

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

**Journey of the
Heart**

ELISSA AMBROSE

Elissa Ambrose

Journey Of The Heart

Аннотация

TELL ME, LAURA, DOESN'T IT GET LONELY UP THERE IN YOUR IVORY TOWER? Upon her return home, Jake Logan made Laura see how the perfect life she'd ordered (with a little denial on the side) wasn't so perfect. Sure, her marriage to him had been electric in that department but it had failed miserably in others. Now Laura Matheson had another chance, a new lease on life and the ex-husband she'd always loved staring at her. Which path would Laura choose this time? That impossible "perfection" or a cozy love seat in her ivory tower—with Jake Logan by her side?

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“As I recall, we’re no longer married. I stopped taking orders from you years ago.”

“As I recall, you never took orders from anyone, least of all me.” He kneeled behind her and in one fluid motion, he was sweeping her into his arms.

“Who do you think you are, manhandling me like this! Put me down!”

“Still the same hell-bent ball of fire, all right. It’s good to know that some things in life don’t change.”

“You have some nerve.” Laura squirmed in his arms before he placed her on the couch.

“No need to thank me,” he said. “I wouldn’t want you to exert yourself.” He lowered his gaze. Even though she now lay curled under a blanket, he could picture the curves of her shapely legs. Her rumpled black skirt had been pushed up high above her knees, exposing the smooth, creamy flesh of her thighs. It had always amazed him how quickly she could arouse him just with a turn of her leg, a flash of her eyes—that was another thing that hadn’t changed.

Dear Reader,

A rewarding part of any woman’s life is talking with friends about important issues. Because of this, we’ve developed the

Readers' Ring, a book club that facilitates discussions of love, life and family. Of course, you'll find all of these topics wrapped up in each Silhouette Special Edition novel! Our featured author for this month's Readers' Ring is newcomer Elissa Ambrose. *Journey of the Heart* (#1506) is a poignant story of true love and survival when the odds are against you. This is a five-tissue story you won't be able to put down!

Susan Mallery delights us with another tale from her **HOMETOWN HEARTBREAKERS** series. *Good Husband Material* (#1501) begins with two star-crossed lovers and an ill-fated wedding. Years later, they realize their love is as strong as ever! Don't wait to pick up *Cattleman's Honor* (#1502), the second book in Pamela Toth's **WINCHESTER BRIDES** series. In this book, a divorced single mom comes to Colorado to start a new life—and winds up falling into the arms of a rugged rancher. What a way to go!

Victoria Pade begins her new series, **BABY TIMES THREE**, with a heartfelt look at unexpected romance, in *Her Baby Secret* (#1503)—in which an independent woman wants to have a child, and after a night of wicked passion with a handsome businessman, her wish comes true! You'll see that there's more than one way to start a family in Christine Flynn's *Suddenly Family* (#1504), in which two single parents who are wary of love find it—with each other! And you'll want to learn the facts in *What a Woman Wants* (#1505), by Tori Carrington. In this tantalizing tale, a beautiful widow discovers she's pregnant with

her late husband's best friend's baby!

As you can see, we have nights of passion, reunion romances, babies and heart-thumping emotion packed into each of these special stories from Silhouette Special Edition.

Happy reading!

Karen Taylor Richman

Senior Editor

Journey of the Heart

Elissa Ambrose



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Dedication

To my husband, Robert, for his continual support,
and who for some strange reason likes to refer to himself as
“her long-
suffering husband”; and to my daughters, Sarah and Aviva
Mlynowski,
who, although they have left the nest, still keep me on my toes.

Acknowledgments:

Special thanks to my editors Karen Taylor Richman, for taking a chance on a new kid on the block, and Patience Smith, for her insight and guidance; and to Anne Lind, a fine writer and editor, and always, a friend.

ELISSA AMBROSE

Originally from Montreal, Canada, Elissa Ambrose now resides in Arizona with her husband, one smart but ornery cat and one very sweet but dumb-as-a-doorknob cockatoo. When not writing, she's either editing, skating or trying out a new recipe. She was a computer programmer for too many years, and now serves as the fiction editor at Anthology magazine, a literary journal published in Mesa, Arizona. Currently, she is working on an inside axel, a cheese soufflé and another novel.

Dear Reader,

It is with profound pleasure I present to you my first book, *Journey of the Heart*. A few years ago, after she was diagnosed with cancer, a close friend set out to change her life. She made a vow to live the rest of her life to the fullest, no matter how much time she had left. True to her word, today she continues to search for the joy in every passing moment. Although the plot in the novel is fictional, my friend prefers to remain anonymous. She is truly the inspiration behind this story—a story that I hope you will find as emotionally satisfying to read as it was for me to write.

I am proud that *Journey of the Heart* has been selected for the Readers' Ring, and I look forward to your comments in an online discussion. Only through interaction can we make any sense of this voyage we call life, and what is life if not a journey of the

heart?

