’s only been your supervisor a few weeks. She has no evidence.”

“Actually, I can’t. She confiscated my computer and laptop before I left the building.”

“And you *let* her? Reeves, c’mon!”

“I didn’t have much choice. She threatened to file a sexual harassment complaint with HR if I fought her on it.”

“That’s crap. You would never—” Then I sighed. I was well aware of her particular skillset. “You didn’t sleep with her, did you?”

Silence.

“Oh Reeves. She’s...” what could I say to him. She wielded her

sexual weapons better than a fencer his sword. “Kirsten’s a pro. I’m so sorry.”

“I’d better go. If you hear of anyone hiring, would you—I know I screwed up, but would you..?”

My heart ached. “I’ll write a recommendation letter anytime you need one. You were a great employee. Really topnotch.”

He exhaled heavily. “Thanks.”

Once we disconnected, I screamed and threw my phone across the bedroom. Then, after rethinking things, I crawled across the floor after it.

“Bob. Susan Walsh here. I was—”

“Can’t help him.”

“Reeves did nothing wrong.”

“Her word against his.”

“Dammit, Bob. You know what she’s doing. This is the beginning of a bloodletting.”

“Let it go. If she violates company policy, I’ll deal with it.”

“I can’t just—”

“Let it go,” he said sternly.

I sighed mightily. “This is all very difficult for me.”

“Try sitting in my chair sometime,” he said with an empty chuckle. “How are you personally?”

Because I’d clearly lost my mind, I said, “Bored, frustrated, blimp-like. Without any projects, I’m not sure what do with myself.”

He was silent for a moment, and I was afraid I’d overstepped the boundaries of our lord/serf relationship. I knew nothing about Bob’s private life. He wore a wedding ring, and floating in his sea of desk debris were pictures of two young children. I’d never noticed any other personal effects in his office

“My daughter had a rough time with her first. Drove us all nuts.”  
*Alrighty then.* “You remind me of her sometimes.”

“Oh?”

“You’re both stubborn pains in my ass when you want something.”

I barked out a laugh. “I’m in good company then. While I’m being a pain, you don’t happen to have any work an invalid can do, do you? I’ll take pretty much anything.”

He chuckled. “Rest, have your baby, come back to work.” And with that he disconnected.



My phone rang later that day. Grateful for any human contact, I answered immediately.

“Good afternoon, Miss Susan. How are you?”

“Lovely, Mr. Dupree. It’s so nice hearing from you.”

“Where’s that boy of yours?”

“Excuse me?”

“Donna called over to your office and was told he’d left the company. I’d never want to be the recipient of your ire, but he seemed an upstanding fellow. Came with your blessings, if I recall.”

“Reeves is, I mean *was* an upstanding employee.”

“Donna liked him quite well. I don’t know who you’re plannin’ on replacing him with, but as you know, I’m not a man who enjoys change.” *Understatement of the century.*

“Yes, sir, I’m well aware of that. Unfortunately, I have no say in the matter. I believe you know I’m pregnant, but you may not be aware that I’m now on mandatory bedrest. I’ve been replaced.”

Mr. Dupree became enraged. “It is illegal and immoral to fire a woman on maternity leave. I will be contacting your legal department to discuss this matter.”

“Mr. Dupree—John—I haven’t been fired. I’ve just been replaced. They’ll assign me a new district when I return to work.”

“A *new* district?”

I sighed. “Yes, sir. And unless a miracle occurs, it won’t be in North Carolina.”

He sounded as if he was choking. When he caught his breath, he said in a strained voice, “That is unacceptable to me.”

“Sir, I’m certain you won’t be alone in that sentiment.”

“Hmm.”

“John, if I could ask a favor. Since you appreciated Reeves’ work, if asked, would you be willing to serve as a reference? The woman who replaced me has treated him rather unfairly.”

“I’d be pleased to. Now, tell me about this new woman.”

*Game fucking on.*

My smile grew as wide and crooked as the Grinch’s on Christmas morning. “Born and raised up North, she’s never worked in the South before and doesn’t understand...or perhaps it’s that she doesn’t *appreciate* the way we do things. I’m afraid she might look down on us, altogether. It’s very unfortunate, really. Regardless, she ought to get to know her most important clients, and as quickly as possible. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“That would be prudent,” he replied.

“Since I’m unable to introduce her in person, perhaps you might invite her to Swans Quarter for a visit. You could take that opportunity to express your concerns about Reeves’ replacement. I can promise she’s very...interesting.”

“Well, I do enjoy meeting *interestin’* people.” I felt the edge in his chuckle. “I’ll have Donna call over to your office.”

“Her name is Kirsten Scythe. And it’s her office now,” I said glumly.

“Well, we’ll have to see about that. Patience is a virtue lost on current society, Miss Susan. I, on the other hand, have been blessed with a plentiful supply.”

I imagined a tiger crouched in the brush, waiting for its lunch to wander by.

*To the Gallows*

My birthday was overshadowed by my mounting anxiety. When not worried about the baby, work dominated my thoughts. I knew Reeves was a warning shot across my bow. Waves of anger and misery crashed against my hull; a churning ocean into which I was rapidly sinking.

My personal coast guard cutter sailed into the room and handed me a folded brochure. “Happy birthday, sweetheart.”

“What’s this?” I asked.

He smiled brightly. “A present you can cash in when you’re ready. You won’t be able to climb mountains anytime soon, but you once told me about a place called Stone Mountain that you’d enjoyed hiking as a kid. I thought we’d sneak down for a weekend once the baby’s born. Since it’s only an hour past your mamma’s, I imagine she could watch him while we had an overnight.”

“Her,” I corrected.

“The baby,” he conceded. “There’s this lodge nearby—right on the Blue Ridge Parkway.” He pointed to the picture.

In an act of simple love, he’d exchanged a birthday celebration that should have been filled with champagne and dancing for hope and the perfect promise of normalcy; of trekking up steep mountain

paths rather than struggling just to walk twenty feet to the bathroom. “Thank you. I can’t wait.”

“Me either.” He ran a finger down my arm. “I was thinking, after a good long hike and soothin’ bath, I could lay you out on a bearskin rug in front of a fire...maybe with not so many clothes on.”

I spent the whole evening fantasizing about making love to Pete in all manner of positions. I would use the dreams he’d wrapped in pretty paper to get me through these last few weeks of pregnancy; a raft to which I’d cling.



“It was the strangest thing,” Mona said as we sipped tea and nibbled cookies. It had become our Sunday afternoon ritual. Regardless of temperature, Pete and Jimbo went out on the boat, and the Mona and Susan Book Club—well, porn and gossip club, in all honesty—would meet. “When I invited Jayne to celebrate Thanksgiving with the family last week, she told me she was goin’ up North to visit with her children. But on our way over to Charlotte’s house, I saw her car parked in the office lot right beside Kirsten’s. I know she’s demandin’ and all, but to make Jayne work on Thanksgiving Day? It’s just not right to keep a woman from seein’ her own children. And her with a grandbaby on the way to boot.” She huffed and shook her head in dismay.

I thought about how I’d worked right through Thanksgiving when in Ohio. Like Kirsten, I’d had no reason to go elsewhere, but expecting my staff to be in the office on a national holiday? I frowned. There was surely a lawsuit in her near future.

“Then, when I dropped by her house the next day with a pie,” Mona continued, “she acted awfully strange. Odd that she didn’t even invite me in, don’t ya think?”

“Very,” I concurred.

“And I am surely imaginin’ things, but I could swear I saw

Kirsten's fancy car pullin' up in front of her house right as I was turning the corner to go home."



Mona's voice was filled with sorrow and despair the next day. "Oh Susan," she said, breaking into muffled sobs. "Kirsten came in this morning, all smiles, and asked to see me right away. I didn't know what to make of it." Her voice dropped to a strained whisper. "She told me to shut the door, and then pointed to the stack of thick packets on her desk." When she blew her nose, it sounded like an elephant. "She's called an all-district meeting and, and...she's firin' nearly everyone today."

"Everyone?"

"Well, best as I can figure. Those she can't fire outright, she's givin' one week to find another job in the company. *A week*," she squeaked. "I looked through the packets. The only people she's keepin' are Jayne, Gene, and the new boy she brought in to replace Reeves. That's it. She told me I wasn't fired, yet. That's the word she used. *Yet*."

"You're too high up for her to directly fire. I'll find a place for you." It wouldn't be in North Carolina, but I'd make sure she survived.

"That's not the worst of it. She's not firin' one single person herself. She's makin' me do it. *Me!* I've never fired a soul in my whole life. I'm a mess just thinking about it. And here it is three weeks before Christmas. What am I supposed to say?"

"I broke down right in front of her, too. I couldn't help it. I'd been holdin' back like you told me to. No matter how many times she sent me to Raleigh, no matter how many mean things she said about my work, my friends, our clients, and especially you, I've not cried—at least not in front of her. But she broke me today. It's like she was trying to crack me open, and she finally did it." Mona burst into a fresh round of sobs. "And you should have s-seen her ex-

expression. It was s-scary.” Whatever she said next was thoroughly unintelligible.

I heard a soft knock in the background.

“Oh Lord have mercy,” she said with a shuddering gasp. “It’s startin’. Pray for me. Please?” The line went dead.

For a few long minutes, I stared at the boiling cloud of rage obscuring the ceiling.

“Susan.” Bob didn’t sound remotely surprised to hear my voice. Though utterly futile, I’d called anyway. It was that or have a friggin’ heart attack. Already my vision was blurring at the edges, and a fierce headache was sweeping over me like a tsunami. Shutting my eyes, I rode through the pain. “It’s already done.”

“But—”

“Kirsten has every right to bring in her own people. Most managers do it. You certainly rearranged personnel when you took over the district, and I approved two promotions immediately. I thought it was damned decent of you not to clean house.”

“But I—”

“I know you’re upset.”

“Upset is putting it mildly.” *Enraged, murderously homicidal...*

“If it’s any consolation, once you’re assigned your next district, you can negotiate to bring those who haven’t lost their jobs over.” My next district... I wasn’t ready to have that conversation with Bob, Pete, or even myself.

“What about those she’s fired? My sales team?”

“Kirsten’s sales team. And she’s not the only one losing people. Don’t worry about this right now. Focus on your health.”

I had absolutely no recourse. I’d known that before I called him, but dammit! The longer I stared at my black and turbulent ceiling, the more ferocious my headache became. Mona was suffering. I imagined her pale, tear-stained face; her chest caving in upon itself as she absorbed the shock and fury of those she’d called friends. She wasn’t made like me. Her pelt was softer, more pliable—easier to rip. And that was surely what was happening in real time. Kirsten was

lacerating her unblemished heart, scarring it permanently. I realized with a shock that she might not come out of this the same person.

I had to protect her. She was the closest thing I'd ever have to a sister. She was family. She was precious. I rolled off the bed, yanked open the closet door, and rooted for something semi-presentable. Susan Wade Walsh was breaking out of pregnancy jail and taking a little field trip.



“You fucking bitch!” I screeched, bursting through Kirsten’s door. “You are destroying these people’s lives for your own amusement. It’s almost Christmas, for God’s sake! What are they supposed to tell their families?”

She raised a savagely waxed brow, a ghastly smile forming. “Santa’s not real? Look, if you cared so much about their welfare, you shouldn’t have gotten pregnant in the first place. God, you’re fat.”

“Why are you making Mona do your dirty work? Why not at least enjoy the pleasure yourself?” By then, the whole of the office—what was left of it, anyway—was crammed into the doorway; innocent eyes blinked as our age-old battle raged.

“Oh I am enjoying it. Trust me. But listening to their whining is so tiresome. I’ve heard it all a hundred times before. Right Jayne?”

Jayne had the good sense not to respond. She had seen this evil creature in action before. She surely loathed her even more than the rest of them. What horrible stroke of fate had placed her under Kirsten’s twisted rule a second time? And for that, how could she not hate me? I was completely to blame for her misfortune. I offered her my most apologetic look.

Kirsten regarded Mona for a moment before returning her attention to me. “Ramona is your sister-in-law, correct?”

Cousin-in-law, whatever that meant, but I wasn’t quibbling over details at the moment. I glanced at Mona. Just as I’d imagined, her white pallor was punctuated with pink blotches and fiery red streaks.

Her mascara had long worn off, and her eyes looked tired and vacant. She walked in the piercing light of goodness and mercy, but she'd just been cast into a dark place—one I'm sure she didn't believe existed. I knew its blackness well. Hell, I used to live there.

"What the fuck does that have to do with anything?"

"Who better to let your 'family' down than one of them?"

"Family?"

"That's what they are to you, right?" she sneered. "I mean, that's how your husband treated them when he came to visit. Didn't hug me, though..." She tapped her chin, her reptilian lips forming a mock pout. "I felt so left out." Her eyes then narrowed. "If you had even the slightest clue about company politics, you'd understand the importance of housekeeping. You've raised these people to be loyal to you. I need my own. Ones loyal to me."

"That species is long extinct, Kirsten. You are the most hated DM at INTech. People despise you. Don't you know that?"

"I love that you care about my reputation." Her laughter was chilling. "You always have, my little puppy. I taught you how to step on others—showed you how to get ahead." I shook my head, taking a step backwards. "Don't feign innocence, Susan. You and I are the same." She then pointed an imperious claw at Mona. "Finish your job." Her growl was feral—*or was that mine?*

"This is between you and me. Leave her alone, Kirsten, or I'll—"

"You'll what? Look at you. You can barely stand up straight. What is it that you think you can do? You have no authority here, as I'm sure your pal, Bob, has already explained."

"I swear, I'll devote my life's work to seeing you fired!" I screamed.

Kirsten's face twisted in horror. I couldn't believe my threat carried such weight. "Oh. My. God!" she shrieked, though her voice was oddly muffled. Then I heard Mona call my name from somewhere far away.

What a pretty shade of red, I thought, as I landed on the wet and matted carpet.

*The “C” Word*

The din of chatter, rubbery squeaks, and elevator pings hurt my ears. A kind voice told me I was doing just fine. I was confused. Was I not doing fine before? And why couldn't I see? Whatever I was lying on came to a gentle halt. Murmurs, mild beeps, and the smell of alcohol replaced the cacophony. I tried opening my eyes, but lacked the strength. Oblivion lulled me into itself.

Some time later, I was roused by a different voice—a voice I knew better than my own. He was praying ardently, his whispers filled with immense gratitude as he rhythmically stroked my forehead. I turned towards the sound, and he gasped. “Susan, can ya hear me?”

“Pete?” I croaked.

“Right here, darlin’. I’m right here beside ya.”

“Where are we?”

“The hospital.”

“Are you okay?”

He let out a strangled laugh. “Never better.”

“Am I okay?”

“Yes,” he said adamantly, but then choked out, “Oh sweetheart, you—I—” He buried his face in my hair and broke into quiet, gut-wrenching sobs. My heart doubled upon itself, and tears spilled down my temples. I tried to console him but my arms were so heavy.

"I love you," I mumbled.

A whimper escaped his lips. "I love you, too. More than the world itself." He cradled my head and painted my face with kisses. With a great deal of effort, I finally pried open my lids. Even in the dim light, he looked wretched.

"There you are," he said, his red-rimmed eyes lighting like a Christmas tree.

"I need to tell you something."

He leaned closer. "What darlin'? What do you want to tell me?"

"Gonna throw up," I garbled.

"I didn't quite catch that."

"Gonna throw—" My body lurched, and I promptly puked all over him. "Up."

After a moment of shocked silence, he laughed. "You do pick the most interesting times to do that."

Pete pulled off his sodden shirt and waved a nurse over. She froze mid-step, gawked at his torso, blinked once, and then yanked off my blanket. "That'd be the anesthesia," she said, wiping the vileness from my mouth and chin. "You'll feel much better now." She then cocooned me in a heated, fresh-smelling blanket, its warmth feeling better than anything I'd ever known. "I'll go get you a bedpan in case there's more in your stomach, and a..." She raked her eyes over Pete's chest once more. "A shirt for your, um, husband." She dropped her eyes and scurried away.

I tried to laugh, but my body wouldn't cooperate. Suddenly—finally—I realized why I was here. I looked frantically at Pete. "Is the baby—?"

"Perfect, though I'm afraid she has your temper." Too raw and lacking his usual self-control, that sliver of humor failed to mask his apprehension.

"It's not alright, is it?"

He sighed and met my eyes. "They had to take her by emergency C-section. She's gonna be here a few days—you both are."

"It's a girl?"

Nodding, he said, “She’s the most beautiful child I’ve ever see.” Though his smile was threadbare, his eyes were fierce—willing everything to be alright, willing us both whole.

“Can I see her?”

“Sweetheart, she’s in an incubator. She came awfully early.” His upper lip disappeared, launching me into full panic. “If she’s got even one drop of you in her—and she absolutely does, she’ll fight for all she’s worth. And she’s gonna win. I promise you that.” Pete was losing it, and that terrified me. “The doctor said they’ll put her in your arms the second she’s ready.”

I choked on my anguished moan and, true to form, threw up again.



Impatience was my trademark, but even so, I’d reached a whole new level. “I want to hold my damn baby,” I seethed, glaring at the latest nurse. They left as fast as they entered. And they kept getting younger and less experienced. In fact, at this point, I was fairly certain I was participating in some kind of baptism-by-fire, on-the-job training exercise.

Wide-eyed, she shook her head frantically. “I’m not—I mean, I’ll have to go ask. Be right back.” *Poof!* Another one gone.

“Darlin’, you’re scarin’ ’em to death.”

“I don’t care. She’s my flippin’ baby. I’m supposed to be nursing her or something. What is taking so long?”

Pete looked at the floor, his smile fading. “Sweetheart, she’s battlin’ mightily right now. Give her time. They’re monitoring her round the clock. You’ll be able to hold her soon, I know it.” His exhale was ragged, and I realized he was holding mind and body together by sheer force of will. He mustered a smile. “She’s you incarnate. I think she’s scarin’ off the nurses as fast as you are.”

I tried to laugh, but the pain in my abdomen was wicked.

He bent down and touched his lips to my forehead. "Do you need more pain meds?"

Tears filled my eyes. I hated looking weak, especially in front of Pete. "Yes."

"I'll let the nurses know."

"They'll probably bring me cyanide."

He smiled genuinely. "Probably. While I'm at it, I'll just wander over and check on the baby." He was a ping-pong ball, bouncing back and forth between us. I'm not sure he'd even slept since she was born.

"Pete," I said, as he reached the door. "Go eat something. And for the love of God, take my mother with you before I feed her my cyanide."

He nodded. "Soon as I see the baby."

"I love you," I whispered.

He placed his hand over his heart, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply. "Don't go anywhere." Though a joke, his voice was earnest.



I assumed she'd be a wrinkled raisin, something ugly and slightly repulsive. That image couldn't have been farther from reality. Bundled in a pink blanket, the moment I held her the world simply fell away. I gazed at this tiny, mystical creature for a very long moment, and then up at Pete. His eyes brimmed with the same awe and wonder I felt. "She's just...beautiful."

He nodded. "Perfect in every way." He touched her head, priest-like, and then brushed my cheek with his knuckles. "We made her, you and I," he murmured. "We made this precious child."

My smile wobbled as his face blurred. "I can't believe it."

"Me either," he whispered.