Elicsa Ambrose

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Chapter One

She knew he'd show up.

Face it, she told herself. She'd hoped he'd show up.

She'd spent five long years telling herself she had forgotten him, all the while wanting to see him once again. For closure. It was closure she desired, not the man himself. And what better place for closure than at a funeral?

Now here he was, standing directly in front of her, extending his hand, and she could think of nothing, not one single thing, to say. Take his hand, dummy, her inner voice directed. Don't be nervous. Now smile. That's it, you're doing fine!

She raised her head and looked into his eyes. They were as dark and compelling as she remembered, eyes a woman could easily get lost in. But those telltale lines around the corners were new, and so was that little scar above his right brow. An accident at a site? A fallen crane? A minor explosion? But wouldn't Cassie have told her if something had happened to Jake? Laura had instructed her dear friend to never, absolutely never, speak his name to her again, but where Jake was concerned, Cassie never listened.

"It's good to see you, Squirt," he said, holding Laura's hand. "You look well. So do you, Cass." He nodded at the slim, dark-haired woman sitting next to Laura in the pew.

Laura was well. Surgery and chemotherapy had seen to that.

After her recovery, she had resolved to follow a healthy lifestyle, which meant regularly working out at the gym. Now, five years later, she was in better shape than ever. She wasn't one to toot her own horn, but these days Laura Matheson knew she looked better than well. She had managed to keep off those extra pounds she'd lost during treatment, and after her hair had grown back in, she'd added gold highlights to her natural dark blond.

As for Jake, he looked basically the same. Laura remembered the lanky boy she had adored in high school, the cocky teenager with the dark, unruly shock of hair that kept falling in his eyes. And he still had that same little dimple on the left side of his smile, although he wasn't smiling now. The scowl on his face looked as fixed as a tattoo.

But even though he was no longer the happy-go-lucky boy from her youth, Jake Logan still looked good. Damn good, especially in that suit. Laura suppressed a smile, imagining him swearing under his breath, trying to straighten his tie. He'd always been a jeans-and-lumber-jacket kind of guy. A man's man. Strong and muscular because of so many years in construction, at six foot two he was almost a foot taller than Laura. Now, hearing him call her Squirt, her old nickname, she felt a familiar rippling in her heart.

"You look well, too," she said, trying to ignore the electricity from his touch. She pulled her hand away. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why couldn't she think of something clever to say? Something with ginger, Cynthia might say. Might have said, Laura corrected

herself.

Her throat tightened with remorse. Would she ever be able to think about Jake without thinking about Cynthia? But that wasn't the six-million-dollar question. It was Jake who had never stopped thinking about Cynthia, Laura's best childhood friend, and years later, Jake's first wife.

"I'm sorry about your aunt," he was saying now, his voice somber. "I know how difficult this must be for you. How are you holding up?"

Before Laura could respond, the minister arrived at the lectern, signaling that the service was about to begin. Jake abruptly turned his back and began to walk away.

"Jake, wait!" she called after him, surprising herself with her forwardness. "Will you be coming over later? People will be dropping by the house after the service, and I'd like it if you came by. Bring Cory, too. How is he? I'd love to see him."

He spun around. "How the hell do you think he is? How would any ten-year-old kid be in his situation? You have your nerve, asking about him. You may not have given a hoot about me, but don't sit there pretending that you cared about my son. You abandoned him when he was only five."

She felt the color drain from her face. "What are you talking about? My leaving had nothing to do with him. I never thought —"

"That's just it, you didn't think—which is odd, considering how you used to overanalyze everything." He exhaled slowly.

“Look, I didn’t come here to make a scene. No, Cory and I won’t be coming by later. He doesn’t remember you, and I don’t want to resurrect old wounds.” He gave her a curt nod of farewell. “Take care of yourself, Laura.”

Tormented with conflicting emotions, she watched her ex-husband walk away. What exactly had she expected? To find that Jake had changed and wanted to start over? She had made a life for herself without him. She had a fiancé who adored her, and she was happy. She had come back to Connecticut to pay her last respects to her aunt, and that was all.

But that was not all. She still hadn’t decided what to do with the house. The rambling two-story cottage was now hers. Legally it had been hers since the death of her parents, but after she had left home to marry Jake, she had been content to let her aunt stay on. On the one hand, Laura wanted to sell the house and get on with her life. On the other hand, part of her wanted to keep it, reluctant to let go of the past once and for all. Although she had almost no memory of the years before her parents had died, she had a vague sense that she had been happy there, before her aunt had moved in.

“Looks like Jake still has the old charm,” Cassie murmured, breaking into Laura’s thoughts.

Laura reached into her purse for a tissue. “I can’t really blame him. I just thought he’d be over his anger by now. He’s still so... bitter.”