*Bubble Wrap*

Sitting beside me when I awoke, she was incredibly composed; full of pulsing energy, yet still.

I snorted. “You drew the short stick tonight, huh?” Our child now strong enough to out scream the other babies, I’d convinced Pete to go home, shower and sleep. That didn’t mean I was left alone. No, when Pete wasn’t here, someone else held vigil: Mom, Mona, Anita. Tonight, it was this poor woman. She looked familiar enough, but my mind was foggy with pain meds, and I couldn’t pull her name from the ether.

She didn’t respond, but unmistakable mischief lurked in her features. “Ah, you’re one of my husband’s relatives,” I said after an unladylike yawn.

“Why yes, I suppose I am.”

“Have you seen the baby, yet?” I asked.

“That’s why I’m here.” Her smile was as serene as the sound on a calm day. Her eyes, that same verdant green, seemed so very familiar, and yet so feminine.

“She’s truly a vision,” I boasted, my pride and overwhelming love for that tiny being nearly overwhelming me.

“I expect so.”

I realized as I watched her that she wasn’t so much looking at

things as through them, like the furniture was a mere apparition to her. In fact, she might just as well have been sitting on a porch swing in another time. Yes, that was it. She looked like she was from another time—her hair, the style of it, and her clothes. Perhaps it was the way she sat: straight as an oak—the kind of perfect posture so lacking in today’s society.

“I’m restless, you know?” I said, repositioning myself. “I can’t sleep, but I know I need to.”

After a solid moment of silence, she turned to me, her eyes alight with warmth and anticipation. “I want to tell you a story.”

As I had nothing better to do, I said, “I’d love that.”



My eyes flipped open and met Pete’s.

“Ya look spooked this mornin’,” he said.

Glancing around me, I was in the same hospital room I’d been trapped in for days. Surprisingly, it actually lent me comfort. “I think I am. I had the strangest dream. It seemed so real.”

Pete kissed my cheek and settled on the bed. “Tell me about it.”

“It’s already fuzzy, like it’s just outside my reach. Has that ever happened to you?”

“Sure. Dozens of times.”

“It was...important, I think.”

“Was I in it?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Was I naked?”

“It was not a sex dream,” I laughed, swatting at him.

“Well, I’ve been havin’ an awful lot of those lately, and believe me, I remember every one.”

A beautiful smell wafted from the bag in his hand. “Whatever’s in there, I want it now.”

His smile widened, and his green eyes twinkled. I was struck suddenly, as if lightning had pierced the many floors of this hospital.

“It was about the baby’s name.”

“Good. All they’ve got on her cradle is *Walsh*. I’ve been callin’ her *sugarplum*, but I’m afraid people are gonna start thinkin’ that’s her real name soon. I know you weren’t warm to my grandmother’s name—too old-fashioned. I get that. What about—”

“Audrey!” My dream came back in a roaring rush of memories and thoughts and colors and even smells. “It has to be Audrey.”

“*Audrey*? Are ya sure?”

I looked at his beautiful face and the hopeful smile lurking there. “I’ve never been surer.”

“Audrey,” he said, testing the name. Mischief filled his laughter. “Talk about old-fashioned. That was my great-grandmother’s name.”

“You have her eyes.”

“So I’ve been told.” His face then took on the strangest expression. “That must’ve been some kind of dream.”



The trip home was a one-eighty from the last time Pete broke me out of a hospital. Then, we were frenemies; he’d tortured me in a wheelchair, stopping innumerable times to introduce me to anyone he knew. He was all business today, his expression as protective and serious as I’d ever seen it.

Without breaking his stride, a curt “I’ve got to get my family home” was as cordial as he got. I worried that this experience had changed him in some inalterable way, bled a portion of joy from what I’d assumed was an endless supply.

The SUV was parked in a handicapped space near the entrance—something Pete would never do, but I suppose he felt justified. I chose not to tease. I was tired and infinitely sore, and home was a dream waiting to be realized.

Every bit as careful with her as the finest porcelain doll, Pete placed Audrey in her car seat. He had tapped bubble wrap around its outsides so that it wouldn’t so much as quiver. He gave me the adult

version of that same treatment. I didn't object. I just smiled dreamily and closed my eyes.

"I'll get ya home fast as I can, sweetheart." He traced my face from temple to chin. "I love you so much." While buckling the seatbelt, he kissed my forehead, inhaling my surely ripe-smelling self.

Pete's idea of "fast" was twenty-five miles per hour with the flashers on—a warning to all that we needed space. I would have laughed had it not hurt so much. When he turned onto the long driveway, the scrub and juniper bushes were decorated with yellow ribbons. I shook my head.

"Anita," I stated.

He chuckled. "She can't help herself."

Our house had never looked more welcoming. No longer the prison in which I'd festered, it was a monument to glorious freedom, security, and love.

"I'll be right back for ya. I want to get the baby inside."

He carried Audrey with the focus of a running back on his way to a touchdown. I insisted on walking, but my stubbornness failed me halfway up the first flight of stairs. Pete carried my limp self the rest of the journey.

Once settled in bed beside Audrey's bassinette, I swallowed my painkillers and closed my eyes. The howling December wind outside our protective walls was sweet music cradled in warmth; Pete had turned the room into an incubator.

He quietly entered, carrying a tray laden with a miscellany of semi-vileness. "I know how fond you've gotten of hospital food, so I got ya a to-go box from the cafeteria." His eyes were filled with innocence. "See, all your favorites." Meatloaf, instant mashed potatoes, nearly gray peas, a soggy-looking roll, and the piece de resistance: lemon Jello. Food should not jiggle; my final word on the subject. The combination of smells was nauseating. Glaring at him, I curled my lip in disgust.

He fought a smile. "Well, aren't you the persnickety one?"

The reek trailing in its wake was soon replaced by an aroma that

caused me to wantonly salivate. At my first greedy bite of my mother's homemade chicken and dumplings, I moaned in ecstasy.

"Eat up, Susie-Q. You need your strength, and so does Audrey. You've got to give her all the help you can. Since I can't do it myself, I'll do my level best to give it to her through you, sweetheart."

My emotions on a quivering tightrope, I wasn't sure whether to be appreciative or hurt. His expression couldn't have been more earnest, and I sensed his helplessness. A man, he wasn't built to nourish a child; he was the protector, the provider. And he was all over that.

When Audrey stirred, Pete rushed to her side. He wanted to squeeze her to his chest; I could see the fierce desire in his eyes. Instead, he very gently picked her up, looked at her with a love that defied words, and then placed her in my arms.

He produced a small vial from his pocket, unscrewed the cap, and drew a small amount of liquid into the dropper. "Neonatal vitamins," he explained. "The doctor said even though you're giving them through your milk, since she was premature, these are vital." Audrey scrunched her face when he dropped them on her little tongue, but all was forgotten as she latched onto my nipple with the lust of a vampire.

Pete lingered, watching this spectacle, and then his eyes met mine. "I've so missed touchin' you."

I drew the covers back and patted the mattress. "Lie with me."

Pete's eyes melted like butter. "Ya sure?"

At my nod, he stripped down to his boxer briefs and climbed in, snuggling against my body. I needed this connection as much he, and for the first time in weeks, I felt whole. Lightly tracing my arms, he murmured, "I'm nearly afraid to touch you. Afraid I'll hurt ya."

"I'm not as breakable as I seem. Put your arms around me. I need to feel you."

*A Good Talkin' To*

My mother hadn't stopped fussing over me since Pete brought me home. If she wasn't cooking or forcing liquids in me, she was cleaning like a banshee. I was grateful for the help, since it allowed Pete to get some work projects completed. Plus, with the whole district's workload dropped in her lap, it eased Mona's guilt for not being here constantly.

I slept when Audrey did and lay barely awake as she sucked me dry in the wee hours. Though twisting my torso came with mind-bending pain, the sliced abdominal muscles were quickly mending, and my strength was returning. I no longer dreaded going to the kitchen. It's amazing the simple things you take for granted.

"I've been here long enough, I think," Mom announced out of the blue. "Y'all need some time alone to start findin' out what this parenting business is all about."

For once, I truly did not want her to leave. I patted the chair, and she sat beside me. "Mom, I don't think I can be a stay-at-home mother. I want to go back to work. I need to." I braced myself for the *a woman's place is in the home* lecture.

"Are you expecting me to be upset about that?"

"Yes."

"I'd be a fool to believe you're not struggling with which path to

take. You've got a family now, and you've got to consider them, but I know you. I know how you tick and what makes you happy. Pete does, too, I believe."

"He's going to be furious."

"Most likely," she said, nodding with supreme understanding. Then she smiled and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, her eyes filled with genuine kindness. "Perhaps the thing I admire most about you is that when you make up your mind to do something, you do it, and you do it very well. You've already discovered marriage is hard. Raisin' a child is harder still. Put the two together..." She sighed.

"Mom, I don't want the life you had. You put your world aside to stay home and live with a man who clearly did not love you."

"He loved me. He did." I tried to smile, but I knew better. If he had felt love for her, he'd never shown it in my presence. "But I didn't stay home because he wanted me to. I stayed home for you."

"And that went really well, didn't it?" I scoffed. "Unable to finish school, incapacitated in the career world, left with nothing but a screaming baby."

"Your screams were what kept me going."

"What?"

"I didn't leave your daddy when I could have. I stayed to give you everything in life you deserved, including a father."

"Did that make you happy? Were you happy, Mom?" I tried not to sneer, but dammit, she could have been so much more.

"I was happy to be your mother. I still am. And watchin' you make your way in the business world, seein' all you've accomplished...it fills me pride." She took my hands in hers. "Choose the path that makes you happy. Do it for me."



Her bags were packed and waiting by the door. Mom had already wept all over Audrey. I settled her back in her crib and descended the stairs once more—a feat that was becoming easier by the day. At the

bottom, I stopped short, taken aback by my mother's tone. I peered around the jamb.

"Sit down, Peter." He obliged, taking a seat across from her. "I love you like one of my own."

Pete's easy smile widened. "I feel similarly."

"What you need to understand, though, is that my love for you is conditional. The condition bein' that you take care of and treat my Susie right. If you don't, my opinion of you will change drastically."

I watched the color literally drain from Pete's face, and I noted he was working very hard to keep the shock from showing. I'd never seen this side of my mother. There was iron there that had never been mined.

"Polly, I love Susan with all my heart. She means everything to me. And I need you to know that my love for her is unconditional."

"Be that as it may, a child can change a man's feelings. A baby needs protectin' and lovin', but so does its mother. She needs to know *she* is protected and loved just as much—more even." My heart clenched. I knew exactly where this was coming from, and I feared where it was going.

Pete nodded solemnly. "I will always take care of Susan, and I will never stop workin' to earn her love."

"You also need to come to terms with the fact that the baby belongs to Susie, should anything happen between the two of you. Do you understand what I'm saying?" I muffled my gasp. *What the fuck?*

"No," Pete said, his face coloring. "A child is a gift only God can give—a great and precious treasure—and He gave that gift to both of us. Audrey was made by us and she'll be raised by us, together or not." There was a slight tremor in Pete's hand. He inhaled deeply and let his breath out slowly. "Polly, I love your daughter. I'll love her forever—no matter what. And as long as she'll have me, I'll do everything in my power to make her happy."

"And what if she decides to go back to work?"

Pete sighed. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

“She’s worked terribly hard to build a life for herself. I know you and the baby are a big part of that now, but you’ll not keep her from her career. If it comes down to it, I’ll not let you.”

Pete didn’t respond for a moment. I couldn’t begin to imagine his thoughts. Meanwhile, my eyebrows had permanently taken up residence at my hairline. Who the hell was this fierce woman seated in my living room? The newfound respect I had for my mother was expanding by the second.

“Polly, I know what her job means to her. We’ll find a way to work through it.”

Her back, ramrod straight, relaxed a bit. “I’m glad to hear you feel that way. But know that I am watching.”

Without malice or anger, he nodded, looking steadily into her face as if to emphasize he’d gotten the message. “Forgive me if I offend you, but I’m fairly glad I never met Mr. Wade. I don’t think we would’ve got on too well.”

She smiled appreciatively. “I don’t think so either.”

Pete caught my movement, and a small smile painted his lips. In that single moment, his eyes promised things—vowed them. I stepped into the room, trying to act casual.

“Susie!” Mom popped from her chair, all smiles. “It’s time for me to be on my way.”

I met her at the stairs. “Thanks for coming. You were an immense help.”

“Now, I’ll want to see my grandbaby as soon as you’re well.” She hugged me one long last time and whispered in my ear, “It’s gonna be alright. Whatever you decide, I’ll support you.”

“I love you, Mom.”

She pulled back with a humored smirk. “Well, of course you do.” When she reached the door, she winked and slipped out. Through the window, I watched her cross the driveway. After Pete finished loading her bags, she gave him a small hug. With blurry vision, I watched her taillights disappear into the scrub.



Asleep and sated, Audrey had finished feeding long before my body was ready. "I'm going to flippin' pop. Could you bring me the pump?" I hated it already, though it brought me relief. Pete placed Audrey in her bassinette and returned to the rocker empty-handed. He touched my face, and then dropped to his knees.

One button at a time, he slowly freed me from my shirt. Seemingly mesmerized, his warm hands explored my engorged breasts, caressing them gently. When he rubbed a thumb over my right nipple, milk dribbled out. He bent his head and licked at it, a private smile forming. Then, wrapping an arm around me, he latched onto my nipple and began gently sucking. I wasn't sure if I was repulsed, embarrassed, or fucking turned on. My milk flowing freely, I sighed, enjoying the most exquisite relief.

I watched in sheer fascination as he moved to the other breast. A moan bubbled from my lips. Though my nipples themselves were nearly numb from Audrey's ravenous gnawing, the act was intimate and sensual, and yep, it was turning me on. It was doing things to Pete as well, because his fingers drifted down my stomach and began flirting with the waistband of my sweatpants.

Since I hadn't delivered vaginally, I was whole and working just fine. He drew my body to the edge of the chair, slid a finger inside me, and began moving it slowly. I groaned in ecstasy; it had been so long. He firmly pressed his thumb against my clit, and almost instantly, I seized up in an epic orgasm, my insides milking his finger as he had my breasts. A full lifetime later, the echoes of my orgasm bled into a peace of immense scale.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"My pleasure, I assure you." His voice was husky, and his eyes half-lidded. "Sweetheart," he said, looking up at me, "I want you somethin' terrible. When you're ready..."

I wanted him as well; more so now. But moving my hips more than a fraction was still painful. "Maybe if we took it really slowly."

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply as shook his head no; he was following the doctor's orders to the damn letter. Then he cocked his head to one side, eyes twinkling. "Would ya like me to do that again?"

"God, yes."



It was the very first alone time I'd had in weeks, and I relished it—well, for a half-hour or so. Pete was meeting with a new client, and Audrey was currently sleeping. After a soothing cup of hot tea, I found myself pacing like a caged animal. I needed something to do, a memo to write, someone to yell at. I needed to work.

Pete got to escape to his office, create, interact with other people—even if it was primarily Laney. And frankly, I resented that. I was trapped: wrapped in the suffocating cocoon of motherhood.

Through the window, I spied the pod of dolphins that regularly cruised down the long strip of water separating our barrier island from the mainland. I thought about the boundless miles they travelled each day, of the infinite sea they were free to roam, and sighed.

Evening had fully staked its claim when Pete sauntered into the living room, all smiles. "Santa brought you a present."

I glanced at the beautiful tree in the living room. Unable to even leave the house, much less shop, there was little for Pete underneath it, and for that I felt terrible. He had forgone the outside lighting for fear the bazillion megawatts would keep the baby awake, and I had zero remorse on that front.

"Really? What?"

"Freedom."

Taking my hand, he led me down the stairs to the front door and flung it open. "Ta da!"

I gazed at the object and then at him. "We already have five strollers."

“Not like this one. It’s all terrain!” He waved his hand at the impressive mountain bike tires, their shiny chrome spokes reflecting the porchlight. “The handbrake is here, and this’ll hold your water bottle when you’re ready to run.” He rattled off its other attributes, and then said, “Best of all—”

“It has an engine?” I interrupted, grinning. I hadn’t been cleared to drive, but hell, at this point, I’d take a flippin’ scooter.

“Ya want one?”

I kissed his cheek. “Yes.”

He rolled his eyes. “According to the discharge paperwork, it’s time for you to start walkin’. C’mon, we’ll try it out together—just to the end of the driveway.”



Before this whole pregnancy debacle, I’d enjoyed running along the paved path beside the highway. Since drawn and quartered, I could only walk it slowly, but even that was sheer joy. I breathed in the cool, clean air, seasoned lightly with salt, as Audrey and I wandered the swank development called Cedar Village. It was one of the few residential neighborhoods on the island. Peopled primarily with wealthy retirees, the wide streets were flanked by perfectly manicured lawns. Pete had designed several of the monster soundfront homes. I smiled with pride as I passed them, wondering if their interiors rivaled our own.

Past the duck pond, lighted tennis courts, and the large swimming pool, a small marina harbored numerous watercrafts, rocking peacefully. The breeze blowing off the sound was chilly, and I tucked the blanket more tightly around my girl. I seated myself on the wooden bench near the water’s edge; I’d come to think.

Wondering what my future held, I stared out at the gilded wavelets lit by winter’s sun. The clock’s hands were moving ever closer to the time when I’d have to make a choice. Could I do this—what Pete secretly wanted? Become a stay-at-home mom?

Would I manage to keep my sanity in the process? I knew the answer—felt it as surely as the omnipresent breeze. Work galvanized me. Moreover, it defined me in a way I understood, in a way that filled me with satisfaction.

“Aud, I’ve got some big decisions to make and most likely a war to wage.” She looked up at me, her eyes brimming with a wisdom lost on adults. “You understand what’s at stake, right?”

She blinked, owl-like.

“You won’t resent me when you’re older?”

With the workings of a smile, she made a gurgling noise I took as her blessing. I kissed her tiny forehead and ran my finger down a cheek smoother than the finest nectarine. With a great sense of peace and certainty, I exhaled.

“You’re about to get really pissed off at me. It’s time to wean you.”

*New Year's Revolution*

“You gave birth not four weeks ago, you’ve barely been out of the hospital three, and you think you’re ready to go back to work? Look at you! You’re not even supposed to be drivin’ yet and ya want to fly up to Philadelphia for a meeting? *Seriously!*!” he sputtered.

We’d already fought about my returning to work. Then it was when. He thought four months was realistic. Clearly, I was of another opinion, since that was just plain stupid. “I need to know what my future holds. The uncertainty is killing me.”

“Can’t they just tell ya over the phone? Do you actually need to go up there?”

“I do. I’ll fly up and back the same day.” I switched Audrey to my other nipple and rubbed her little back. “I’m fine. The baby’s fine. The only one who’s not fine here is you!”

He shook his head and stormed out the front door. After four circuits around the house—yes, *I counted*—he stormed back in. “If you’ve got to do this. If it can’t wait another damn couple of weeks, then I’ll take you to the airport. But know now, I think what you’re doin’ is crazy.”



I pumped as much milk as I could squeeze out of myself and added it to the small stockpile in the refrigerator. As I wasn't staying overnight, I simply brought a large purse, its complete contents: one breast pump, one empty bottle, one wallet, and one lipstick.

Pete and I talked animatedly for the two plus hours to Raleigh. It was the first time we'd been alone since Audrey's birth, and there was an unbridled freedom that came along with it. Of course, some of the conversation was Audrey-related—a whole new topic in our repertoire, but much of it resembled the unencumbered days when it was just the two of us against the world.

"In a couple of months, when Audrey's ready, we'll take that overnight in the mountains. I can't wait to be really away for a night, just the two of us," Pete said.

I loved my child—don't get me wrong, but during our first eight months of married life, Pete and I hadn't enjoyed even one week without worry or discomfort of some type. A break sounded spectacular. Honestly, Philly sounded spectacular, too, and I almost wished I was spending the night there. The concept of sleeping eight hours without my brain on high alert, missing just one midnight feeding... I longed for that simple peace.

"Our marriage has been kind of a bust so far, hasn't it?"

He snatched up my hand and kissed it fervently. "Our marriage has been amazing. I wouldn't change a thing."

Walking me to the roped off area, he took my face in his hands. "Be safe and don't overdo it. Oh, and make sure you eat. I know you." He gave me a stern look before kissing me tenderly.

After clearing security, I blew him a kiss.

He winked and then mouthed, *I love you*.



As passengers impatiently shifted from one foot to another, waiting for the cabin doors to open, I remained seated, afraid to leave the airplane's protective hull. My meetings had not gone well

at all, and I was saddled with information certain to start World War Three.

Pete's perfect form was sitting in one of the bizarrely placed rocking chairs. The interior designers must have thought these lent the reception area a warm and homey touch. I thought they said, "Welcome to Hillbilly Central."

When our eyes met, he hopped up, his face glowing. He pulled me into his arms and kissed my hair, forehead, and finally lips. "I didn't know I could miss someone so badly in the course of ten hours."

It had seemed a long time.

Once settled into The Beast, I unbuttoned my suit jacket, shaking my head at the bold stains on my silk blouse. Ten minutes into the return flight, my udder had begun leaking. For two hours I'd felt sticky and sodden, and now smelled vaguely of cottage cheese.

I noticed several shopping bags in the back seat. "What did you buy?"

"A sweater, some clothes for Audrey, and a surprise for you. I never knew how much fun after Christmas shoppin' could be." He grinned a bit too widely.

"A surprise?"

"Just a little something." He shrugged and then kissed my knuckles. "How was Philly?"

*Amazing, fantastic, exhilarating.* "Oh, you know, cold, dirty, loud...the usual."

As we pressed eastward, the emotional atmosphere slowly changed. The warmth of homecoming cooled, and our jovial conversation dwindled to an oppressive silence. Though I'd offered nothing, I was somewhat shocked Pete hadn't asked the million dollar question—not even hinted at it. I knew he would give me just enough rope to hang myself, but in the meantime, I was smothering under the heavy blanket of foreboding.

We stopped in Smithfield for a quick dinner of Barbecue. While waiting for our food, he reached into his jacket and slid a small box across the plaid tablecloth.

“What’s this?”

With a calculating smile, he simply nodded for me to open it.

The heart-shaped gold locket dangled from a sturdy chain. I opened it to find a tiny picture of Pete holding Audrey, their faces pressed against one another. I’d taken the shot with his phone while still in the hospital.

“It’s beautiful.”

As he fastened the clasp, he whispered, “You hold our hearts, Susan. You take us with you wherever you go. Don’t forget that.” He’d not spent the day shopping so much as fashioning a weapon with which to stab me in my less than golden heart.

It hit the mark perfectly, too, because the guilt I felt magnified tenfold, tears threatening to spill. Blessedly, our number was called, and Pete left for the counter. I quickly dabbed my eyes and inhaled deeply. We spoke little the rest of the way home.

“Hey, Miss Susan,” Taylor said, carrying Audrey in her arms. At seventeen and a half, with “the boyfriend”—*a far less colorful term than Kirk’s*—currently out of the picture, Taylor was very available and thrilled to have a job. Though she’d been sitting the entire day, she looked utterly fresh. “How was your trip?”

“Just fine, thanks.” Pete watched me, his eyes mildly accusing as I took Audrey in my arms, the sinking feeling pulling me under the surf like an anchor. “Did she behave?” I asked, planting kisses on my child’s forehead. Audrey yawned impressively and closed her eyes.

“Didn’t cry one bit. She’s just the most precious baby in the whole world.”

In the silence of our journey, I’d decided not to have this conversation in the house. I didn’t want angry words and hurt feelings staining the walls of our sanctuary. Instead, we would exchange them irrationally where the mighty Atlantic Ocean could easily dispel them with her moist and salty breath. I placed Audrey back in Taylor’s arms rather than Pete’s. “Would you mind sitting for one more hour? I’ll pay you double.”

“Miss Susan, you don’t have to pay me anything. I love Audrey.” She whisked her back upstairs, singing softly.

I looked deeply into Pete’s eyes. “We need to talk.”



Though I’d so often disparaged the Eastern Carolina residents’ concept of cold, let me assure you that walking the beach in January was a bitter affair, the damp and weighty chill seeping to my bone’s very marrow. The icy wind jerked our clothing in disjointed spurts as we plodded along in silence. I knew lack of warmth would not be a problem for long, however, since Pete was about to go thermonuclear. As if reading my thoughts, he suddenly stopped.

“Okay, out with it.”

“They want me back. Now.”

Pete closed his eyes and wiped his hand down his face. Though his stubborn mind refused to admit it, surely he knew this was inevitable. He looked to the sky for divine intervention. I’d already scoured it myself. *Nada.*

“Where?”

Exhaling deeply, I looked towards the sea. “Minnesota.”

I counted all the way to ten, which was, quite frankly, rather amazing, before his head exploded right off his shoulders. “Minnesota? Are you kidding me?!” Pete waved his arms in spasmodic fashion and made a number of sputtering and unintelligible sounds. “You’re a new mother! What are they *thinking?*” Sensing my resolve, he stopped cold. “Oh Lord, tell me you’re not seriously considerin’ this.” His hands found his hips in the war stance to which I was so very accustomed. To humor myself while I found the right words, I imagined him wearing a feathered headdress with red stripes painting his face. I almost laughed.

“Bob said this was my only option.” Pete spat in disgust. “He won’t be my boss when I take over, which is a tough pill to swallow, but Frank Calvin is a decent man. It’ll be okay.”

His look was the very definition of audacity. “I don’t care who your boss is—” He froze mid-sentence and shook his head like he was trying to clear it. “*When* you take over? You’ve already accepted it, haven’t you?” I nodded slowly. “Who’s gonna take care of Audrey? I’m in this a thousand percent, but—”

Suddenly, he turned and stalked to the water’s edge. I crossed my arms and waited as he drew strength, wisdom, energy, who the hell knows what from his surrogate mother. When I decided he wasn’t returning, I joined him.

“How do you see this playing out?” he asked, staring into the gray abyss. Wearing white caps as far as the eye could see, it appeared Mother Atlantic was as disgruntled as he.

I sighed helplessly. “I start next week.”

His head whipped towards me, and he literally choked, his face turning scarlet from lack of oxygen. I patted his back as he coughed and explained, “I’m commuting. I’ll start with an abbreviated workweek.”

I wrapped my arms around myself and rocked back and forth as Pete set to the task of turning sand into molten glass with his glare. Finally, he met my eyes. “Have you considered a demotion?”

“A what?”

“For a while. Maybe back to a region like when we first met. Maybe you could run this part of the state again.”

“And work for Kirsten?!” I sputtered. “One, no way in hell, and two, do you understand how much money we’d lose?”

“Susan, money’s not the object here. Audrey is. I make plenty—”

“You do well, Pete. I won’t argue that, but I make more than you by half, and your income is project-based. If the housing market tanks, so does your livelihood—*our* livelihood. We live very comfortably at the moment, but we have a flipping car payment of epic proportions thanks to you. And the house—”

“We’ll sell it.”

“What?”

“We’ll sell it all if we have to. Eventually we’ll need to move,

anyway. I love it here, but New Bern has the best school system in the area.”

“School’s six years away!”

“Five,” he said. “Five short years, most of it spent with you travelin’ out of state.”

“Do you think I want this? Do you? I have no choice. It’s take this job or quit.”

He made a scoffing sound then cocked his head, loaded his cannons, and opened fire. “So, Miss Minnesota, are you plannin’ on bein’ in town when she says her first word? What about when she learns to crawl? To stand? What about her first steps? Will you be with her or your employees?”

“You bastard! How dare you play the *I suck at motherhood* card so soon. How dare you!” Tears scorched my cheeks, thawing the icy air that brushed them. “If I left, they’d never hire me back, but you could pack up your office and be gone tomorrow. Hell, you could be a stay-at-home dad. It’s all the rage now. What about that, you damned chauvinist?”

He dropped his shoulders. “Do you think I haven’t thought of it?” My mouth popped open in shock. “I’d be willing to, but what you have to understand is that while I can meet her basic needs, a baby needs her mother—a little girl, even more so. I of all people know how important havin’ a mamma around is. A daddy can provide, but a mamma is the soul of the family.” His eyes softened. “*You’re* the soul.”

I couldn’t breathe. I truly couldn’t. He was either being painfully honest or manipulating my emotions like a puppet master. Remembering the locket and the look in his eye, I was betting on the latter. Still, the mere idea of a Southern man agreeing to stay home spoke volumes about his commitment.

I thought about Pete’s childhood. How he was raised by a single mother—one who’d put him before all else. And even though she’d had to work after her husband died, she’d stayed close by, guarding him like a lioness. Then I thought about my upbringing. Even with

a father who'd doted on me in his own skewed way, my mother had been the steadfast one; the one who sacrificed.

Through my fury, I looked at Pete. So loving, so able-bodied, so ready to do anything to help, to support, to hold our family together and love our child. And he was right, damn him. There would be a time when Audrey would need a woman's influence, someone to teach her how to be strong, to nurture her determination and school her in wielding her femininity. Would I be able to do that from a thousand miles away? Would I be useful as a weekend mother? Would that suffice?

My friend and former boss, Grace Newman, was making it just fine with her, albeit, shorter commute. Her child was in daycare. That's what career women did. They gave birth, put their kids in daycare, and went back to work. Hell, if it made Pete feel better, I could hire a full-time nanny—an ugly one to whom he would never be attracted—or even one of his relatives. That would make life easier for us both. Or, I could take Audrey with me to Minnesota and place her in a daycare near my office, so I would be nearby. Would that resolve the issue? Would that be enough for him?

But then I thought about myself. If I quit—surely what he really wanted—who would I become? I thought about my worth in this world; what defined me as a person. “Mother” was not the first descriptor that popped into my head, or wife. It was businesswoman. I'd be trading the powerful position I'd worked a lifetime to achieve for a powerless one filled with strollers, bottles, and leaky diapers. And to bank on his salary for our livelihood? Forced to depend on him rather than myself? He loved me, and I him now, but would I come to hate him for it in time? I knew the answer.

I looked him straight in the eye and said, “I'm going to Minnesota, and you can't stop me. I will *not* be kept from my career by you!”

His jaw dropped. “By *me*?! He ran his hands through his hair, causing it to stand on end. “This is not about me holdin' you back.” Narrowing his eyes, he pointed a finger at my chest and growled with the force of a hurricane. “This is about satisfyin' your ego.”

“Ego? You think this is about my ego?!”

With an evil glint in his eye, he said, “I absolutely do.”



As furious as I'd ever been, I pressed on my abdomen to ease the pain and jogged back to the car. His ego was five times bigger than mine, and if this situation was ego-driven, his was behind the wheel. I climbed into The Beast and all-wheel-drive spun it out of the lot.

The car was barely parked before I slithered out and staggered into the house.

“Taylor,” I said, stuffing a bounty of clothes into a suitcase. “Pete will pay you when he gets home, okay?”

Smacking right into her on the way to the kitchen, I grabbed up a grocery bag and filled it with bottles and my breast pump. Then, tiptoeing into Audrey's room, I quietly gathered several outfits and her blanket, and stuffed them into her baby bag.

“Miss Susan?”

“Please tell Pete that Audrey and I are taking a little trip...and that that he can go to hell.” I then calmly turned away from her shocked expression and marched back down the hall.

Once packed and loaded, I carefully secured Audrey in her car seat as she slept. I dreaded the day when that peaceful expression would be replaced by one reflecting the heavy weight of adulthood.

“Susan!” Mona said, greeting us with the warmest of smiles. “Come on in out of the cold.” Audrey was wide awake now, her full flirt on.

“Could you hold her for a moment while I run out to the car?”

“Why, I could hold my sweet angel all day long. Yes, I could,” she cooed, blowing raspberries on her little tummy.

Her next expression was one of shock as I dropped all our shit on the carpet and announced, “We're staying a few days. Hope you don't mind.” I then marched to the guest bedroom and slammed the door.



Pete waited until after Audrey's bedtime to show up. I was amazed he'd had the willpower to last that long.

"Ya can't just take off every time we have a fight."

"This is only the second time I've ever done that, and as you can see, I didn't go very far."

"Walk with me down the street." He kept his voice low and controlled. "I don't want to wake the baby." I turned to confirm with Mona, but she had discreetly disappeared.

He knew better than to reach for my hand. A block away, he stopped and turned to me. After taking a deep breath, he spoke. "A very long time ago, I promised I'd never hold ya back from your career or from doin' what ya wanted, but it's not just you and me anymore. It's us—the three of us. I'm sorry about the way I reacted earlier. I was mad and I maybe shouldn't have said those things in quite the way I did, but the fact is: I meant 'em."

"Don't you understand I already feel like a failure? I failed in protecting my district and my people. Clearly, you think I suck at being a mother, and as a wife—"

"You couldn't help work, I think you're an amazing mother, and the only woman I could ever imagine bein' married to is you, darlin'." He ran his hand down my cheek. "Our lives have changed. You need to accept that and make some concessions."

*Annd* we were off to the races again...

"I've made concessions, dammit. I forfeited an incredible opportunity to come back here. What about you? What concessions have *you* made? When I was transferred to Ohio, did you come find me? No. Did you call or even fucking text me while I was gone? No. You just went on with your life as if nothing had ever happened, leaving me bleeding by the roadside."

There would always be a kernel of resentment when it came to my stint in Ohio. We'd talked some after I returned, but were so happy simply being in each other's arms that the subject had been dropped,

the past swept under a rug. Well, it had just found its way back out, and the anger it totes surprised even me.

Pain drenched his features like a fierce rain.

“You once accused Ryan of seeing me only when it was convenient for him. Is that what our marriage is about? Is it simply that I’m here? If I take this job, will *you* make any concessions, or just write me off as a fucking inconvenience?”

He took a step back and threw his hands up like I was some kind of rabid creature. “One, don’t ever compare me to that asshole again, and two, you broke my heart, Susan. Right in half. And then you took the best part with you. Don’t ever think I stayed away because of selfishness or because it was inconvenient. And as far as goin’ on as if nothin’ happened?” He threw his head back and laughed bitterly. “I died the day you left, and I stayed dead until you came back. With the exception of Audrey’s birth, that was the single greatest day of my life.”

“Because I moved back. Because I was in front of you again.”

I truly could not believe we were having this argument. I think in reality it was a deflection from what was really at stake here, from the bigger issue at hand: who was willing to bend and how far.

“I came up!” He shouted.

“What?”

“I came up.” His shoulders dropped and his voice became raspy. “Right after your birthday. I watched you. You must’ve just bought your car because you were practically skippin’. You looked so beautiful in your wool coat and black boots, a big smile on your face. Happy.

“That’s what you kept sayin’ in your messages. It’s what you told Mona, too. But I needed to see it for myself.” He kicked at a small rock. “I guess I was hopin’ it maybe wasn’t true. And after those guys finished hugging all over you, ya followed them home. I knew then that Ohio was your place. That that’s where you belonged. I also knew,” he said, his voice a mere whisper, “that I didn’t stand a chance in hell of getting you back.”

“What guys?” I barely remembered the day I brought Lucy home. I remembered signing papers and then driving her around the beltway... Then it dawned on me. “Ken and Chris? Of course they hugged all over me. They were gay! Did you actually think I’d already found someone else, that I cared so little for you?” Shaking with forgotten anguish and the acrid loss of what could have been, I looked at the sky. I could have had him and kept Ohio. We could have been in a very different place right now. “Why didn’t you—? You could have at least spoken with me. Dammit, that would have been a game-changer!”

“Would it’ve really?”

“I fucking *loved* you!” I seethed.

“I don’t doubt it. But the fact is: when you left, you weren’t ready to commit—*really* commit to our relationship. And then when I came up, I realized you had everything you wanted—needed. What I conceded that day was hope. What I *forfeited*...was my soul.”

Tears spilled down my cheeks as he touched my face.

“You sacrificed a great deal comin’ back here. And you did it for me. I thank God every day for that gift,” he said tenderly.

“Pete, I don’t want to go to Minnesota. It was very painful leaving her for one day. And to do that on a weekly basis—be a weekend mom? I’m not a monster. I’m not,” I said, balling my fists. “But what am I supposed to do?”

“Look, I know you didn’t want to be a mother so soon, and I know it’s been damn hard on you physically and emotionally. Probably more than I can understand. But four weeks ago, my world disappeared—gone like smoke in a gale. I will not lose you again. I won’t.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You died on that operating table. *Died*.”

I gasped as the horror sank in. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t bear to think about it, much less say it out loud.” He was visibly shaking. He pulled me into a tight embrace as if could literally hold my body and spirit together.

I rubbed his back, whispering, "I love you," over and over.

Finally, he stepped back and looked at me, the streetlight's glow playing on his damp cheeks. His eyes were sad and lost, and his voice ragged and filled with pain. "If moving is what it takes to keep us together, then that's what we'll do. I'll sell my business, and we'll...go."

I couldn't breathe. He was willing to walk away from his life here. He was giving up everything to keep us together. The very high respect I held for this man multiplied tenfold. I touched his face. "You would do this?"

"I've known it was coming in one form or another since the day you took leave. I've been working through the problem for months now—trying to see it from all sides, but I couldn't figure out how to solve it." He smiled weakly. "I just did."

He pressed his lips against my palm and closed his eyes. "I'm goin' home now. If ya don't mind, I need a little while by myself."

*On Bended Knees*

I wandered downstairs to the horrible sound of Pete singing to Audrey. This time it was “Sweet Child of Mine” by *Guns N’ Roses*. Honestly, he wasn’t far off the lead singer’s voice.

“You look nice,” Pete said, admiring my form-fitting cashmere dress. I hadn’t regained my figure by a long shot, but my postnatal curves and swells seemed to please him.

“I’ve got to run an errand. I’ll be back in a little while.” I kissed them both and slipped out. Though I wasn’t exactly wearing a suit of armor, I had a dragon to slay.

“Susan!” Jayne exclaimed when I walked through the door. “You look amazing! How’s the baby?”

Mind set to task, I wasn’t interested in chatting, so my answers were glib.

“Mona just left for lunch. She should be back—”

“I’m not here for Mona,” I said, cutting her off.

Her face lit. “Did you bring me pictures?”

“No.”

After a confused look, she said, “So...why *are* you here?”

“Kirsten.”

“This isn’t the best time.”

“Too bad.”