She scanned the pews, telling herself she wasn’t looking for

him. She took in the scene around her, noting how quickly the chapel had filled. Who were all these elderly people? Aunt Tess hadn't exactly been the sociable type. Or the motherly type, either.

Laura closed her eyes, trying to conjure up an image of her parents. If she could only remember one thing, a lingering scent of aftershave, a hairpin left on the bathroom counter, anything at all.... She had been five years old when the driver of the truck lost control and crossed the median, killing himself and her parents. Five years old. The same age as Cory when she'd left Jake. A dull ache centered inside her. Did Cory ever think about her? Or had he completely obliterated her from his mind, as Jake had said?

She opened her eyes and tried to focus on the minister.

"...generosity of spirit," he was saying. "Elizabeth Armstrong touched the hearts of all those who knew her, and will be sorely missed...."

Cassie leaned over and whispered, "'Generosity of spirit?' The only one generous here is the minister."

"Be good," Laura admonished. "Try to remember, she took me in. She raised me."

"Took you in? It was your parents' house, not hers! That woman got a free ride, living in that house. Not that she was ever there to take care of you. Raised you? I don't think so. You raised yourself."

"Shhh!"

But Cassie whispered on. “And while we’re on the subject of who wronged whom, I want you to remember that it was charm-boy here who abandoned you, not the other way around. Sure, technically you left him, but he didn’t try very hard to get you back, and he wasn’t there for you when you needed him most.”

As far as Laura was concerned, the issue regarding who left whom was still off-limits. As if sensing her friend’s discomfort, Cassie relented and leaned back in the pew. But Cassie was Cassie, and couldn’t stay quiet for more than a minute. “Where did you find this guy?” she snickered, motioning to the pulpit. “‘Touched the hearts of all those who knew her’? Is he for real?”

“He’s from Ridgefield,” Laura answered in a low voice. “My mother and Aunt Tess grew up there. Honestly, Cass, can’t you just sit still and listen to the sermon? The woman was my mother’s sister.”

But Cassie remained undaunted. “Remember when she caught me climbing through your bedroom window, trying to sneak you down the old oak tree?” She poked her friend lightly in the ribs. “I’ll never forget the look on her face. But we made it! And Ellen and Cyn were waiting at the bottom, waving flashlights. Ellen was all prepared with swabs and bandages. She was so sure we’d fall. How old were we? Seven? Eight?”

Despite her resolve to keep up a solemn front, Laura smiled at the memory.

“And what a sight your aunt made,” Cassie continued, “flying out the front door, trying to stop us from getting away. I can

still see her running down the street, wearing that wretched old bathrobe, her face in that awful mudpack.”

“Will you please stop? People are looking!”

“And what about the time she ran outside, screaming like a banshee after finding a snake in the toilet? Did you ever tell her it was Jake who put it there?”

“Cass, I’m warning you!” But it was too late. Laura had doubled over in a fit of giggles. Cassie could always make her laugh, in any place or situation, even a funeral.

What’s wrong with me? she thought. This is a funeral. My aunt’s funeral. It doesn’t matter that she left me all day with baby-sitters. It doesn’t matter that she was always so critical, scolding me for the least little thing. Control yourself! What kind of person behaves this way at a funeral? “Stop it, Cass! What will people think?”

“You mean what will Jake think, don’t you?” Cassie’s face turned sober. “Okay, take it easy, kiddo,” she said. “Put your head on my shoulder. They’ll all think you’re crying.”

Except that Laura was crying, somewhere deep inside.

From her pew in the front row, she could feel Jake’s eyes on her back. Who was he to judge her? What did he know about her life? When they were growing up, he’d been her ally and her foe, her friend and her tormentor and, always, her secret love. But throughout their three-year marriage, he’d remained distant, as if he’d never really known her.

She turned in her seat and looked in his direction. Their eyes

met, and for a moment she felt dizzy. He needs to keep a safe distance, she thought sadly, noting that he'd chosen to sit in the last pew.

She looked back at the minister, who was now saying, "...a beautiful soul who will be mourned by her dearly beloved niece and friends..."

One glimpse at Cassie and she fell into another fit of giggles.

Laura's feet were aching. After the service, people had been dropping by the house all afternoon and evening. Laura had been standing for hours, acting as hostess to a stream of strangers, and now she was in the hallway, bidding her guests farewell.

"What a caring, lovely person she was," Reverend Barnes was saying. Except for Cassie, he was the last to leave. "When I heard that a stroke had taken her from us, I insisted on giving the eulogy."

Laura was having difficulty concentrating on the minister's words. Her thoughts kept returning to the scene in the chapel. It had shaken her to discover that Jake was still angry, or that she even cared how he felt. She kept playing his words over in her head like a song on repeat until she was sure she'd lose her mind.

"...great childhood friends," the minister was saying. "I had a secret crush on her, but she had her eye on some other fellow..."

Angry or not, he should have come to the house. Not that she'd been expecting him. Not that she'd wanted him to come. But they had been married. It would have been the right thing, the decent thing, for him to do.

“...didn’t work out. Poor Tess, bless her heart...”

Every time the doorbell had rung, she’d stiffened, half with anticipation, half with dread. But he hadn’t shown up. This is ridiculous, she rebuked herself, glancing at the front door. What did she care?

“...would always tag along. But we never minded. Your mother was such an adorable little thing. Just like you at that age.”

Laura’s attention was riveted back to the minister. “You knew my mother?”

“Of course I did! Even though she was six years younger, Elizabeth used to take her everywhere. I can still picture little Caroline, her golden-brown pigtails, those shining turquoise eyes. And those freckles! She couldn’t say the word ‘sun’ without twenty new dots popping up all over her face. And she had a cute little bump on her nose, just like yours.”

Automatically Laura raised her hand to the bridge of her nose. As a teenager, she’d wanted to have it fixed, but all her friends had been against it. “It gives you character,” Jake had said, “not that you lack any.” Later, she decided that the bump she had inherited from her mother was too small for her to even consider having it removed.

Why can’t I remember what my mother looked like? Laura thought now. I wasn’t that young when she died. I should be able to remember something. For years after the crash Laura had searched for her mother in the park, at school, at the doctor’s office. Even to this day she still caught herself looking around

corners in department stores, in the supermarket, in the library. It's no wonder, she told herself, considering I've never seen pictures of my parents. Where are the mementos of our lives? Where are the family albums? These were questions Aunt Tess had never answered.

"My mother looked like me." The statement had been meant as a question.

"My stars, yes! And how your aunt doted on her! Until the day I performed the wedding ceremony for your parents, Tess was always there, looking out for her. Always sewing something special for her to wear or fixing her hair or baking a special treat. That girl was more like a mother than a sister."

It was as if Reverend Barnes were describing some other person. Aunt Tess, so it seemed, had worn two faces, one at home, the other for the outside world.

A honking outside jolted Laura back to the moment.

"My taxi must be here," the minister said, taking her hands in his. "Don't be a stranger, Laura. Come visit our church in Ridgefield. You might find comfort there."

She watched as he shuffled down the front walk, leaning heavily on his cane. The taxi drove away and she closed the door.

Her thoughts returned to Jake. She remained in the hallway for several minutes, her eyes fixed on the door as though she could will the bell to ring.

"Weren't they a nice bunch? Who would have figured she knew so many people?"

Laura sat on the couch next to Cassie, her feet propped up on the coffee table. They had just finished rounding up plates and coffee cups and were relaxing in the living room, going over the events of the day.

“Just be grateful that everyone from the chapel didn’t show up,” Cassie answered, yawning. “These walls would have burst wide open. It would have been a geriatric nightmare. Speaking of absenteeism, why wasn’t Steady Eddy at the service?”

“I told you, Edward couldn’t get away. His surgery schedule is set weeks in advance.” In truth, Laura was relieved. Somehow she couldn’t picture her fiancé here in Middlewood, Connecticut, as she went on with her everyday life. She burst out laughing, trying to imagine the prominent heart surgeon wearing one of her aunt’s prissy smocks, helping her clean the house.

“No fair,” Cassie said. “You’ve got to share your private jokes.”

There was no stopping Cassie once she got started on the defectiveness of the male species, and Laura had no desire to discuss Edward’s flaws. “I was thinking about Ellen with all those bandages, the night we climbed down the tree. I wish she could have been here today. But you know Ellen, busy saving the world.”

“How is our little Florence Nightingale? It must be months since she last called me. Any man in her life?”

“Dr. Ellen Gavin is fine,” Laura said with affection. “And the phone works both ways. To answer your question, yes, there is a

man. Although I don't know how she makes time for any kind of personal life, with the schedule she keeps."

"There's always time for a personal life. Trust me, I know."

Laura didn't know how Cassie did it, flitting from relationship to relationship without getting involved—or hurt. When it came to men, Cassie claimed she knew exactly what she wanted; the problem was that what she wanted changed from week to week. When it came to business, however, she was as sharp as a razor. Cassie was one of the town's most successful real estate brokers. Her rise to the top of her field was a result of hard work and shrewd planning, but to Laura it was nothing short of amazing.

Ellen Gavin, too, amazed Laura. Even as a child, Ellen had known exactly what she wanted to do with her life, letting nothing stand in her way. Years later, it was that same will, that same determination, that had helped save Laura's life. When Laura first became sick and decided to leave Jake, it was Ellen who had convinced her that life was worth living. Even though Ellen had just become a resident in internal medicine, she was the one who had made sure that Laura had the best team on staff—the oncologist, the anesthesiologist, the surgeon, the chemotherapist. And despite her heavy schedule, it was Ellen who had been there for her day and night throughout the entire ordeal.