“She’s in a meeting right now. Shall I—”

I didn’t wait another moment. I just threw open her door. Kirsten was leaning back in her chair, a look of infinite pleasure on her face. Eyes closed, her lips were slack and open slightly as if she’d been panting. She let out a soft moan.

I cleared my throat loudly, and her lids flipped open. Her shocked expression was quickly replaced by an ugly grimace. And that’s when I noticed the thatch of hair poking up from between her legs. It was a color I recognized, and my stomach turned. I stared, stunned and disgusted.

“May I help you?” she asked, without a hint of modesty or shame.

“We need to talk. I’ll wait in the lobby until you’re less...” I wanted to say repugnant, vulgar, vile—*honestly, I could go on for days*. I finally just mumbled, “Occupied,” and shut the door.

Jayne shrugged apologetically and went back to typing. I wandered into Mona’s office and froze. In a word: landfill. With files strewn across her desk, papers carpeting the floor, and boxes stacked to the ceiling, it looked exactly the way mine had when I was a disorganized service rep. The most striking difference between us, however, was that Mona was a neat freak of OCD proportions. Kirsten was destroying her: slowly skinning her to the bone. My lips curled up like a wolf’s.

The insect’s door opened, and a disheveled and red-faced Gene Daniel stepped out. He refused to meet my eyes as he slinked by. I waited until I heard his engine start before stepping to Jayne’s desk. Mechanically, she punched numbers, listened, and then hung up. “Kirsten will see you now.”

“Thank you.”

My—*Kirsten’s* office looked nearly the same as when I’d last left it. A giant, red, Louis Vuitton handbag, its cost in the low thousands, took up a full fourth of her desktop. Plugged into black Jimmy Choo heels, her ankles were now crossed, and her head languidly rested against my—*her* sumptuous leather chair. I dug my nails into my thighs.

“Always a pleasure, Susan. You look less...bloody today.” Her smile dripped venom. I glanced at the area I had soaked red. An admittedly gorgeous oriental rug now covered it.

Without preamble, I said, “I want North Carolina back.”

She laughed coldly. “That would be no.”

“You can’t like it here. It’s not your style.”

“I don’t know... It has its perks.” I thought of Gene and wanted to retch. Ew, ew, and just...ew!

“Power is what you crave. Power and position, and North Carolina offers you neither. No one really wants this state but me.”

“It’s an adequate placeholder for now.”

“I’ve just been given Minnesota. It’s lucrative and metropolitan. It has all the things you want. Things that this place can never hope to give you. Consider it yours.”

“In Frank’s territory? I think not.”

“ComSync has a strong presence here. They take revenue away from our bottom line potential. In Minnesota, INTech has no competition. You’ll have a complete stronghold—all profits are yours.

She shook her head no.

Desperate, I had little to barter with. “I’ll give it to you plus half of North Carolina’s budget.”

“Hmm. Very generous, but no.”

“What can I offer you?” I was mere inches away from writing her a personal check. I was also mere inches from tears.

She laughed wickedly. “Firstborn? Isn’t that what desperate women typically offer?”

“Only on Disney. Come on, Kirsten, I’m giving you a hell of a lot of money and a painless way out of here. *Please.*”

“Begging. Oh, I like that. I like that a lot.” His voice was sensual and disturbing. She slowly walked around her desk, her fingers evocatively dragging along its polished surface. Less than a foot away from me now, she stared down from her staggering height, her lips

twisting into a malicious smile. “I’ll give you everything you want...if you drop to your knees.”

My mind screamed, “No!” The word just didn’t make it to my lips. The faces I loved: Pete’s, Audrey’s, Mona’s, those of the whole town of Havelock; friends and family, my sense of place, the state in which I’d been born and recently fallen back in love with, all flashed before my eyes in rapid succession. I could give it up—walk away from everyone and everything I held dear, except for Pete. For him, I would do anything.

My lips trembled as I met her stormy gray eyes, and I slowly dropped to my knees. “Please,” I whispered.

Closing her eyes, Kirsten inhaled deeply. “God, that’s better than sex.”

My ego annihilated, I muttered, “I’ll contact corporate and make arrangements.”

“Oh shoot, Susan,” she mocked. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“What?!” I gasped, hopping to my feet.

“A woman’s prerogative, hun.”

“No! You promised.”

She tsked, tapping her chin. “I forgot the cross-my-heart-hope-to-die part.”

Rage boiled over my shallow pot, hissing as it reached the fire. “You fucking bitch. Give me back my district!”

“When hell freezes over! I’ll stay here until the entire company falls apart before I give it back to you.”

“Why? Why do you hate me so much?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No! What have I ever done other than idolize you? I’ve never screwed you over. I’ve never stabbed *you* in the back!” I seethed. “Why?”

“You exist. You breathe.”

“What does that even mean?”

“That’s just it. You’re an annoyingly naïve, innocent, clueless little lamb, and yet they hand you whatever the fuck you want,” she

hissed. “You haven’t had to work for anything in your professional life.”

My jaw dropped. “I’ve worked for everything. I’ve taken on huge loads, sacrificed for my people, my company—”

“Oh, spare me. You’ve moved up faster than anyone I’ve ever seen. You’ve hopped from one promotion to another. People love you. Bob loves you. Hell, even Frank loves you, and I can promise that never happens. Whatever magic you seem to have, whatever charm fools them into thinking you’re competent, I want it.”

She then bent down, her face so close to mine I could smell the soured coffee on her breath. “I step on people, double-cross, manipulate. I do everything you’re *supposed* to do in big business. I work all the angles, and yet you continue gaining on me. You don’t know how many people I’ve slept with—the things I’ve done to get where I am. And you...you’ve slept with, what—two, three people in the company? And Ryan, the only damn one who even mattered—a vice-fucking president, for God’s sake—you slept with him for two solid years, and according to our little pillow talks, you never once asked for his help. Not once. Stupid girl! So stupid.

“I’ve been with this company twice as long as you. I should be a vice president by now. I should be *your* boss,” she snarled. “But here I am: a lowly district manager barely making more than you.”

I had nothing to say. There was nothing I could say. I simply stared at her, shocked.

Botox could no longer contain her emotion, her face contorting with rage. “Get out of my office!”

“Kirsten, please—”

“Get out!”

I turned on my heels and slammed the door. Jayne looked up over her reading glasses. “You okay?”

“I’m sorry you’ve gotten stuck with her again. It’s the last thing I wanted for you.”

“It’s working out fine.” She offered a sly smile and winked. I hoped against hope she was undermining her in every way possible.

I shakily climbed into The Beast. I don't think I'd ever felt more powerless in my life. Even in the hospital, barely able to move, I'd entertained the illusion that I was somewhat in control. But now? Nothing. There was no moving heaven and earth this time.

I pulled into Oceana's empty parking lot and staggered to the end of the pier. I knew I shouldn't be out here without a coat, but I could barely feel the chill. I could barely feel anything other than a sickening numbness. I stared into the abyss as rain pelted me. Our life here was over. I laid my head on the railing and sobbed.

*The Extent of Love*

Pete and Audrey came to Raleigh to see me off. I stopped short of security, my heart aching. "I'll be back in just a few days. It'll seem like I wasn't gone as all," I whispered, kissing them both. A vegetable stew of emotions, I boarded the plane.

If I ever thought I'd been cold, I was sorely mistaken. In fact, I was fairly certain we'd accidentally landed on the polar ice cap. Approximately six million people lived in Minnesota, four million of whom huddled shivering in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. I assumed the rest lived in random igloos spread out over the frozen tundra. Icy tentacles slithered through every crevice of the corridor as I disembarked, causing goosebumps to explode over my body.

John Brody, Minnesota's current DM, met me at the top of the escalator with a warm smile and firm handshake, his parka stuffed with the feathers of several hundred geese. I followed him through the glass breezeway connecting the airport and parking garage. Rattling fiercely, its outer walls were caked in so much snow and ice I feared under the added weight, the raging winds might blow it away with us inside.

Though midafternoon, the northern sun—*wherever it was*—was near setting, its light dimming by the moment. The highway was

as white as the fields on either side, and I had no idea how John could even tell the difference. A sudden curtain dropped across his windshield, rendering us completely blind to the cars ahead. “Holy shit,” I gasped, sending up a prayer for our lives.

John chuckled. “Relax, Susan, whiteouts are completely normal. You’ll get used to them.”

I could get used to anything, I suppose. Pete? He was going to flipping hate it here. “What are summers like?” I asked, hoping for good news.

“Well, other than mosquitos large enough to bleed small children dry, they aren’t too bad. There are lakes everywhere. It’s very pretty.”

Lakes. We wouldn’t have to sell Bessie. That would make Pete happy. “How’s the fishing?”

“I’ve heard it’s outstanding. I’m not the outdoorsy type, but the guys I know who are love it.” He glanced at me with a curious expression. “You fish?”

I laughed. “My husband’s Captain Ahab.”

“Ah. If that’s the case, ice fishing is big here. I mean, you couldn’t pay me to do it, but if he doesn’t mind the cold, it’s supposed to be great. My last district was Arkansas. It’s taken me a while to adjust to the climate here, but Hong Kong is basically tropical. I can’t wait. Oh, and I’m selling my snowmobile and removal equipment if you’re interested.”

I glanced around at the white on white on white and nodded. “Consider it sold.”



The office was quite nice. Hoisted in a downtown St. Paul high-rise, the staff was friendly and very...blond. Primarily of Scandinavian descent, every other person’s surname seemed to be Anderson—or *-sen*, or some other variation. I’d have to get used to the accent, too, but I suppose they would mine as well. And especially Pete’s.

Of course, my first action as their new commander-in-chief was to let seven people go. The orders came directly from Frank. I felt Mona's pain acutely. Plus, it was a hell of a way to make an entrance. *Hi, I'm Susan Walsh. Nice to meet you. Oh, by the way, you're fired.*

John and I spent the morning making introductions. Over a late lunch at a fairly fantastic bistro, he took a sip of beer and casually said, "Frank wants me to negotiate the budget. I know what we need."

I gaped. "Does he not trust me?" I hadn't worked for him before, but dammit, I knew how to do my job.

He shrugged. "He's probably trying to be helpful. I mean, you did just have a baby." Then he smiled playfully. "We're not all assholes, Susan. There is a little chivalry left in the world. I'll make sure you're well-funded."

Day three and I had yet to actually step foot outside. It seemed all the downtown buildings were interconnected, their parking decks attached like papooses. So used to the freedom of roaming at will, I was starting to feel like a caged gerbil.

I met with a realtor named Trisha—you guessed it—Anderson. A condo would do for the time being, but if my commuting scheme didn't work out, we'd soon need a house. And though the city's school system was infinitely better than anything at home, we'd want Audrey in the best possible district. Trisha drove me through a plethora of snow-blanketed neighborhoods, extolling the virtues of each. They all looked the same to me: white.

"When does it actually stop snowing?" I asked.

"Oh, ya know, May, occasionally June. And fall comes quick. Starts snowing again by mid-September—lots of cross-country skiing and hockey. We get 'em on skates before they can even walk. Your daughter will love it." At my frown, she began back-pedaling. "Summers are wonderful, too. My favorite season. High sixties mostly, ya know. Perfect. Now last summer we did have a heat wave. It got up to nearly eighty a couple of days in August." She must have

misread my pained expression. “Oh, but don’t worry, Susan. That was a fluke.” I smiled tightly.

She took me to dinner in one of the hottest sections of town. Sipping a gorgeous drink, I admired the warehouse ceiling and naked glass lights. The food was amazing, brilliant even. Microbreweries and gifted chefs. Pete would love this part, I thought. It was urban and hip and it called to me—the Philly part. I could definitely get used to living in this metropolitan sprawl. Pete had conquered Los Angeles in his twenties. He could survive here. He could learn to like this, I reasoned.

That was, until we stepped outside, and a blast of purely cold and terribly vicious wind quite literally knocked the living breath out of me. I struggled for air, the moisture in my lungs turning to frost. Trisha rushed me back into the restaurant. “Breathe through your nose, dear,” she said, laughing. “I keep forgetting you’re not used to this.”



“There’s my angel,” Mona cooed, barely making eye contact with me as she wrenched Audrey from my arms.

I sighed in frustration. She was angry. I’d dropped the bomb on her yesterday, leaving her literally gasping. “And good evening to you, too, Mona,” I said with an edge.

“Hey, Susan.” Her smile—if you could even call it that—was brittle.

“Pete, could you take Audrey for a few minutes?” I asked.

Once the ears of the innocent were upstairs, I crossed my arms over my chest and said, “Go ahead.”

“Susan, I’m speaking for myself and the family.” I raised my eyebrows in surprise. “We—I—think you’re making a big mistake goin’ back to work right now. I know how much your job means to you, but Audrey’s got to mean more, and Pete—”

“Unh uh! You will not lecture me about my marriage. That is

private, and none of your business. And especially none of the ‘family’s’ business! They are not the mafia, and they don’t have a say in how we live. They can talk about me all they want. They can hate me, for all I care, but you?” My throat constricted. “You’re my best friend. You should be supporting me.”

“I am. But it’s also a best friend’s job to tell you when you’re wrong. And you are wrong, Susan.”

My jaw dropped. “I can’t believe you’re not backing me on this. After all we’ve been through together, and this is how you treat me, this is your idea of sisterly love?”

“You’re just not thinking straight right now. You’ve got hormones,” she said softly.

“Thanks for dropping by,” I said, breezing by her. “I’ll show your judgmental self out. Oh, and as emissary, you can tell ‘the family’ I said to piss off.”

“Susan—”

“Good night.” My chin quivered as I slammed the door in her face; my only ally lost to Southern expectation.

Pete’s expression was kind. He wrapped his arms around me and we rocked as I dampened his sweater. “She meant well,” he whispered, kissing the top of my head.

I pulled away and held up my finger. “No.”

With Mona’s words still ringing in my ear, before leaving for the airport Sunday, I said, “Let’s give this commuting thing a few weeks just to see how that goes. I’ll try working four days a week there. Fridays I’ll work from here, and then we’ll have weekends to spend together.”

Before we made any drastic changes, I needed to figure out my job, and more importantly, I wanted Pete to enjoy his family and the area for as long as possible. Perhaps, if I kept things moving smoothly, I could work from home a few days a week and we wouldn’t have to move at all. Surely that was doable. Surely.

“Sweetheart, I don’t want this to be our lives. I don’t want to go

days on end without seeing your face. I don't like sleeping alone. I miss you. Movin' up's the only realistic solution."

"A few weeks. Let's just try it."

Pete grudgingly conceded and we convinced Charlotte, Jimbo's mother, to keep Audrey while Pete was at the office. It was a temporary solution fairly agreeable to all parties.



Though somewhat distracted by the process of onboarding, by Thursday of the following week, I was morose. I launched myself at Pete, wrapping both arms and legs around him. Breathing in his very essence, I kissed him thoroughly, and then Audrey's face until she squealed. The following week was no less painful.

Saddled with longing and bitterness, as January bled into February, I'd become fairly unpleasant at work, yet coming home was providing increasingly less solace as well. Fridays and Saturdays were filled with warmth, but Sundays left me in tears. Pete wasn't any better. We'd ended the last two weekends with arguments about nothing in particular, the heavy cloud above us sparking with energy.

"I thought this would be like going to Quarterlies. I'd miss you, but I'd be so busy with work that I'd survive. It's not, though. Every time I leave, it's like something's tugging on my heart—like a chain on a drain. And I'm afraid one day the plug's going to pop right out. It's getting harder for me to focus on my job because you and Audrey aren't there, and, and...it's killing me," I sobbed.

"It's no better on this end." Pete's eyes swept over me critically; I was down to my premarital weight, though I wasn't working out. Even though my condo was in food mecca, I didn't venture to the restaurants. "You're not takin' care of yourself either." He kissed my head and squeezed me tightly in his arms. "That's gotta change, darlin'."

A shell battered and beaten by the relentless surf, I nursed a gin and tonic while wallowing in self-pity in Atlanta's business lounge.

It was my third. When I trudged into my apartment, I threw my weekend bag against the wall violently. I hated this. I hated it, and I pitied the office staff on whom I'd take out my frustrations tomorrow.

These were not stupid people, and I'd already noticed Monday mornings were museum quiet. No one knocked on my door, and chatter was kept to a minimum. I was Kirsten. I absolutely was. I took Monday to wallow in that revelation as well.

The week actually did fly by less painfully. I was busy preparing for Quarterlies, scouring reports. By Thursday, though, I was grappling for breath, and the pull home was physically painful. Arriving at the airport earlier than necessary, I soon discovered that Atlanta was shut down due to a freak ice storm. Freezing rain in the South constituted a federal emergency for the six-hour period it remained actually frozen. I rolled my eyes.

"Isn't there another connection?" I asked, muscling my way to the front of the long line.

"We're rerouting people as best we can, ya know, but there are only so many planes."

"I'm a diamond medallion member, for heaven's sake. Route me through Canada or something. Just get me home!"

She looked at me and shook her head. I was about to go all gangsta on her when she laughed. "I have one seat on a direct flight to Washington DC. Does that help?"

I pulled up Google maps; a six-hour drive home... "Yes, I'll take it!"



Pete kissed the top of my head and closed my laptop.

"I just needed a few more minutes."

"You said that an hour ago. We're gonna be late for dinner over at Jimbo and Mona's. Why don't you change and we'll go."

I opened the lid on my computer again. "Take Audrey, and I'll meet you there."

“Susan, is work your master, or are you its?”

I looked at him sternly. “I’ll be over soon.”

Pete walked back in the door a short while later, carrying a sleeping Audrey in his arms. “You just left. Is she ill?”

His eyes were piercing. “Mona saved you a piece of cobbler. It’s in the car.”

“You guys ate without me? I told you I’d be over in a little while.”

“Look outside.”

It was pitch black. I glanced at the wall clock. “Holy crap!”

“Yep, that’s what I was thinking.”

“I snatched up the phone and called Mona. “I am so sorry. I’m in the middle of a big project and lost track of time.”

“You’re workin’ too hard.” That’s all she said before disconnecting. I’d barely had time to find the right expletive when she called back. “I’m sorry, Susan, that was rude of me. You want to have lunch tomorrow before ya go? We could meet ya at—”

“I’m taking an early flight out, so I’ll be long gone before lunch. Can I have a raincheck?”

Her voice brightened slightly. “Next weekend. I’ll cook you somethin’ special.”

“I can’t wait.”

I looked up at Pete, whose jaw was literally dangling. “You’re leavin’ early in the morning?”

“Quarterlies are next week. I’m going directly to the office as soon as I land.”

“When were you plannin’ on telling me this?”

“I...well, I just did, I guess,” I replied in a small voice.

He arched a brow. “It wasn’t like this when you took over North Carolina.”

“At first...a little bit. But I already knew my people and the territory.” He gave me a disparaging look, and I pushed my chair back and stood. “It was *exactly* like this in Ohio—worse, even, because I didn’t know the job at all then. I spent every waking hour at work. I

need to do some of that now. These long weekends aren't getting it anymore. I'm losing an entire day of work to travel alone."

"So, it'd be better if ya didn't have to come home at all. Is that what you're saying?"

"I'm not saying that. No! I'm just asking for your patience and understanding. Once I get the district under control, my time will be freed up."

He made a scoffing sound as he headed for the stairs. "I'm goin' to bed."