"It was Ellen who introduced me to Edward," Laura said to Cassie. "She has a lot of friends at the hospital. Maybe if you're nice to her, she could set you up with someone who just might convince you to settle down. Didn't your mother always want you

to marry a doctor? How about a psychiatrist?"

"Are you insinuating that I'm not nice, I have bad taste in men and I need therapy?" Feigning indignation, Cassie reached behind her and picked up a throw pillow.

"No, don't!" Laura squealed. But it was too late. Feathers were flying everywhere. "I tried to warn you," she rebuked her friend lightly, "but as usual, you just ignored me."

"Did you say something?" Cassie said, and Laura laughed. Cassie rose from the couch. "I guess this means you want me to sweep up. What a mess!"

"It's nothing compared to the mess before I cleaned up for the gathering. This place was like a warehouse. Aunt Tess had put everything into boxes and stacked them all in here. It was as if she had known she would be leaving this house."

"Spooky," Cassie said. "Where are the boxes now?"

"Forget the broom, and come with me."

Cassie raised an inquisitive eyebrow, and followed Laura through the archway. "I'd forgotten how dismal this place was," she said with a shudder. "You should probably renovate before putting it on the market. You could make a tidy profit. What about adding a breakfast nook at the back of the kitchen? And a skylight would do wonders."

"I don't want to spend the time, not to mention money I don't have. Edward keeps asking when I'm coming home." She pulled open the door to the pantry off the kitchen. "Voilà!" she sang out.

The pantry had been intended as a maid's room when the

house was built in the early 1900s. Layers of wallpaper and different markings on the walls indicated that at one time the room might have been used as a den, a guest room or even a sewing room. As a child, Laura would sneak in there to daydream, and in her fantasies, her mother would be sewing something special—a Halloween costume, a new party dress, Laura's wedding gown....

Piled up in the middle of the room were dozens of boxes. "You should have seen what I threw out," Laura said. "There were hundreds of rusty tins on the shelves, and over there—" she pointed to the far wall "—barrels of flour had turned black. I had to disinfect before moving in the boxes. These boxes, by the way, are my next project. I can't just throw them away without first checking what's inside."

"You sure have your work cut out for you," Cassie said. "I'll be glad to help—but not tonight. This puppy is off to bed, and I suggest you do the same. It's been a long day."

Laura turned to her friend and hugged her. "Thanks so much for being here for me, Cass. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"You always say that, but the truth is, you're the strong one here. You're the fighter, the survivor." Laura opened her mouth to protest, but Cassie cut her off with a quick peck on the cheek. "You don't have to walk me to the door. I'll let myself out. If I know you as well as I think I do, you won't call it a night until you've gone through every box with a magnifying glass."

Sometimes it seemed as if Cassie knew Laura better than Laura knew herself. But on one particular point, Cassie was wrong. Laura was not strong. There were times when she felt she couldn't go on, times when she didn't want to go on. Whenever she thought about going through life without having children...

She waited for the click of the front door before reaching for one of the smaller boxes in the middle of the room. Wrapped in silver cellophane, it was tied with a faded crimson bow. It was one of her own old memory boxes, she realized, one of the many she had not taken with her after she had married Jake and moved into his house. I wanted us to have a fresh start, she thought as she removed the bow.

She tore away the wrapping and hesitated. Weren't some memories better left buried? As if taunting her to take that scary trip down memory lane, the box lay there, unadorned on the pantry floor. She took a deep breath and lifted the lid.

The first thing she pulled out was a snapshot of her and Cassie proudly dressed in full Girl Scout garb, marching down Saw Mill Road in the Veterans' Day Parade. She smiled. Going down memory lane wasn't so bad, after all. Next, she picked up a picture of Jake in his gold-tasseled uniform, playing the trumpet. That is, trying to play the trumpet. His cheeks were puffed out, his eyes bulging out of their sockets.

Then she picked up a photo of Cynthia.

Cynthia was wearing a white satin gown she had designed and made herself. With its deep décolleté, and a side slit that ended

at the hip, it was so risqué that Cynthia's mother had forbidden her to wear it. But Cynthia had been determined, and what Cyn wanted, Cyn got. The night of the Sweetheart Dance, she told her mother that Jake would be picking her up at Laura's house. She put on a plain, high-neck dress, then drove over to Laura's, where the girls spent hours on their makeup and fixing their hair. Laura had always felt awkward next to her chic, lithe friend, but she had to admit, by the time Cynthia had finished working on her, she looked good. In fact, for the first time in her life, Laura felt beautiful. She slipped into her gown, a fairylike creation of dawn-tinted crepe, and twirled around and around, feeling wonderful and weightless.

Cynthia then wriggled her body into her sleek, tight dress. She was not only sensuous, she was majestic, and wore her confidence like a crown. Laura looked at her with awe. "After you, Your Royal Highness," she said, curtsying.