I landed in Raleigh, thoroughly frazzled and slightly troubled. I'd skipped out as soon as the Quarterlies DM meeting ended. The atmosphere had been off. Something was amiss, though I had no idea what. There'd been no transfers or promotions. In fact, the meeting had only lasted an unprecedented fifteen minutes.

When I made the turn into our driveway, I nearly crashed into the *For Sale* sign prominently displayed beside our mailbox. Our beautiful house, the one into which Pete had poured his full heart, the one that had taken him years to design. A deep chill ran through me, its temperature making Minneapolis seem balmy.

"Don't you want to come up and visit first, to make sure?"

He snorted and rolled his eyes. "Do you really think the looks of the place will stop me from being with my wife?" He kissed Audrey's nose and placed her in my arms as we wandered to the sound's shore. Sweet light bounced off the ever-moving wavelets.

I sighed. "I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this."

His lips turned up in a half-smile. "We shouldn't have let it go on this long."

"I love you."

"You'd better," he replied with a chuckle.

Sunday was so very different. The oppressive emotional cloud above us had fled, the thrill of excitement encasing our little cluster

of three taking its place. Spring now in the South, we looked foolish piling our massive parkas on the seat beside us.

The flight from Raleigh was bittersweet. Pete paid more attention to Audrey than was necessary. It was as if he was hiding from the truth of it all in her bald innocence. His eyes were slightly sad, and I wanted to weep. I grabbed his arm as Atlanta's plane lifted from earth. We stared at each other—just stared; our eyes speaking volumes. Eventually, he squeezed my hand and looked out the window, watching our world fall away.

*Parents Anonymous*

“You’re going to love it. There are parks and lakes everywhere, professional football, basketball, baseball—hockey. We’ll get season tickets to everything. There’s a huge amusement park and a great zoo for Audrey. Minnesota’s ranked fifth in the nation in education, and the restaurants are world class. This city is brimming with life.” I had studied every fact to soften the blow and in many ways to ease my guilt. And I’d repeated this information at least five times already.

What I couldn’t bring myself to say was new home construction was near an all-time low. He’d have to get in with a big firm to survive—if they were even hiring. The thing with Pete though, was he was no dummy. I’m sure he’d already done his own analysis and was keeping quiet for my sake. His personal freedom as an independent business owner was no more.

He offered me a wry smile. “So how long exactly are these lakes actually liquid?”

“Okay, it’s a little chilly, admittedly, but we’ll get used to it. We can adapt. Plus, I got a cherry deal on a snowmobile.”

He pulled me into his arms. “Snowmobile? Now we’re talkin’.”

The elevator pinged to our floor. “Nice hallway,” Pete said, pretending to admire the wallpaper.

I threw open the condo door. “Ta da!”

Pete carried Audrey to the bank of floor-to-ceiling windows. “Would you look at the view?”

“I picked this unit because it faces downtown. We’ll have the city lights to enjoy at night.”

“Very nice. And I’ve never seen so much snow before.” He probably hadn’t. North Carolina, Nashville, Los Angeles; those were sun places. I suddenly realized he probably didn’t even know how to drive in snow. I had handicapped him in more ways than I could count.

Pete wandered the space, making positive comments. My angst waned when he turned to me with a brilliant smile. “It’s our new home.”

“For now,” I said, thinking of the neighborhoods and schools.

“Yeah, for now.”

I came home nightly to a big smile and a wet kiss. We made love like wanton teenagers. We lay naked on the thick carpet in front of the giant windows, gazing at the twinkling city below, making plans, talking—just talking. The feeling of being together again was extraordinary.

I handed him a competently wrapped box—okay, fairly competently wrapped, since I had to do it myself; press-on ribbons are a godsend. He held out his arms, and I settled in his lap. “Crappy birthday, I know.”

“Well, you can’t knock it out of the ballpark every year.” He glanced out the window at the blowing snow. “New venue. That’s something.”

“Unwrap it,” I said, smiling into my wineglass.

He tore open the paper and then raised his eyebrows. “Condoms?”

“Flavored ones!”

“Flavored condoms. Definitely a surprise.”

“This day usually comes with a curse, and I am *not* getting pregnant again.” Smiling brightly, I rummaged through the box and ripped open a purple one. “Let’s party, dude.” Slowly unbuttoning

his shirt, I leisurely kissed down his neck and chest. His head fell back against the chair, and he let out a little moan as I ran my tongue across his washboard stomach, and then began my teasing journey down his happy trail.

“Well, this part I like,” he breathed.



I refused to work late—refused. I needed Pete to know I was committed to our family. That lasted all of two weeks. Work was piling up like the ever-falling snow. Five-thirty turned into six-thirty then to seven-thirty, and finally eight-thirty.

“What did you do today?” I asked, setting my briefcase on the island.

“Walked around the mall.”

“Didn’t you do that yesterday?”

“Yep. And we’re plannin’ on doing it again tomorrow. My girl loves shopping.” He popped a bottle in Audrey’s mouth and looked at me, his smile overzealous.

He’d already taken her to the contemporary art museum, the conservatory, an ice sculpture exhibit, and a cultural festival.

Friday, I brought home NHL tickets and waved them in the air. “Scored front, right behind the glass. I’ve even hired a babysitter from a professional service. We can have an early dinner then drinks after the game. What do you think?”

“Can’t wait,” he said enthusiastically, taking me in his arms and kissing me solidly. “I’ve always wanted to see a professional hockey game.”

Another performance; the guilt was overwhelming. “Stop it! Just stop it!”

“Stop what?”

“Stop pretending everything is just wonderful and you love living here. You’re acting far too happy. You’ve got too many nice things to say. You hate it.”

“No.”

“Admit it. You’re freezing to death. There’s no water. No ocean. I miss the hell out of the beach, and I only lived there two years. You’ve had it your whole life. This has got to be killing you.”

“It’s not.”

“It is!”

He sighed. “Alright, it’s a bit brisk.”

“It’s negative ten outside. It’s cold as hell, Pete. Stop putting a sunny outlook on everything. You don’t have to love all this. I know I don’t. But for me, I’ve got an office, the comfort of a work I know well. I have purpose and a reason to jump out of bed in the morning. You don’t—”

“Audrey’s my reason,” he snapped. “And you—when I get to see you, that is.”

I contacted Trisha and stacked the next few weekends with open house visits. Pete needed a mission, a *raison d’être* other than entertaining Audrey, who could no more appreciate the things he was showing her than a newborn kitten. He feigned interest, asking her lots of questions, though I couldn’t imagine any of the cookie-cutter houses interested him in the slightest.

Slowly, Pete dropped his mask. He was clearly miserable, and I felt both responsible and helpless. It became increasingly difficult to meet his disapproving looks when I crept home late. Meetings ran over, travel took me away for overnights. I was beginning to hate myself.

I clearly remember the day I bought my first roll of Tums from the ground floor kiosk. Unpleasant memories flooded my brain as the flavor hit my tongue. The *petit vendor* and I became fast friends over the next few weeks. While not the black cloud of despair surrounding me when I lived in Columbus, a gray fog of disappointment and frustration swathed me, and I found myself increasingly less driven to hurry home to the man who meant everything to me.

It was nearly midnight when I slipped under the covers. Deeply

sleeping, Audrey's cherub face was filled with a peace I'd never know again. I'd watched her for nearly a half hour, shocked by the changes I hadn't noticed; she was growing so fast. When I kissed her forehead, her brow furrowed slightly. That expression palely matched the one staring back at me from the bathroom mirror: scrunched brows, frowning face. The old me.

Pete rolled over and brushed my hip.

"Hi," I whispered.

"Hey." His voice wasn't groggy in the slightest. Rather, it was tense; he'd been waiting. "You missed a nice supper."

"I'm sorry. My meeting ran late, and then I had some emails to send."

He exhaled audibly and propped up on one elbow. His furrowed brow matched mine; we were a set. *Wonderful.*

"We moved up here to live as a family, and because I couldn't stand bein' away from you. I thought you felt the same, but nothin's changed. And lately, it hasn't been just you climbin' into bed with me. Work gets you all day. I will not share you with it at night." He slipped from the covers, snatched up his pillow, and left the room.

I lay on that cold mattress for nearly an hour, remembering a time when my bed was always cold, remembering when I'd awoken to a pillow drenched with tears, my chest leaden with sorrow, desperate for the feel of Pete's arms.

My phone pinged: a reply to an email I'd sent two hours ago. Sitting up, I switched on the light and scanned it. The bedroom door opened, and Pete walked back in, carrying his pillow. His rueful expression morphed into indignation.

"Seriously?!"

"Pete, wait!" He slammed the door behind him. Audrey's high pitched cry sounded like a siren. I raced into her room. She was already in his arms, and he was apologizing for waking her in the sweetest and most lulling tone. "I'll take her," I said.

He glared at me. "Fine. You're up anyway." He gently placed her

in my arms, turned on his heels, and stalked back into our bedroom. Returning seconds later, he tossed my phone into Audrey's crib.

"I'm sure you're gonna need this," he sneered.

After a wicked game of peek-a-boo, Audrey and I had a good long talk about men, priorities, and responsibilities to one's self and one's family. She made some good points, but in the end, I turned a deaf ear. Just as I laid her sleeping form back into her crib, my phone pinged again. Four a.m. Who was awake at this hour? Then I snorted. This was INTech. I quickly typed a response.

My gloved hand was on the doorknob when Pete staggered into the kitchen. I gave him a quick peck, but before I could turn, he pulled me against his chest and inhaled deeply. "I love you more than anything in the world. I hope you know that."

"I love you, too," I choked out. My tears beat me to the garage.

I promised myself a shorter day. In fact, I was bundled up with briefcase in hand at five sharp when Jacob walked into my office, carrying a stack of papers. "You're leaving?" He glanced at his watch. "Are you ill?"

"It's our anniversary. We have plans."

"I keep forgetting you're married." He ran his eyes over the black and white image of Pete, leaning against the Oceana pier railing, wearing one of his killer smiles. I'd hung the large canvas opposite my desk my very first day.

He smiled salaciously. "He is so hot."

"He is so mine, thank you very much."

"If things change between you two..." He raised his brows suggestively.

"He's also extremely straight."

His full lips puckered in a mock pout. "Things aren't always as they appear."

I snorted. "What do you need?"

"Could you sign off on these papers? They've got to be couriered to legal."

"Can't it wait until morning?"

“No. They want original copies by midnight.” He rolled his eyes. “Lawyers. My ex- is one.”

I sighed. “Give them to me.”

I called Pete. “I have a work emergency. I’ll meet you at the restaurant at six-fifteen, okay?” I’d booked reservations at *Capital Grill*, hired a professional babysitter, and made arrangements for Champagne to be waiting at our table. “I’ll probably beat you there.”

Sounding less enthusiastic than I’d hoped, he said, “Okay.”

Because I realized I needed to thoroughly read through the verbiage, and then make corrections, and then review the new copy before signing off, the process took a bit longer than I’d planned. It was nine when I scribbled my name on the dotted line. I’d called Pete twice, but he hadn’t picked up. I’d called the restaurant and was told he’d left nearly two hours ago. I called a priest next to have the evil spirit plaguing me exorcised.

Walking into our darkened apartment, I groaned. A scribbled note lay on the counter.

*Out.*

“Well, I can see that,” I snarked at the emptiness.

I slammed my laptop shut and hopped up when I heard the sound of Pete’s voice singing off-key as he jiggled the lock. I was still taken aback by the sight of him in a knit hat, scarf, and down coat. With snow peppering his head and shoulders, he looked like a friggin’ North Face model. I’d like to say his face lit up when he saw me; I’d like to say that. Unfortunately, I couldn’t.

Other than meeting my eyes for a long moment, he walked past me and into Audrey’s room; his singing now sounded forced.

“Dinner was great. Especially the champagne. The flowers were a little over the top, though.”

“Pete—”

“Would’ve been better with my wife across the table. Anniversaries usually are, ya know.”

There was a long, empty pause. Pete fell into his recliner and picked up the remote. Channel surfing, he eventually settled on one

of those stupid HGTV home makeover shows. I wondered if he was missing work as much as I had during those long weeks of bedrest.

“Have you heard back from any of the firms, yet?” He’d applied to all six in the greater Minneapolis area.

“Yeah. Two.”

“No luck?”

“I have interviews with both.”

“That’s fantastic! Did they call today?”

“Earlier in the week.”

“Why didn’t you—” He shut me down with a look that could freeze lava. “When do you go in?” I asked quietly after the program’s would-be homebuyers/underpaid actors had left the third overly priced hovel.

“Tuesday for the first, Friday for the second. You’ll have to take Audrey to work with you.”

“I can’t do that,” I blurted out. “I have meetings all day.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You’re the boss, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then you can take her.” He continued focusing on the screen, his jaw muscles clenching.

I nodded. “Fine. No problem.”

As he changed the channel to a house flipping show, a smile crept across his profile like a spider. He’d won an argument I never intended entering. I hurried into the bedroom and quickly changed into the sexy black lingerie I’d ordered.

Returning to the living room, I draped myself against the doorjamb provocatively. “Come to bed,” I whispered. “It’s our anniversary. I have big plans for you.”

He glanced at me then back at the TV screen. “No, I want to watch this. I’ll turn in after a while.”

I’d never felt more neglected—or ridiculous. I was being punished, and I couldn’t hide the hurt in my voice. “Oh. Okay. Well...goodnight?”

“Night,” he replied absently.

After stuffing the \$200 lingerie in the garbage, I donned a pair of raggedy PJs and curled into a ball. I was back in Columbus again, only the man I loved was right outside the door; right there within reach; right there wanting me to be his wife, losing faith in me by the moment. There was little to do but cry.

I did wake when he climbed into bed. I was grateful he'd chosen ours rather than the guestroom's.

"This will get better, I promise," I whispered.

"I'm wonderin' if we'll see each other at all when I start working."

"We'll have weekends." I regretted those words even as they left my lips. "I mean—"

He exhaled sharply then put his back between us. I did the same.

*Airport Bombing*

Pete met me at the door, his face drawn. He took a bundled-up-to-her-nose Audrey from my arms and the large bag of Indian take-out sloshing against my briefcase.

“Oh Pete, there’ll be other jobs. This was just your first interview. Give it time.”

His chuckle was void of humor. “No, I got the job. Made me a damn nice offer, too.”

“That’s fantastic! Let’s pop open a bottle of champagne.” He shook his head. When he set the food on the island, I noticed the open bottle of whiskey and half-empty glass. “I know it’s not what you want, but—”

He sighed mightily. “The job’ll be fine. It’s just...someone’s made an offer on the house. A good one.”

We’d spent the last couple of weekends house hunting with a vengeance. The ice was thawing, and we were now able to identify the surrounding lakes. I’d spent time playing with Audrey and made a concerted effort not to go into the office as an olive branch of sorts. Admittedly, my laptop and I had enjoyed some quality bathroom time, but that didn’t really count.

“The one we liked?” I fished out my phone and scrolled through the contacts. “I’ll call Trisha. We’ll just outbid them.”

He shook his head. “No, sweetheart. *Our* house.”

A small yelp escaped my lips, my vision instantly blurring as I slumped onto the couch. It was our stronghold, our North Carolina anchor; Pete’s lifeline. Mine, too, in all truth. “I didn’t think it—can’t we keep it? I mean, you know, rent it out?”

He smiled weakly. “We’ve already had this conversation. Face facts. Even with my new job, we can’t afford two mortgages. Two *big* mortgages. No one’ll pay what we’d need to break even. Especially on the sound side. Were it on the beach, maybe. But it’s not. It’s our *home*. Or was,” he muttered. The flash of resentment quickly fled his eyes, but its heat left my insides charred. Suddenly his defeated expression transformed into resolve. “This is what we signed up for, Susan. We’ll take the offer.”

We sat in silence on opposite ends of the couch, separated by a great wedge of sorrow. If Audrey and I were his first loves, that plot of soil and shoreline came in a close second. Suddenly he stood. “I’m gonna take a walk.” He pulled me to my feet and kissed my hands. “I want you to know that I love you with my whole heart.” And with that, he left.

I took the next few moments to quietly sob. The door opened again, and Pete reached around the jamb to snag his parka from the coat rack.

He chuckled. “It’s damn cold outside.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“You’ve got nothin’ to be sorry about. We’re adults who’ve made adult decisions. This is our present. Call the realtor and buy that house ya like.” His smile didn’t come close to reaching his eyes, but he’d made a valiant effort. I did the same.

Nearly two hours elapsed before his return. He set a growler from the nearby microbrewery on the island and got out a tall glass. “I imagine you need a drink as much as I did.”

I responded by putting the whole damn jug to my lips. “Take me to bed. I need to hold you,” I said.

We made love, a feeling I’d nearly forgotten. It wasn’t wild and

overwhelming, or even playful, but it was terribly sincere and wholly tender. We held one another until the alarm went off.



“Hey, Susan!” Mona chirped, her voice a warm ocean breeze blowing into my ear. I’d missed several calls from her, and I’d been so busy prepping for Quarterlies I hadn’t returned them.

“You’re never gonna believe what happened!”

“Tell me.”

“Jayne and Joe Pat are gettin’ married!”

“What?”

“He proposed to her in the bar a couple nights ago in front of everyone, and she said yes! I’ve never seen him so happy.”

I knew they’d gotten close, but married? “Have they set a date?” I’d so love an excuse to go home.

“Well, that’s the most excitin’ part. I dropped by work on my way back from Raleigh, yesterday, and she was gone.”

“So?”

“So, Kirsten was cussin’ up a storm, sayin’ she’d run off to Mexico, and how dare she leave, and a lot of other things that didn’t make any sense.”

“Well, it is right before Quarterlies.”

“That’s true. But she seemed right distraught, which surprised me. I never thought they were close, ya know?”

“Me either.”

“When she started throwin’ things against the wall, I thought it best to leave.”

“I wonder why Jayne didn’t just wait until next week to take a vacation.”

“Isn’t it clear as day? They’ve eloped!”

“Eloped? That’s crazy!”

“I know! And so romantic. Everybody’s talkin’ about it. But enough of that. When’s my precious angel comin’ down?”

“Sunday. You won’t even recognize her. She’s near crawling.”

Mona squealed. “I’ve missed her somethin’ terrible—all of you. It’s just not the same here without you.”

“We miss you, too.” Especially Pete, I thought dismally.



I’m ashamed to admit it, but I was looking forward to a week away from Pete and the suffocation of our apartment. The valley of what was not being said was growing wider and deeper by the day. Though I was miserably failing at home, work was going extremely well. I had a beautiful report to present. Dropping *The Beast* in an offsite commercial lot, we were shuttled to the airport. Lost in our own thoughts, the ride was a quiet one.

After security, Pete carefully tucked Audrey back into the Bjorn front-loader. I helped refasten the harness around his broad shoulders, and she snuggled into his chest, the pacifier lazily escaping her rosebud lips. We rode the escalator to the underground train. Packed to capacity, we were sandwiched together. His scent never failed to arouse me, and I realized with a shock that I hadn’t been close enough lately to even notice.

“I’ll miss you,” I said, becoming momentarily lost in the beauty of his profile, his soft lips, his perfectly straight nose.