"You're the one who looks like a princess," Cynthia said, then added jokingly, "I'll be watching you tonight, so don't get any notions about my prince!"

Laura studied the photo, trying to recall the name of the boy who had taken her to the dance. That night, all she had thought about was that he wasn't Jake. David? Donald? I guess some things aren't worth remembering, she thought now with a twinge of regret.

But there were some things a person couldn't forget.

An old pain came hurtling back. Cynthia had told her mother

that she'd be spending the night at Laura's.

Laura pulled out more snapshots. Here was Cyn waving goodbye after spring break. Laura remembered how she, Ellen, Cassie and Cynthia had huddled together at the station, as though New York was a thousand miles away. And here was Cyn walking down the aisle, wearing a stunning gown of silk and lace, which she had designed and sewn herself. And here was Cyn, hair and blouse drenched, holding her pink, naked one-year-old son after giving him a bath.

She fingered the photograph of Cynthia with Cory. It might have been the last one ever taken of her once-best friend.

She thought back to that final day, that final hour, that final moment in the hospital when Cynthia had opened her eyes for the last time.

"Take care of my men," she'd said.

And Laura had. Eight months later she and Jake were married.

What was it Rhett Butler had said to Scarlett? It must be convenient having the first wife's permission.

Oh, Cyn, I certainly made a mess of things, didn't I?

Maybe resurrecting old memories wasn't such a good idea. With each recollection came a fresh wave of pain.

Laura's thoughts strayed back to her childhood. Aunt Tess had been a cold and stern caretaker. Yet in spite of the resentment Laura felt, she was filled with pity. Poor Aunt Tess. The woman had never known the meaning of happiness.

Before Laura could stop herself, she started to cry. Not the

low, broken whimpering that, as a child, she used to smother by burying her head under her pillow, but deep, loud, heart-wrenching sobs that threatened to tear her body into pieces. Whether it was because of her reminiscing or because she was exhausted made no difference; her anguish was an acute physical pain that wouldn't ease. She crossed her arms tightly over her chest, rocking herself to and fro as if her spirit were the mother, her body the child. Through a small window in the kitchen, the late night's moon cast its rays over the boxes. Outside, the wind had picked up, and she could hear the insistent tinkling of the chimes hanging from the eaves. She sat there for what seemed like hours, weeping for all the losses she and those she had known had endured, until finally her sobs dwindled into whimpers, and exhausted, she lay down and fell asleep.

Chapter Two

Morning was bright and crisp. Last night's lusty wind had waned to a breeze, its cool breath lingering in the air. In the margins of the roads, sunlight streamed through the trees, exposing hints of autumn's palette dappling the leaves. Summer was coming to an end.

Jake stood under the overhang outside the front door, pressing the bell. When no one answered, he tried the large brass knocker. He knew she was home. A Ford Taurus was parked in the driveway leading to the garage behind the house. On the rear bumper, a sticker indicated that it was a rental. "What normal person in New York City owns a car?" he imagined her saying.

He stepped back from under the overhang and glanced around. To Jake, the charming Colonial reproduction was a dignified testament to days gone by. He'd always been drawn to this style of architecture, with its direct outlines and sturdy proportions. Especially pleasing to his eye was the way the chimney jutted out from the center of the roof into the sky, majestically uniting hearth and heaven. He'd always believed there was beauty in this kind of design, and that in this kind of beauty lay truth.

Unfortunately, years of neglect had caused both aesthetic and structural damage. Alongside the house, pieces of clapboard had broken off, exposing wood studs. He looked at the broken fence

and frowned. Laura hadn't lived here in a long time, but the house still belonged to her, and she should have seen to its upkeep.

He walked down the pathway and rested his gaze on the window of Laura's old bedroom. Was that where she was sleeping these nights? Or had she moved into one of the larger rooms? He couldn't imagine her spending one hour, let alone one night, in her aunt's room, even though it had once belonged to her parents.

He made his way around to the back of the house. The steeply pitched roof, which covered a lean-to and sloped down almost to the ground, was in need of repair. Several of the shingles had flipped over, and many were missing altogether. The yard here was as unkempt as it was out front. Weeds had overgrown any signs of healthy plant life, and the once trimmed bushes now resembled a forest. He vaguely remembered a garden, and for a moment he could have sworn he smelled roses. But the memory slipped away like a dream, and the scent was gone.

After completing a circle of the entire property, he found himself back at the front door. Where could she be at eight in the morning? Wanting to apologize for his outburst at the chapel, he'd come by early to make sure he'd catch her at home.

A movement at the living room window caught his eye. Suspended from a swag of faded green velvet, white lace curtains flapped in the breeze like laundry on a line. He cut across the lawn, crashing his way through the overgrown grass and weeds.