Pete placed a protective hand on Audrey’s head as the train hurtled to a stop. He then met my eyes. There was love there, but a mishmash of other emotions as well. “I’ll miss you, too,” he replied quite soberly. I looked at him questioningly as we were forcibly spat from the train’s belly. We negotiated through the heavy and bustling crowd, getting separated twice before finding each other on the escalator.

“Where are all these people coming from?” I exclaimed.

“Holiday,” he responded, cocking a brow. Memorial Day typically piggy-backed May Quarterlies. I’d been so busy, I’d forgotten unimportant things, like what the rest of America was doing.

“Oh, right. I suppose Anita will be throwing her annual party.” I could only imagine the ridicule I’d receive if I showed up at that gathering. “Give her my love.”

He nodded, dragging the empty stroller and his carry-on across the atrium area. A gray sky showered the glass ceiling with random bursts of snow and rain, bathing us in its dismal glow.

My flight was leaving from Concourse B and his from C. When we reached the divide, I smiled. “Well, I’ll see you next week.”

He exhaled sharply and met my eyes. “I’m thinking Audrey and I are gonna stay in North Carolina for a bit.”

The hair instantly raised on the back of my neck. “Define ‘bit.’”

“Everybody misses Audrey terribly, and I—” He exhaled again as though breathing was becoming difficult for him. “Susan, you and I both know your heart belongs to your job right now. You promised things would let up, and I wanted to believe it, but they haven’t. You’ll be a week in Philadelphia—”

“Five days,” I corrected.

He nodded. “Okay, five days. And then you’ll be playin’ catch-up the next two weeks. We won’t see ya then either, I expect.” He glanced at the carpet. “Right now, you just don’t need us around.”

“I do—”

“No, sweetheart, ya really don’t.”

“How long?” I demanded, my fear escalating.

“I don’t know. A few weeks or so. Maybe a month.”

“A *month*?! What about your new job? You’re supposed to start next—”

“It can wait.”

“Pete, jobs don’t wait.”

He glanced at a group of Asian girls with no fashion sense whatever. They gawked at him and giggled as they passed. “It either will, or it won’t.”

“What does that mean? You can’t stay unemployed. It will eat away at your insides. It already has.”

“I still own my business.” He smiled anemically. “I’ll find somethin’ to do.”

My stomach dropped below sea level, and goosebumps skidded across my skin as sheer horror seized me. “Pete, are you leaving me?”

His upper lip disappeared. *Oh God!* Finally he said, “No, I’m not leavin’ ya. I just need a break from all this.”

“From all what? Our life?”

He shrugged slightly.

“You don’t take breaks from marriages!” I choked out, my voice raising a full octave. “Are you asking for a separation?” Those within earshot dropped their heads and quickly moved past.

“This isn’t really the place for that conversation,” Pete murmured.

“Excuse me, but you chose to drop this bomb in the middle of the airport!” I shouted.

Suddenly, everyone stopped in their tracks and stared at us through terror-filled eyes. *Oh for fuck’s sake, Homeland Security was going to arrest me!* “I mean, *concept!* Drop this *concept!*” I said very loudly. I then turned back and glared at him. “We could have rationally discussed this at home.”

A sardonic smirk made a brief appearance. “I doubt it would’ve been rational.”

“So you chose a crowd for your own protection? Coward!” I hissed.

“I’ve barely been able to get your attention the past few weeks. When do you think would’ve been a better time? Three in the mornin’? I mean, that would’ve cut in on your emailin’?”

I was sincerely shocked. Pete didn’t run from anything, especially a fight. I looked at the stranger in front of me. “You’re not the man I married.”

He sighed. “And you’re not the woman *I* married. The Susan I knew gave us—*me*—nearly everything she had. Her love, her passion, her time. When you were in North Carolina, your heart wasn’t divided. Now it is, and we’re gettin’ the smaller portion. And I’m afraid it’ll shrink up even more with time, until there’s nothin’ left

but me, Audrey, and a woman who occasionally drops by the house to change suits. This isn't the way I want to live. It's not fair to Audrey, and honestly, it's not fair to me."

"It won't. God, Pete, how can you say that? Things are already getting better. I was home early on Friday, and Saturday—" He looked at me pointedly. "Okay, Saturday I had to go in, true, but it was only to finish my presentations. That's normal for Quarterlies. You know that."

"I don't want you to stop workin'. I'd never ask that of you. I just think your priorities have changed. I moved up here to be with you. I didn't move up to be by myself." He gently rubbed Audrey's back as if to say that comment wasn't directed at her. "We can go back to commuting, if you want. You can work from here, and I can stay in the South, even if it means bein' alone most of the time. At least I'll be home."

"Is that it? You'll stay with me as long as we live in the South?"

"Sweetheart, you didn't hear a damn word I just said."

"I heard it, and all of what you didn't say." Cold tears spilled down my cheeks. "Don't you love me anymore?" He quickly pulled me into his arms, careful not to squish Audrey's sleeping form, and kissed the top of my head.

"I will love you 'til the day I die," he whispered.

"But you don't want to live with me." I pulled back and met his eyes, my voice strangling on the words.

"Let's both just think about things and talk later."

"When? In counseling? In court?" Then it hit me like a speeding wall. "You aren't selling the house, are you?"

He appeared lost for a moment. "Susan, I'm still working through all this. I just need some time to think. Some time to—"

I gasped. "You're not coming back at all, are you? You're taking our daughter and you're not coming back!"

His shoulders dropped. He looked down at Audrey's head then towards his concourse. "They'll be callin' our plane soon. We should head on down there."

“You can’t casually tell me you’re leaving me in a stupid airport, and then just walk away.”

“I told you I wasn’t leavin’ you!” he growled.

“You did. You just did!” I seethed. “You swore in your wedding vows, and again during our honeymoon. You said you’d never leave me. You swore it before God, our friends, and our families. I was there!”

Gritting his teeth, he looked at me coldly for a moment. “We’re not leavin’ *you*, Susan. You’re leavin’ us.”

Dashing away tears with the back of my hand, I said, “Fuck you, Pete. *Fuck. You!*” I turned on my heels and jerked the handle of my rolling bag, stumbling over a bump in the carpet that wasn’t there. Before I was swallowed by my terminal’s entrance, I glanced back, and our eyes met. Pain and pain and pain.

I wanted to run back to that beautiful and injured person across the corridor, beg him to stay, to understand, but Quarterlies tugged me in the opposite direction. I repositioned my briefcase. It was an appendage, and always had been. The gold band gleaming on my finger...now, that was new. I stared at them both for a moment, frozen with uncertainty. My boarding call sounded.

Surely we could work out our problems after Quarterlies. I was an INTech district manager for goodness sakes; I couldn’t just not show up. I stepped towards my gate, and then looked back once more.

The saddest expression I’d ever seen drowned Pete’s features. *I’ll always love you*, he mouthed.

Too stunned to reply, I simply stared at him. After a long moment, he turned and walked away, my heart crumbling with every step he took.

*Shakedown*

In line to board, I curled inside myself, aching as though I'd been stabbed...then I was lying on a soft bed, Philadelphia's downtown lights a twinkling blur.

Fully in my head, Monday, I drifted from meeting to meeting. It seemed that's all I did anymore; attend meetings. I longed for an earlier era when training seminars consumed my time, and I actually learned something, broadened my knowledge, embraced the challenges of cutting-edge computer technology. No longer. I just listened, scribbled, nodded, and pretended I cared. All I could think about was Pete: his pained expression, my shredded soul, our disintegrating marriage.

The next morning, after swallowing a yogurt and a fistful of Tums, I headed to my first—*you got it!*—meeting. At least in this one, I actually got to do something. My eyes swept over the faces of the anxious service reps and confident district managers poised to impress one another with their amazing piles of bullshit. Lifting the pitchfork, I began shoveling mine on the heap. During my closing remarks, it struck me that more than a handful of seats were empty. *Odd.* There were meetings you could skip with little backlash; this was not one of them.

Of course, one of my favorite faces, Reeves', was long gone. I

wanted to cry for him and the others—my others—who'd been ruthlessly sacrificed in the name of evil. I seated myself between Jeremy and Beth; supporting walls that held me upright.

"Where is everyone?" I whispered.

"I honestly don't know, but it's weird," Jeremy replied.

"Really weird," Beth interjected.

A mystery not interesting enough to keep my attention, my mind drifted back to the fissure in my marriage. Was this to be our lives: brilliant fits of joy separated by grand swaths of desolation? Was this the best we could do, Pete and I? With each career step forward, our relationship took two steps backwards. With the exception of passing Audrey between us during court-mandated visitations, it would soon be as though we'd never met.

After Art Campbell, Oklahoma's DM, spoke, Beelzebub's wife took the stage. The ruby ring Frank Calvin had given her bathed the large screen behind her in blood, and I wondered for the hundredth time why Frank had allowed her to leave. He'd had her exactly where he'd wanted her: frozen and under his crushing thumb. My hatred, a similar shade to her ring, was trained like a laser on her unnaturally smooth forehead.

"I truly loathe that bitch," I breathed.

"At least *you* don't have to work with her anymore. Thanks for that, by the way." It was meant as a harmless joke, but it hurt; she'd taken everything from me. My hand curled into a fist, and I bit down on my quivering lip.

"Hey," Jeremy whispered, touching my arm. "Did I say something wrong?"

I inhaled deeply to center myself. "No. I've just got some personal stuff going on." At his questioning gaze, I added, "With my husband."

"You've had to move your family to Minnesota, haven't you?"

I nodded.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think. That must be hard."

“Wait until you’re married,” I said with a dark chuckle. “Life gets so much more complicated.”

“I’ll bear that in mind. Liza and I are engaged, by the way,” he whispered, his smile unstoppable. I glanced at the back of her head. With hair that reflected the vague light like polished onyx, high cheekbones, and a beautiful figure, she was truly a lovely young woman, and I was happy for them.

When I heard “Mona Skarren”, Kirsten earned my full attention. While merrily dragging her name through the dirt, blaming her for the district’s massive profit drops, my rumbling volcano shot great clouds of smoking soot into the air. *Holy shit, she’s trying to get Mona fired!* My nails dug viciously into my thighs, and my teeth ground together like gristmill stones.

“Liar!” I hissed, jumping to my feet.

Her eyes shot to mine. “Excuse me?”

“I said you’re lying. Mona could easily run the district without your interference. You want her gone out of spite. You’re despicable,” I shouted.

“Don’t you dare speak to me—”

Before she could fire her familiar stockpile of insults at me, the door flew open and the overhead lights were flipped on, their brilliance nearly blinding me. At first, a wave of confusion washed over us all, but then our eyes latched onto the group of black-clad men rushing in. Two, whose jackets prominently displayed the letters *FBI*, roughly pressed Kirsten against the podium, her boobs nearly popping from her blouse.

“Kirsten Scythe, you’re under arrest for embezzlement and fraud. You have the right to remain silent...”

We stared dumbly at the shocking sight of Kirsten being hauled away in handcuffs, all the while screaming, “It wasn’t me,” over and over like a witch’s chant. She glared at Bob and Frank, who’d materialized at the door.

Our bosses conferred with one of the agents, and then Bob turned suddenly and barked, “Put your goddamned phones away for

Christ's sake!" Those who'd had the presence of mind to video the incident pocketed them immediately. "This meeting will resume at"—he looked at his watch—"three o'clock. *Sharp.*"

After upper management exited, several seconds of shocked silence passed before pandemonium broke loose as if a terrorist attack had just been thwarted, and we'd all miraculously survived. Before I could get my "Kirsten's going to jail" happy dance on, a fully grimacing Bob Shillings reappeared in the doorway again. He pegged me with his principal's glare and growled, "Susan Walsh. Come!" *Holy shit!*

Wide-eyed, I scampered out the door behind him. Frank's eyes met mine in the hallway, his expression hinting intrigue.



INTech's internal security force, an urban legend, was rumored to be peopled with former government operatives, who'd found working in the private sector far more lucrative. My company lived under constant threat of corporate espionage, as did every consumer product superpower. We were also rumored to employ an arsenal of top lawyers, who, with pen and persuasion, warred with foes across the globe over patent infringements. Though very far removed from these worlds, I imagined computer ninjas turning summersaults through laser tripping devices to steal secret documents hidden behind spotlight vault doors. *Yes, I watched too much television.*

Today, I had the distinct displeasure of discovering our security force was both very real and truly very scary. It was also the day I met my first real FBI agent.

"How long have you known Kirsten Scythe?" The INTech security officer asked. He was stocky with cropped hair and sharp blue eyes. He also had a British accent, which would have been really cool had he not been pelting me with its crisp syllables.

"Um, years." The FBI agent, who hadn't bothered introducing

himself, stared at me analytically. I wasn't bound to a chair with a lightbulb swinging above my head, but I felt equally helpless.

"You two were close?"

"For a time."

"You're not now?"

"No. We hate each other." The FBI agent cocked his head slightly. "Look, whatever Kirsten's done has nothing to do with me. And why is the FBI here, anyway?" I asked, eyeing him suspiciously. "Did she kill somebody?" The agent's lips twitched.

"We've been aware of financial skimming activities for some time. Because thefts have occurred in multiple states, the offenses are federal. *That is why the FBI has become involved,*" the security officer replied snottily.

"Okay. But why am I here?"

"Based on personal associations and your movement in and out of targeted areas, most recently North Carolina, you've become a person of interest."

I froze, my fear escalating. "Am I being arrested?"

Ignoring my question, he continued. "Over time, though locations have shifted frequently, a pattern has emerged: larceny rising at fiscal year onset then tapering off in the third quarter. For a brief period, all activity ceased. When it resumed last January, the location had shifted. This time to North Carolina."

"According to your personal bank records, you spent significant sums of money last year," the FBI agent interjected.

"I got married. Do you have any idea how much weddings cost?!"

The FBI agent's lips quirked. "Unfortunately, I do." He looked to be about my mother's age, and I wondered if he'd recently suffered through a daughter's wedding. His eyes softened, and I relaxed a bit, deciding he was probably a nice guy just doing his job. He then said, "You also purchased an expensive car."

"No, my domineering husband did after I got pregnant," I growled. "People buy cars. So what?"

The INTech guy cut in. "This past November, we had a

breakthrough when the pattern deviated from its norm during fourth quarter, and funds continued disappearing. Since this year's fiscal commencement, activity has nearly doubled, isolated solely in North Carolina."

"I've been in Minnesota since January. I would think that means I'm not involved."

"It would appear so." His smile was icy, and his tone nowhere near mollifying. "Describe your relationship with Jayne Balbach."

"Jayne?"

"According to our records, you hired her as your personal secretary shortly before the illegal activity resumed."

"My former secretary resigned, and I hired Jayne to replace her."

"What were her duties?"

"The usual, I suppose. She answered calls, ran my calendar, booked travel, and managed the office budget."

"And you didn't notice anything amiss?"

"Look, last year my personal life was a mess. I spent the winter running the district and planning my wedding, then I became pregnant, then I was put on mandatory bedrest. That's when Kirsten took over. Jayne is a twenty-year INTech veteran. She's managed budgets far larger and more intricate than mine. I trusted her judgment. I still would."

"She's been implicated," the INTech guy said, boring a hole into my forehead.

I balked. "Jayne can't be involved!"

"And why is that?"

"She's just so nice." The FBI agent snorted and rolled his eyes.

"You're friends then?"

"Yes. She came to my wedding, and we used to hang out at the same bar."

"She's currently missing. We have reason to believe she's fled the country," the FBI agent said, crossing his arms.

I laughed. "She didn't flee the country. She eloped with a dear friend of mine."

The two men glanced at one another, and then stared at me. “Where?” They asked in unison.

“Mexico.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Walsh. You’ve been very helpful.”

“So, I’m not being arrested?”

“No. You’re free to go,” our security guy said. He shook my hand and ushered me to the door.

“But Mrs. Walsh,” The FBI agent said, narrowing his eyes. “If you discuss this matter with anyone, including your husband, you *will* be.”

*That was the moment I wet myself.*

*The Reaper Wears Ralph Lauren*

That night I paced in my hotel room, my thoughts chasing one another like squirrels during mating season. I didn't believe Jayne was guilty. We'd worked together; she was a decent person. If Kirsten was trying to frame someone, Mona and Gene might soon find themselves staring dumbly at an FBI agent as well. And if I forewarned them, I would be arrested! I quaked at the thought.

I ached to call Pete—ached to hear his comforting voice, ached to feel his strong arms around me. He was my solace, my strength, my safe place, and I realized in that moment that I could not lose him.

At three a.m., I sat bolt upright in bed. The solution was so simple: Kirsten had been arrested, therefore North Carolina needed a new leader! I threw on clothes and hailed a cab.

I'd had every intention of camping out in front of Bob's office until he arrived. Imagine my surprise when I found his door wide open. At a dead run, I burst in without so much as a knock.

"I want North Carolina back."

As if nothing could faze him at this point, he simply glanced at his watch. "I'm surprised it took you this long."

Though slightly shocked by his response, I pressed on. "Look, I know the Kirsten thing is paramount to you at the moment, but—"

"That investigation's been ongoing for years." He waved his hand

as if shooing away a fly. “Right now, I’ve got more important things to worry about than a couple of sticky-fingered employees.”

He leaned back in his chair and cast his tired eyes towards the ceiling, the world’s very weight on his shoulders. I realized he looked absolutely wretched.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He chuckled sourly. “Sometimes, I hate this job.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Our stock’s down.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.” I monitored its value daily, anxiously watching my pot of gold, the sum stored for my—*our*—retirement, slowly bleed away.

“To make our investors happy, the board has mandated major budgets cuts.”

“Okay, I’m willing to work with less.”

He shook his head. “You’re missing the point. Cutting budgets means cutting jobs. We’re shaving personnel by thirty percent. Losses will be greatest among middle management.”

Let me tell you, if foreboding was a tangible object, I would have been holding it in my arms right then. “You’re letting DMs go?” I thought of the faces I knew so well: my colleagues and my friends. Suddenly my heart stopped beating entirely. “Are you letting *me* go?”

“You’re one of Frank’s people now.”

A violent tremor ran through me. “Is *Frank* letting me go?”

He smiled weakly and shook his head no. “Cashed in a favor.”

Nearly overwhelmed with gratitude, I wanted to throw my arms around his neck. But then I realized my personal problems had not been resolved. “If Frank’s not firing me, why can’t I have North Carolina back—become one of *your* people again?”

“That’s not an option.”

“Why? Why is that not an option? You’re a senior VP. You can do anything!” I suddenly lacked sympathy for his condition. I would give him a fucking heart attack if it meant getting my family whole

and back to North Carolina again. I'd pay any price to ransom my marriage.

"That district no longer exists. To stretch resources, we're consolidating North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee into a single business unit. Once the merger's complete, redundancies will be eliminated."

"But—"

"Wall Street's been demanding larger profit margins for some time. We've just been ignoring them. We can't afford to any longer." He shook his head dejectedly and met my eyes. "We're going to lose some fine people."

As his words sunk in, pure panic accosted me. "What about Mona Skarren? Will she lose her job?"

He actually sighed—a sound I'd never imagined him making. "Susan, focus on your own position."

"But—"

"It's been a pleasure working with you."

"Bob—?"

"Shut the door on your way out."