What was wrong with that woman? Maybe this wasn't New

York, but she just couldn't go around leaving her windows open! He pushed aside the fabric and peeked inside. Why was there a light on? He knew she liked it bright, but drawing the curtains would have supplied all the light she needed. She must have left it on all night. His concern mushroomed, and he sprinted back to the front door to try the bell again.

This time if she doesn't answer, he told himself, I'm going to climb in through the open window.

He knew he was being irrational—she could be asleep, or in the shower—but still, he had the unsettling feeling that something was wrong. It was that radar again, the radar she'd always said was between them. Normally he didn't go in for all that psycho mumbo jumbo, but it was weird how she used to finish his sentences or tell him what was bothering him when he tried to keep it all inside. Maybe now the radar was working the other way. How else could he explain the nagging in his gut?

Maybe I can pick the lock, he thought, not thrilled with the prospect of climbing onto the splintered wood ledge of the living room window. He pulled out the Swiss Army knife from his back pocket. Rattling the knob to test its give, he was surprised when it turned in his hand. It didn't make any sense. Laura had always been too trusting and a little naive, but she would never have left the door unlocked all night.

He entered the hallway and scrambled up the steep staircase, his footsteps thumping loudly on the threadbare carpet. "Laura!" he called, convinced she was lying unconscious somewhere in the

house. "Laura!"

Once inside her childhood bedroom, he allowed himself a moment to think. On the nightstand was a photograph in an expensive-looking frame. His eyes lingered on the couple in the picture. Laura looked exquisite, in a long black-pearl satin gown that slid off her right shoulder, her hair swept back into an elegant knot. The man standing next to her was dressed in full tux, his arm resting familiarly on her exposed shoulder. On the window behind them, a heavy brocaded green curtain served as a backdrop.

In a flash Jake recalled the green velvet swag in the living room. What if she hadn't left the window open? What if someone had broken in? What if...?

He ran out of the room and down the stairs, taking them three at a time. But she wasn't in the living room, or anywhere else, as far as he could see. And then, standing in the hallway, just outside the kitchen, he heard a faint, low moan coming from the pantry, no louder than the mew of a kitten.

He rushed into the small room and for a moment his heart stopped beating. She was lying on the floor, motionless. He bent low and nudged her gently.

She blinked her eyes open and stared at him blankly. "What are you doing here?" she sputtered, her blue-green eyes coming to life. "How did you get in?"

"The question is," he began, "what are you doing here?" A small naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, and a haze of sunlight

from the kitchen window provided the only light. Looking at the boxes, he tried to assess the situation. Dozens of photographs were piled in a heap, and in a far corner, a stool lay overturned. "Are you all right? When I saw you lying there, I was afraid... I thought..."

"Of course I'm all right!" She pulled herself to a sitting position. "What's the matter with you? Don't I look all right?"

"Don't move. You may have a concussion, or a broken bone —"

"As I recall, we're no longer married. I stopped taking orders from you years ago."

"As I recall, you never took orders from anyone, least of all me." He had intended his remark to be as caustic as hers, but the relief flooding through him had washed away the sting. She wasn't hurt. A little irritable and a whole lot ruffled, but she was okay. He eyed her critically. She was still wearing the black linen suit she'd worn at the service, only now it was dusty and wrinkled. Her hair was a mass of stringy tangles, her complexion pale and pasty. Under reddened eyes were large puffy bags, a sure sign that she had been crying. "Actually, you don't look so hot," he said matter-of-factly. "What did you do, spend the night here?" When she didn't answer, he reached out and touched her cheek. "My God, you're like ice! You did sleep here. Here, let me help you up." He knelt behind her and placed his arms around her belly, just above her hips.

"Why are you doing the Heimlich maneuver?" she snapped.

"I'm not choking." She tried to stand, but her legs gave way, and she fell back against him.

In one fluid motion, he was standing again, sweeping her into his arms.

"Who do you think you are, coming in here and manhandling me like this! Put me down!"

"I see you're feeling better. Back to your old self again." He rotated the front of her body into his chest, pinning her arms between them. "Still the same hell-bent ball of fire, all right. It's good to know that some things in life don't change."

"You have some nerve," she hissed, squirming in his arms. "Where are you taking me?"

"No need to thank me," he said, releasing his grip and dumping her onto the living room couch. "I wouldn't want you to exert yourself." He felt her eyes burning on his back as he walked over to the window and banged it shut.

"Now what are you doing?" she called as he retreated into the hallway.

He returned with a bright red afghan. "To answer your question, I'm taking care of you. Apparently, you have forgotten how. Now, are you going to cover yourself or do I have that honor?"

"My fingers..." A look of pain flashed across her face, stripping away the veil of her defiance. "These pins and needles feel more like knives."

He pulled the blanket over her legs and sat down at the foot of

the couch. "Serves you right for leaving the door unlocked." He reached over and began kneading the life back into her fingers. "It's payback time. Instant karma."