I choked out a sob and tore down the hall, launching myself into the greedy mouth of an open elevator. I'd never envisioned this happening. INTech was the top computer company in the world—king of the heap. We were infallible, impermeable, indestructible. No one told us what to do. And with North Carolina completely off the table..? *Oh Pete!*



Frank stood when I entered his palatial office. Numbed by fear and defeat, I'd walked the same city block for hours, circling the idol to which I'd pledged my life. It glimmered in the rising sun, a gold-plated Fort Knox, though now I knew differently.

"And here I thought we were friends," he said, his voice silkily deceptive. I gulped audibly. Crossing my boss—this smooth, yet

ruthless man who held my very future in his manicured hands, was career suicide. Bob had been a benefactor, and perhaps was still so. Frank had been my sovereign for only a few short months; he owed me nothing.

“It’s just...my husband. Moving has been a strain on us.”

Shaking his head ruefully, he offered a sympathetic smile. “My first wife didn’t appreciate the importance of my career, either. Sometimes sacrifices are necessary. In the end, it comes down to priorities. Next round, consider marrying within the company. It will make your life easier. Trust me.”

I couldn’t breathe. Divorce Pete for my career? Bile scorched my throat at the mere thought. While coaxing it back into my stomach, I considered Frank’s romantic past as I understood it. I knew nothing of his first wife; only the second, whom Kirsten had knocked out of orbit. Kirsten possessed powers few men could resist. I’d always assumed Frank was another helpless victim, another sturdy tree felled by her poisoned axe. Though the truth, what I’d chosen to ignore was this: no matter how persuasive and alluring one is, it takes two to cross the line from colleagues to lovers. I glanced at the thick gold band garnishing his left hand and paled.

“The North Carolina spot. Bob explained why you can’t have it?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“That’s one of the reasons we placed Kirsten there. I had far more exciting plans for her, but your unexpected medical leave robbed me of them.” He raised an eyebrow as if the decision to save my child’s life had somehow inconvenienced him. And for one ghastly moment, I felt compelled to apologize.

“I would have enjoyed watching Bob publicly fire her, but arrested for embezzlement?” Carnal gratification painted his features as he leaned back in his chair, cradling his head. “Beautiful!” His laughter was both charming and sinister; an odd pairing that sent shivers down my spine.

“If necessary, you’ll be expected to testify in regards to your personal relationship with her...as will I.” Through his wall of

windows, he appeared to admire the glass and metal landscape, though the tick in his jaw suggested otherwise. “Her games have fooled so many.”

After a moment, he swiveled back and met my eyes. “You shouldn’t have any problems...unless you were aware of her activities.” He arched an eyebrow in question, and I shook my head vehemently. “Good.” He picked up a Mont Blanc pen and gracefully maneuvered it through his fingers in a serpentine pattern. “A word of advice: if you are lying to me, please continue to do so. Deniability is a valuable commodity.”

“I have no reason to, Frank.”

He nodded, a smile lurking in his chiseled features. “Our legal department will thoroughly prepare you for trial and *assist* you should you need it. They’re the best money can buy.”

My veins froze solid at his implication. Finally, I gathered my wits and returned to a less scary topic. “I’m still confused about Minnesota. Had I not been forced to take leave, would I have lost my job?”

“Don’t you find chess an interesting game? The way pieces move around the board—the paths they take? Often pawns are discarded for a greater advantage, but once in a great while, with the right ally, a pawn becomes a queen.” I didn’t understand. Perhaps gleaning that from my expression, he laughed. “Susan, you’re a model employee—an INTech masterpiece, really.” He smiled appreciatively. “I’ve been interested in acquiring you for some time. Ambition draws me.

“The reorganizational plan affects all districts,” he continued. I nodded vaguely, flailing in my personal maelstrom. “One of those consolidations involves you. Minnesota is merging with North and South Dakota.” You’ll be running that unit.”

I coughed to hide my amazement. Surely there were more deserving managers, though I’d be a fool to point that out.

“If you don’t deviate from your present course,” he said, “you could easily advance to vice president in the next five years. You’re

becoming a very powerful woman.” He once again stared out the window, absently manipulating his pen. “Potentially the first female officer of the company one day.”

I quietly gasped. He was offering me the keys to heaven—the very keys. Riches on the other side in denominations of gold and power, the desire for which I thought I’d buried. But vanity is something rarely buried deeply. Need unfurled inside me like a heavily petalled-flower. I wanted this more than I’d ever realized; I craved these common things.

Earning a vice president slot had been my ultimate goal: the culmination of a lifetime of sacrifice. An officer, though? Mere mortals could only dream of running a multi-gazillion dollar company like INTech. I would grace the cover of *Forbes*. I would use private jets for travel. I could barely make my features work.

“Budgets are frozen at the moment, but once the culling process is complete, funds will be freed for the raises, bonuses, and the lucrative option packages accompanying your promotion. You’ll be rewarded in ways no other company could offer; none would ever pay you to the extent we will, or value you so highly.” He inclined his head towards me. “We call these ‘the golden handcuffs’: incentives for loyalty.” He absently rubbed his wrist. “I promise you’ll enjoy their feel.”

His stunningly expensive suit, his expansive office, his unguarded arrogance... In a position like his, I could buy Pete a yacht, a massive beach house, anything his heart desired. Though we would inevitably move again, it would be to Philadelphia, the city I loved—one with an excellent school system and a renowned children’s hospital; important things. Further, the promise of substantial financial gain would certainly soften the blow of my increased absences. The problem, I realized quite suddenly, was that Pete didn’t want any of those things; he never had. All he truly desired was for our family to be together—*really* together.

I heard a faint beep. Frank glanced at his watch. “Work never ends for our kind. You’ll have to excuse me, I have unpleasant meetings

to attend.” He shook my hand, his sultry Giorgio cologne swirling around me like silk ribbons. “Congratulations, Susan. Welcome to the club.”

Aleque Nixon, Frank’s supermodel-looking assistant, caught my arm as I stumbled out, dumbfounded. Nearly purring, she held out her hand and smiled reassuringly. “I look forward to working closely with you, Susan.”

“Um...yes, me too,” I replied, confused.

As I ghosted down the hallway, it suddenly occurred to me that unlike Bob’s burdened and painfully disheveled state, Frank didn’t seem the least ruffled by having to fire good employees who’d willingly sacrificed their personal lives to help build this empire: people like me. From a distance, I’d always thought highly of Frank. But up close, I recognized his semblance to Ryan, a man who, faced with a similar directive, was surely hacking away at personnel with a euphoria nearing that of unfettered war. In time, would I become more like Bob or Frank...or, God help me, Ryan? Feeling dizzy suddenly, I braced myself against the wall.

Was I really so self-centered? Did I truly care more about my career than my family? If so, how could Pete even love me? How could he even stand to look at me? Well, based on our little Shakespearean play in the airport, perhaps he’d finally seen through to the real me. Perhaps I had too.

The “culling” to which Frank had eluded was happening in real time. I morbidly wondered which bodies would remain standing at week’s end? In the very conference room where the miracle of promotion had visited me—visited us all, how many seats would be rendered vacant? I couldn’t stomach looking into the sightless eyes of the fallen, knowing I had been spared, that I was stepping onto their limp forms to reach INTech’s next rung, pouring dirt over their mass graves with a golden shovel. I fled in shame.

Flopping into an empty chair like a sulking teenager, angry at my company, my life, myself, I waited for my flight back to Minnesota. Though I should have called Pete, laid it out for him, asked for his

blessing, begged for understanding, I didn't. The crystal certainty of never returning to North Carolina was news I was unprepared to deliver—news that might easily end our marriage. *Assuming we still had one.* Frank was right, I thought grimly; I was making the “necessary” sacrifices, ripping my family apart for my career, to satisfy my blind ambition, or as Pete had keenly asserted, to feed my ego.

My flight was on time, and for that I was grateful. Philadelphia had suddenly lost all appeal. A nasally announcement flooded the concourse. *Flight 186 to Chicago O'Hare has been delayed due to...*

Like magic, the airline's website popped up on my tablet's screen.

*Under Lock and Key*

On the shoreline of Lake Michigan, bathed by the same gentle sun as I, a young girl pondered her future, her dreams, who she wanted to be. Like me, she thought she knew everything—so smart, so worldly, so damn full of herself. I snorted. She'd been an innocent lamb: idealistic, self-righteous, and fully unaware of what lay waiting in corporate America's tall grass. I was not.

She'd envisioned a brilliant life for herself; the potential of it. Her shortsighted dreams had been realized soon afterwards when she accepted the proposal of the corporation she'd longed to wed. She was clay to be molded into a rare and unique piece of art—or perhaps, more aptly, a clone: an identical statue spat from a conveyor belt of thousands. I had to admire her, though. She'd pushed aside everything remotely important to her—friendships, a budding romance, family—for the mere fantasy of an unrealized future. She had that day set us on the path I now walked.

I followed her into the campus coffee shop, fully expecting a sense of nostalgia to wash over me. Imagine my surprise when I discovered it had been transformed into a bustling Starbucks. Not one, but three baristas raced to take orders, incrementally quenching the thirst of another corporate giant: another success story. Looking through the bedlam to a former time, I watched as she sat with her friend, Ben,

sipping lattes and practicing interview questions. What had ever happened to him, and to my old foe? Sadly, I realized I couldn't even remember her name.

So much had changed on this campus. The very spirit felt different; the price time demanded. I wondered if Mr. Bellman and his wife still owned the old restaurant in which I'd slaved. I smiled at the thought. They had been so supportive, so kind; a second family. I'd completely lost touch with them as well, their memories burned away by the fever of self-absorption. I felt compelled to find them and ask forgiveness for my transgressions, but this wasn't the time. In fact, I wasn't sure this was even real.

Taking my place in business class beside my younger self, I watched her fidget. Her suit was now dated, but stylish nevertheless, her hair hastily fixed in a messy chignon. She wanted to speak, to tell anyone who would listen how very important her upcoming interview was. I ached to take her hand, convince her to be wary, but her eyes looked straight through me.

I watched as she furthered her career at corporate. She'd become INTech's very minion, slicing through her competition with a mighty sword. But that sword had been double-edged, and with every strike, her soul had been nicked. I followed her through streets both dangerous and familiar. The woman now beside me knew them well, where to go and where not to. I noticed the light in her eyes had dimmed; her loneliness palpable.

I climbed into the cab she hailed. We entered the Blue Papaya together, its intimate and alluring atmosphere ripe with possibilities and promises. Had this been the place she'd finally lost herself? Where her delusions of grandeur had become ours? I seated myself at the bar and watched warily.

Her innocence was long gone now. She'd become Kirsten's lap dog, hanging on her every word, envious of everything she wore, owned, projected. She'd watched her toy with men, collecting them like baseball cards. *One day*, she'd promised herself.

"A cosmo," I said to the bartender when he asked. They were

always the same: perfect, so sophisticated. Midway through my second sip, I nearly choked.

A tall, sleek man embraced her from behind, his teeth nipping her ear. *Not him!* He would suck the very marrow from her bones. She subtly ground her hips into Ryan with a calculating smile; sexual torture that would be repaid a hundred fold over the next two years. He represented everything she could narrowly dream of, and saddled with my current knowledge, would realize.

Time shifted again. She rode the shoulders of a band of revelers, her smile nearly blinding. She had been victorious, overcome great obstacles, won the coveted prize of promotion. Champagne was poured, toasts were made.

A tear slid down my cheek. A result of greed and sheer ignorance, in the blink of an eye, her soul would be shattered, the pieces scattering in the cold wind like curled leaves. Shocked, I noticed a gilded cuff gripping her wrist like a possessive hand, the chain attached, pretty and fine, snaking out the door. Unbeknownst, that tether had comforted her when all else failed: a corrupted pacifier.

I ordered a second martini, wondering why my mind had chosen this hour to leave me.

A jaded and bitter woman, only a few years my senior, seated herself beside me. World-weariness draped her shoulders like the mink stoll she wore. Consumed by self-importance, she was oblivious to those around her. Did this one even have a soul? If so, it was well-hidden. I wanted to feel for her, but in truth, I had little sympathy. She was self-made, a willing victim resting comfortably in INTech's maw. And she'd do anything to remain there in that warm, wet place. She had.

I watched in dismay as she made love to several drinks. I slid my own away in disgust. Though the locket still hung from her neck, with a shock, I realized her beautiful diamond ring was gone. *Oh God!* Unable to accept the horror, I closed my eyes and withdrew into myself.

When I peeked at her again, her hair was dull and gray, and I

noticed wrinkles around her lips—those inevitable frown lines one earns from being disappointed far too often. Though gaunt, her jewelry and clothing were the result of real wealth. Her hand shook as she toasted the bartender.

A man dressed in chauffeur livery entered and whispered in her ear. She glanced at her diamond-encrusted watch, nodded, and tossed a wad of hundreds on the counter. Her heavy gold shackle glittered, its thick and heavy chain slithering behind her like a prowling python.

I dropped my head in my hands. This couldn't be my future. I couldn't become her. I would become...who then? When I looked to my right again, she was gone. In her place, an old man wearing a grave expression sipped from a cup of steaming coffee. From his pocket, he pulled out a key and slid it across the counter.

I stared down at my gleaming cuff. Though its edges had been gnawed on and chunks chipped away by determined hands, it remained a thing of exquisite beauty, one of tremendous value. I examined the key, the bar's neon light lending it an ethereal glow. A decade of addiction fed lavishly by a potent narcotic, could I survive its withdrawal? With knowing eyes encouraging me, the man raised his own wrist, the fierce red marks prominent.

A warm and fragrant presence behind me whispered, "Do it, sweetheart." For him, I'd suffer anything. For him...yes. I fitted the key into the lock, but the cogs refused to turn. I twisted it with all the force I could summon. but to no avail. I became frantic. What if it was already too late?

A young child with rosebud lips and hair of fine silk crawled onto my lap. She looked up at me with impossibly beautiful eyes and reached for the key, wrapping her tiny fingers around it. With the slightest of turns, the lock popped open as if freshly oiled.

*Bat Shit Crazy*

I am truly not sure how I got home. Evidently, autopilot takes over when one's faculties completely shut down. Pete cocked his head at the rental car, but when I stepped out, he ran to me, engulfing me in the safety of his arms. Unable to speak, I simply stared at his perfect face. Confusion quickly replaced his warm smile, followed by concern, and finally, fear. That's all I remember before the world went black.

"Darlin', can ya hear me? Sweetheart." He smoothed my hair back and kissed my forehead. *Real*. He was real.

"Turn down the radio," I mumbled. "You'll wake the baby."

He left my side, and the sound silenced. "She's up here," he shouted.

My eyelids were pried open, and a flashlight rudely blinded me. Suited paramedics compressed my arm with a blood pressure cuff while shooting questions at Pete in rapid succession. He responded with a whole lot of *I don't know*s.

"She's in shock," one man said.

I felt a sharp prick.

"What are you doin'?" Pete demanded.

"Administering naxolene. Standard procedure for drug overdoses."

“No drugs.” I swatted weakly at the blurry group.

“What did you take?” a voice said urgently.

“Nothing.”

“Ma’am, if you don’t tell us, we can’t help you.”

“You can’t help me. I quit my job,” I said.

“You’re talkin’ nonsense, sweet—wait, what did you say?” Pete asked.

A bubble of hysterical laughter escaped my lips. “I said I quit my job.” I sat bolt upright and gasped. “Holy Mother of God, I just quit my job.” My body started shaking and my heart rate spiked. I fell back onto the couch, curled into the fetal position, and began rocking myself. “I quit my job, I quit my job. Oh God, I quit my job!” An oxygen mask was strapped across my face. The sound of Pete’s anxious voice faded.

Though I’d dreamt of a bizarre ambulance ride—one in which I tried to escape twice, I awoke to the blur of our ceiling fan. My mouth was desert dry, and thoughts were slow to form.

Pete was lying beside me, one arm heavily draped over my waist. I grunted, and his eyes flew open.

“How’re ya feelin’, darlin’?”

“Ugh,” I croaked. “Weird.”

His eyes, wary at first, slowly bled into mischief. “It’s been a wild couple of days, but valium is your new best friend.” He gently wiped the hair from my eyes and softly kissed me.

“Days?” I unsuccessfully tried to sit up. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Well, according to experts in the field, you’re sufferin’ from a bout of the bat shit crazies. You’re Southern, it happens,” he said, winking.

I looked into his jade eyes for a long moment, a tear trickling down my temple. “I’m not crazy, Pete.”

“Anyone who walks away from a job like yours to live in a dot of land in the middle of nowhere is bound to be crazy. What were ya thinkin’? Your career meant the world to you.”

I shook my head, another tear escaping. “You and Audrey are my world. INTech is just...it was just...a paycheck.”

Pete exhaled and shook his head regretfully. “I never meant to drive you to this, Susan. I wasn’t tryin’ to make you choose. I won’t say I wasn’t hurtin’ inside, or that stayin’ away from you for the next month was gonna be easy, but you needed space, sweetheart, and time to figure things out. Maybe we both did.”

I touched his cheek. It felt like an eternity had passed since the last time. “I got lost, Pete. I got swept up in my work and myself. I took you and Audrey for granted, took your love for granted. I am such a fool. I’ll never do it again. Never.”

I may have figured out what I wanted, but what about him? Fear licked me with its cold and slimy tongue. “There is still an *us*, right? I mean, do you still want to be my...husband? I’m horrible, I know it. I wouldn’t blame you if, if you’re through with me.” I cowardly closed my eyes.

“Hey, look at me.” I cracked open a lid. His sober expression terrified me. “Susan, I have wants, needs, desires, and realities,” he said, echoing a long ago conversation. “You are all those things to me. You always will be.”

“So, we’re okay?”

He nodded. “We’re okay.”

Right then, I swear I heard those golden shackles hit the floor and shatter. I exhaled raggedly. We were silent for a few minutes, my mind grappling with strange images and half-memories. “Did I dream it, or was our stove in the front yard?”

His chuckle shook the bed. “Well, I might be able to part with our house, but there’s no way anyone’s gettin’ my stove.”

“You were selling the house?”

“Of course I was. Susan, you own my heart, and it stays with you wherever you go. We were buyin’ that house ya liked, and I was taking the job.”

“But you—”

“Don’t ever think I could live without you.” He shook his head

adamantly. “No matter how stupid I act, or whatever dumbassed things I do, don’t ever believe that.”

“But what about the *South*?”

“Sweetheart, I may love North Carolina, this house, and my relatives, but without you, none of it matters. Hell, we could move to Vietnam for all I care, as long as we’re together. As long as I know you love me.”

“I love you, Pete. I swear it. I truly love you.”

He inhaled deeply, a beautiful smile forming. “Now, tell me what happened up there.”

“Well, they promoted me.”

He worked his mouth for a moment without success. “They *promoted* you?”

“Yes.”

“So you...*quit*?”

“Uh huh.”

Pete grabbed a medicine bottle from the nightstand and popped the top. A tiny yellow pill tumbled into his palm.

“I don’t need that,” I said.

His eyes sparkled mischievously. “No, darlin’, I do.”

I realized it was terribly quiet in the house. “Where’s Audrey?”

“She’s over at Mona’s. We decided you needed a little...time to get yourself back together.” He rolled off the bed. “What can I get you? Water? Food?”

I shook my head. “Audrey. I need to hold my baby. I need to hold you and my baby.”



I’d like to tell you the next couple of weeks went smoothly, and that I was so happy to be reunited with my family and in my own home that I didn’t miss working for a single second, but that would be an epic lie. I was riding the postpartum, postworkum, postwhatthehellamIgonnadonextum roller coaster in nonstop loops.

One minute I was crying my eyes out, the next I was channeling Buddha. I believe Pete feared for our daughter's safety on several occasions; each marked by Charlotte's unexpected appearance.

I wasn't particularly looking forward to walking into the Rusty Frog this evening. I hadn't darkened its doors since well before we'd officially moved, and I'd spent little time since with those I'd once called friends. Pulling Pete and Audrey out of North Carolina was tantamount to committing first-degree murder, and once back, I'd stayed away, hiding, I suppose.

I can promise I was greatly relieved that I wasn't recipient of their ire tonight, but saddened that worse crimes had been committed.

"I didn't even speak no Spanish," Joe Pat moaned. "I went over and rented us a car—they drive on the same side of the road there." The statement was met with awe. "Well, I loaded us all up, and she said she wanted to go to Palenque—I don't even know if I'm pronouncin' that right. Said she'd read about it in a travel magazine. Well, we drove for about three hours 'til we got there. She was kinda standoffish, not talkin' too much durin' the trip, but I didn't think too much of it. Figured she was tired, or nervous, or something. The town wasn't much of anything—just a church, a little motel, a grocery store, and a bus station.

"She said she wanted to get married right away. I thought that was right romantic. Well, we went over to the church and found the padre—that's what they call preachers down there—and I paid him in advance. Then we checked into the motel. She told me she wanted to take a shower and get all freshened up, and that she'd meet me on the church steps. She said I shouldn't see a bride before the wedding, though I already had. I'm not one to break tradition, though, so I changed into my suit and left.

"It was awful hot, so I milled around the grocery store for a bit. I couldn't read one damn thing, but they had cold beer in the refrigerator section. I went to buy me one. That's when I realized I didn't have my wallet on me. Guess I was more nervous than I thought." Joe Pat shook his head ruefully. "I went on back to the

motel, and our door was standin' wide open. It had been cleaned out—no clothes, no suitcases, no Jayne. All that was left was a note sayin' she'd changed her mind and not to come lookin' for her."

"What happened next?" Mona asked, wide-eyed and utterly enthralled. She was seated on Jimbo's lap, his arms casually wrapped around her waist. I couldn't help but smile.

"Well, I was beside myself, as ya might imagine. I didn't know what I'd said or done to upset her so much. I went over to tell the padre we wouldn't be gettin' married cause she'd run off. He said some women are just born wicked, and there's nothin' you can do about it."

Pete squeezed my knee, and I elbowed him.

"I'd brung a fair sum of cash, so we could have a big time. All I had now were the clothes on my back. The padre refunded my money and helped me get on a bus to Cancun. He was a real Christian fellow, and I wished I could've left a donation to the church, but I had to use every penny for bus fare.

"Cause I didn't have my plane ticket or credit cards anymore, I called Buddy, collect. Bein' Postmaster, I knew he had government connections."

We all nodded.

Buddy Williams threw an arm around Joe Pat's shoulder. "You're like a brother to me, Joe."

Joe seemed on the verge of tears. He cleared his throat a couple of times before continuing.

"Buddy wired some money down so I could buy me a ticket. 'Course I didn't have a driver's license or passport or anything 'cause she took all that, so they wouldn't let me through customs. Lord, it was a mess." He took another sip of his drink, and then stared at the glass in silence. "I loved that woman. I won't ever drink tequila again without thinking of her."

Ginger looked at her husband. "Never did like that woman," she hissed under her breath.

"And the most embarassin' part of all," Joe Pat continued, "was I

had to go to the American Embassy and beg 'em for new papers. *Beg 'em*, I tell you. They wouldn't believe I was an American citizen until I proved it by givin' 'em my rank and serial number. Me not a *citizen*? Why, my family's been fightin' for this country since the American Revolution—and for the Confederates, 'course, but I didn't mention that part.”

“You got nothin' to be ashamed of, fightin' for the South,” Vic Jr. stated authoritatively. The rest of the men, Pete included, nodded in unison. I rolled my eyes. *Oh brother.*

“Thank the Lord they found me in the system, or I'd still be down there. And just so you know, the embassy there ain't no palace like you might think. It's a small buildin' with a big ol' fence around it and a few guards. They were marines, so we had a fair amount to talk about while I waited. One of 'em even let me have his bunk overnight, so I wouldn't have to sleep in the airport.

“When I finally landed in Atlanta and tried to go through customs, I was pulled into this room by security, and a bunch of FBI agents started askin' me questions. I told 'em I hadn't done anything wrong and wasn't smuggling no drugs back or nothin'. They didn't care about me too much after that, but they kept askin' me questions about Jayne. I couldn't for the life of me understand why the FBI cared about her.”

At this point, I was boiling with rage. Fooling us all was one thing, but playing with a man's heart—a really loving and decent man, and then leaving him the way she had was unforgivable. Sadly, it also confirmed that she was guilty of embezzlement and would probably get away with it. Suddenly, I was very much looking forward to Kirsten's trial.

“It was a couple of hours before they let me go. 'Course, I'd missed my flight by then, and there wasn't another one to Raleigh until the next day.”

“So we said the hell with that. 'Scuse my language,” Vic Jr. added. “Buddy and Billy and me piled in my Chevy and drove down to Georgia to pick up our boy.”

“I love y’all, and I always will,” Joe Pat said thickly before taking another large sip of his drink.

“Well, she wasn’t from North Carolina to begin with,” Billy said. “That should’ve tipped ya off right there.” *This from the man who had tried to catch her attention behind his friend’s back.* I bit down on my tongue.

“So that’s why it took you so long to come back?” Crystal Ann asked. “I figured y’all were having one hell of a good time.”

“I’ll never leave America again,” Joe said, before passing out cold on the table.

*Manipulative Men*

I pushed Audrey's stroller into the coffee shop on Morehead City's boardwalk. She was merrily speaking gibberish to anyone who would listen. At eight months, her hair was a riot of golden curls. Her eyes, having finally settled on a stunning mixture of Pete's green and my blue, were an impossible turquoise color that looked, quite frankly, otherworldly. There was no doubt in my mind she would one day win a Miss America pageant, though I was far more interested in her getting into Harvard.

I pulled a bottle from Lexi's stupidly expensive baby bag and propped Audrey in my lap. I waved to Tom as he entered.

"Susan, so happy you could see me. How are you?"

Aside from my psychotic episode, I hadn't seen this man since he detonated a bomb that left me sitting shell-shocked in a parking lot several years ago. If anything, retirement had reversed the hands of time, and he looked younger and more vital than I remembered. "Just great, Tom," I lied.

His eyes lit when he saw the cherub that was my child. "Mind if I hold her?"

"Not at all, but beware, she's a big flirt. She'll have you eating out of her hand in no time."

"I'm not planning on resisting her charms. What's her name?"

“Audrey.”

“Oh, that’s a fine name. Classic. Timeless,” he said, taking her into his experienced grandpa arms. She tossed her bottle on the floor and batted her obscenely long eyelashes at him. He whistled softly. “She may be the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen. I can tell you right now, she’s gonna be a heartbreaker.”

“You’ve never met her daddy or you’d know it for sure.”

As he cooed, I tore off small bites of Danish, pondering the real reason for this visit. Dropping by a boat showroom nearly two hours from his beachfront home in Wilmington didn’t make a whole lot of sense. After nearly fifteen minutes of baby talk, retirement talk, and North Carolina talk, I grabbed the reins.

“Tom, it’s wonderful seeing you, but perhaps you’d better tell me why you’re really here.”

He shook his head and chuckled. “You never disappoint.” He handed Audrey back to me, and then steepled his fingers. “I understand you walked away from a goldmine.”

I nodded. “And now I’m unemployed, as you also surely know.”

He took a sip of coffee. “How’s that going for you?”

“I’m having a rather difficult time adjusting, to be honest.”

“Knowing you, that doesn’t surprise me. Susan, I’d never try to suggest what’s best for you...” My brow rose of its own volition. He continued, conceding with a smile. “We don’t work for INTech anymore and have no obligations to them professionally. But I do know better than most how they operate.” Tom was an INTech lifetime career veteran.

“No doubt.”

“If you’re interested, you can continue working in your field without INTech.”

“Whoa, whoa! I despise ComSync, and ComTech has no presence here. Plus, I am *not* moving my family again.”

“I wasn’t suggesting it.”

I sighed. “Tom, you’re going to have to speak in plain English, because I really don’t understand where you’re going with this.”

“Consult,” he said simply.

“Huh?”

“Consult for INTech...and whomever else you wish. You’d work for yourself, which means you decide your hours and where to spend them.” He nodded to Audrey.

“I have no idea how to do that,” I said.

He slid a card across the table and gave me a meaningful look. “You may not, but he does.”

Tom then glanced at his watch. “Oh, I’ve got to get over to the showroom. Don’t want to be late.” We shook hands, though I couldn’t rise because Audrey had become deadweight on my lap. He regarded her for a long moment. “She is the most beautiful child. You did good, kid.” He winked at me and strode to the door. But as he opened it, he turned back. “Make the call, Susan. You won’t be sorry.”

Troubled, I negotiated through the throngs of tourists, somehow finding an empty bench near the water’s edge. I sat Audrey in my lap.

“Audrey, we are surrounded by manipulative men. Don’t be fooled by their pleasant demeanor. They’ve always got some agenda.”

She blinked at me as though she completely understood—as if she’d suspected it all along.

“That’s my girl. You are woman. Own it.”



It physically pained me to watch the company dismantled through the eyes of Mona. I was terrified I had sealed her fate. By promoting her, I had made her expensive middle management, and therefore vulnerable.

No one had come to backfill in Havelock. In fact, as I drove past the empty office building on the way to Mona’s house a week later, I was neither shocked nor surprised to see a *For Lease* sign plastered to its exterior. It stood as a monument to misplaced dreams and faulted realities.

Mona yanked open her front door, threw her arms around me, and sobbed into my blouse.

"They fired you, huh?" I said, patting her back.

"Worse!" she moaned. "Seems Martin, South Carolina's Chief Acquisitions Officer just got let go, and I'm gettin' his job as well as mine."

"A promotion? That's fantastic!"

"No it's not, 'cause now I'm s'posed to run both."

"You can handle that."

"From Charlotte!" she wailed.

"You're moving?" I was aghast. Who would buy the Rusty Frog? And the house? I couldn't imagine the fights she and Jimbo would have. Somehow, my moving didn't seem all that surprising, but for Mona, and especially for Jimbo, who'd spent his whole life here? That was just wrong.

"Course not."

"Well, with your parents and relatives living in Charlotte, at least you'll get to see them more. It's one hell of a commute, but I guess that's your only alternative."

She looked at me like I was an idiot. "I'm not commutin' like that. I won't do it. I'm quittin'!"

"How are you going to survive financially?" It wasn't my business, per se, but I sure wasn't going to let my dearest friend and semi-relative go hungry.

"We've got some money saved up. I'll get another job doin' something or other. There's nothin' in Havelock, of course, but we'll get it figured out. Jimbo'll have to let Hunter go, but he's young, and now that he's got his bartendin' certificate, he'll get a new job in no time." She wiped her eyes and forced a smile. "Now, let me hold my goddaughter!"

Kicking me, Audrey lunged for her arms. "No-na!"

"Yes, sugar, it's your No-na."

Feeling fairly miserable and hating my company like never before, I glanced once again at the deserted office building as I drove by. I

had been wallowing in self-pity and remorse, but that hadn't been enough to drive me in any particular direction. Mona had just moved my compass' needle.

I talked through it on our trip back to Atlantic Beach: the pros and cons, where I saw myself in the world. Finally, I asked, "What would you do, Aud?"

"Ba-ba," she replied confidently.

"I couldn't agree more."

After putting her down for a nap, I pulled out my wallet. The card Tom had given me was now frayed at the edges. I'd practically memorized the number, though I'd not had the guts to actually dial it.

"Hi, Mr. Carlton, my name is Susan—"

"Walsh, right?" His voice was warm and friendly.

"Yes. Tom Ridgeway gave me your—"

"I've been expecting your call."

"Oh?"



"We need to have a conversation," I said, returning to the living room, more than a little stunned. The late summer sun was threatening to set in glory during dinner, the water already consumed by its fire. Pete turned off the stove and pulled me onto his lap, kissing my cheek.

"I imagine we need to have several."

"INTech's promoting Mona."

"I know."

I rolled my eyes. Of course he knew. "How's Jimbo taking it?"

He exhaled and shook his head. "Not well, but he'll do what she wants." He hugged me tightly. "I think he's just developed a new appreciation for what we went through."

"So he doesn't hate me anymore?"

Pete's eyes twinkled "Well, I wouldn't go that far."

“She’s quitting,” I said.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. *Ha! He didn’t know that.*

“She thinks she’ll get a job somewhere else, and certainly she can, but in all honesty, no one will pay her nearly what she’s making now.”

“Sometimes I miss bein’ a little kid.”

I snorted. “Sometimes you still are one.” I bit back on my scream when Pete started tickling me. After a long playful kiss, I said. “You know how I had coffee with Tom Ridgeway?”

“I owe him a great deal,” he said soberly. The profoundness of his statement was not lost on me. In many ways, Tom had given me back to him, and vice versa. He’d opened a door and pushed me through it. I’d always think of him as my guardian angel, keeping watch over my career.

“Well, after your spawn charmed the pants off of him, he gave me this card.” Pete read it and met my eyes again. “So I called them.”

As it turned out, a group of people, who’d over the years left or been let go from INTech, had created an umbrella consulting firm. Thanks to Tom’s introduction, I had been invited to buy into it like a franchise, and they’d provide the assistance I’d need to start my own company. I’d have access to their resources, from accounting advisors and marketing people to contract lawyers and payroll services. In return for their assistance, once my business was running smoothly, I would be expected to contribute to the core knowledge base with my own specialties. It was a broad spectrum of talents working together for our own greater good—aka food.

After laying it all out for him, I said, “We’re going to be okay.”

He took my face in his hands and kissed me deeply. “We already are.”

*Epilogue*

“I swear, I’m going to leash that child.” I arched a brow at Pete. It was his turn to chase her around the fully gated patio.

“Aud’s got places to go and people to see. Don’t ya, sugarplum?” Pete scooped her up in his arms and held her above his head. She squealed with delight. “At this rate, you’ll be flyin’ soon.” He kissed the top of her head and placed her back in her playset. She eyed the netting then Pete, assessing the best time to make her third escape. I gave her the international sign for I’ve got my eyes on your little butt, and she merely giggled.

Along with his mischievous smile, she’d inherited a full serving of Pete’s humor, charm, and calculating cleverness. I smirked and shook my head. When she hit fifteen, Pete was going to seriously rethink the whole leash concept.

I poured more champagne in Mona and Jimbo’s glasses and topped off Pete’s as he disappeared into the kitchen. Tonight we were celebrating the first anniversary of W&S Consulting Inc. When she’d originally designed our business logo, Anita had cheerfully pointed out that using our first initials, S&M, was a great idea, since we’d get a more diverse clientele. She did have a point, therefore we changed it immediately.

At the moment, our bottom financial line was still in the red,

however, our numbers were about to hit the stratosphere. The most interesting thing had happened not two weeks ago. INTech had contacted *me*. It seems they had spread themselves a bit too thin and couldn't justify expending manpower and resources to cover this region. This news did not surprise me.

I had inflated the proposal by ten times our normal rate, and they hadn't blinked an eye. The ink was still wet on the contract, and we were set to take over their entire Eastern North Carolina business at the end of next month. I sighed once more, beyond content. Our little company was going to make it.

Pete returned to the table with my all-time favorite dish: steamed channel bass. He set down the large platter with a flourish, and after a sweet and lovely prayer, raised his glass. "To the two most amazing women on God's green earth." Mona smiled euphorically as Jimbo smothered her with kisses.

I countered, "To our supportive husbands and our brilliant future." I then mouthed, *I love you*. Pete's eyes glowed in return.

"This looks so good," Mona exclaimed as he dished fish onto our plates.

"Even though you have a mighty cute butt, you know I really married you for your cooking," I teased.

"I think ya married me for a few other reasons as well." He bit the tip of his tongue and gave me a look that was nothing short of obscene. Dinner could be over right now as far as I was concerned.

As we took our first glorious bites, Pete moaned in ecstasy, Jimbo smiled in affirmation, Mona's eyes flared, and I convulsed.

Simultaneously, chairs scraped the deck like two sets of nails on a single chalkboard, and Mona and I lunged for the nearest stretch of railing.

After my dry heaves subsided, I wiped vomit from my lips with the back of my hand and met her eyes. Somehow, Miss Manners had retained her napkin, and after dabbing her lips primly, her mortified expression transformed into something akin to having just met God

firsthand. Mine, I'm quite sure, was more like *ISIS* had just suicide-bombed my SUV.

Horrified, I glanced at the men, whose jaws were fully unhinged and resting comfortably on the tabletop.

"Holy shit!" I whispered. "Not again."

*Addendum*

If you're wondering what happened to Myrtle, I'll tell you. Our relationship had always been based on a firm foundation of mutual disrespect, and even though I hoped she'd be dismantled and sold off for spare parts, alas, that was not to be her destiny. You see, I knew more about falling in love with Pete than anyone else on the planet, and that was something you just didn't get over. I also knew she'd only ever have headlights for him. And while Pete had never mentioned her again, I knew he still had a place for her in his heart's garage. So shortly after returning home, I contacted Cousin Sammy.

Though money was tight, and she wasn't worth the hundred dollars Pete had originally paid for her, I offered Sammy quadruple what he'd spent and drove Myrtle's tired ass home. Mona followed behind me in case she broke down on the roadside. Pete could hear the hole in her muffler well before she came into view. He raced down the stairs and poked his head through her window, his face ablaze with joy.

"This thing drives worse than it did before," I said, unable to hide my smile. "Happy Anniversary!"

"But it's not our anniversary."

"Now I'm just hurt. It's the anniversary of our first date in this deathtrap."

His grin broadened. “Really?”

“Really. I went back and checked my calendar. Turns out I’d circled it in black marker. Wanna take a spin?”

“Yeah.”

I kicked the door open with both feet. For once she didn’t protest. Either Pete’s cousin had thoroughly oiled her hinges, or she wanted me out so badly her door had swung open of its own volition.

“Knock yourself out.”

He threw his arms around me and twirled me in the air. Then he ran around to the passenger door and opened it.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“In that thing? I think not.” I smiled at him. “You two need some bonding time. So, go bond.”

“I love you, Susie-Q.”

“You’d better,” I said, smirking.

And quite literally, I watched Pete and Myrtle drive off into the sunset.

The End—*I mean it this time!*

Thank you for reading *The Golden Handcuffs*. I truly hope you enjoyed the Susan Wade Saga finale. Pete and Susan are forever etched in my heart, and will continue to dwell in my head—*until I become senile, that is*. Don’t be surprised to discover their names in future books. You never know where they might pop up.

Authors literally live and die by reviews. If you enjoyed this story, please take a moment to write a short review, tell a friend, or simply shout it from the rooftops.



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