"Ouch! That hurts! I suppose you're enjoying this."

"Keep still."

"I thought you didn't go in for all that stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Karma and all the other mystical forces of the universe. And for your information, karma is about ethical consequences, not stupid mistakes. And it's never instant. Although sometimes I think that nothing ever changes, at least not in one lifetime. You even said so yourself. But don't worry, maybe there's truth to this reincarnation theory. Maybe next time around, you'll finally get it right.... Am I babbling?"

"If you're going to quote me, do it right. My exact phrase was 'Some things in life don't change.' And yeah, you're babbling."

"All better," she said, pulling her hands away. "You missed your calling, Jake. You should have been a doctor. Tell me, Dr. Logan, will I be able to play the piano now that you've saved my hands?"

On the coffee table, several charcoal pencils were neatly lined up next to a sketchbook. He leaned forward and picked up the book. "And they're such talented hands," he said, leafing through her drawings. "I see you haven't given up your art."

"I did give it up, when we got married. I started again after the divorce. Remember my dream? To make a living from my

painting? I never gave that up.”

The way she talked, you'd think their marriage had been one long exercise in sacrifice—on her part. He picked up one of the pencils and rotated it in his fingers. Laura had always been quick to delegate blame. That, apparently, hadn't changed. He studied her carefully. Maybe some things in life never changed, but some things sure as hell did. This new Laura, well, he hadn't completely figured her out yet, but something was different. She was still headstrong and stubborn, with a quick, hot temper, but he saw something else, something he'd never seen before. The old Laura wouldn't have wasted a minute feeling sorry for herself, as her puffy red eyes and the splotches on her cheeks clearly indicated.

He lowered his gaze. Even though she lay curled under the blanket, he could picture the curves of her shapely legs. He couldn't erase from his mind the sight of her when he'd dropped her onto the couch. Her rumpled black skirt had been pushed up high above her knees, exposing the smooth, creamy flesh of her thighs. It had always amazed him how quickly she could arouse him with just a turn of her leg, a flash of her eyes—that was another thing that hadn't changed.

He thought back to the night he had proposed, when she had come to him so eagerly, so ready. They had always been friends, good friends, and Cory had adored her. It was only natural that they would drift closer and eventually marry. He would have been content with just companionship, and Cory needed a mother, but what she brought to the marriage was an added bonus.

No, they'd never had problems in that department.

In the hallway, the grandfather clock rang out four short chimes, indicating that it was a quarter past the hour. "Doesn't that thing bother you?" he asked, replacing the pencil in its ordered, straight row. "It would drive me crazy, ringing out like that every fifteen minutes."

"You get used to it. A person can get used to anything.... Jake?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry I yelled at you. I know you were only trying to help. It was a stupid thing to do, falling asleep in the pantry. Cassie was here, and after she left, I forgot to lock the front door. I was so tired, and it was such a long day—"

"Forget it. I'm just glad you're all right."

She sat up and wrapped her arms around her bent knees. "Jake?"

"What?"

"Do you remember this afghan?"

He grinned. She must be a mind reader. Once again, he recalled the night he had proposed, when he had said he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, when he had said he wanted her to be a mother to Cory. They had taken the blanket out to Freeman's Pond and lain under the stars, talking, dreaming, planning. "Yeah, I remember."

"We had some good times, didn't we?" she asked, her eyes meeting his. "I mean, they weren't all bad, were they?" Without

warning, two plump tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Laura...”

“I don’t know what’s the matter with me,” she said, her lips twisting down. “Ever since I’ve been back, I’ve been crazy. Maybe it’s remembering how my aunt treated me. Maybe it’s just being here in Middlewood after so many years. Either I’m laughing or crying, or doing both at the same time.”

He pulled her toward him, closing the distance between them. Stifling a sob, she slipped into his arms and buried her face against his neck. Her tears flowed easily. He held her in his embrace, feeling the last of her defenses melting away like a late-spring snow. The scent of her natural perfume floated in the air, and he inhaled deeply. And then, ever so slowly, his hands traveled a wavy path down to the small of her back.

“Oh, no.” She stiffened in his arms. “I can’t do this.”

“You can’t do what?” he asked, feigning ignorance. He knew what she was thinking. Was it his fault she had misinterpreted his intentions? “Let someone take care of you? You act as if it were a sign of weakness.”

She wriggled out of his hold. “What do you want from me? Why did you come here?”

He looked at her coolly. “You know what your problem is? You don’t need anyone. You like playing the martyr.” He teased her lips with his fingers. “Tell me, doesn’t it get lonely up there, alone in your ivory tower?”

“Stop it,” she said, recoiling from his touch. “Answer me,

Jake. Why are you here?"

He leaned back into one of the sofa pillows and sighed heavily. "You probably won't believe me, but I came to apologize."

"You, apologize? For what?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"For yesterday. I shouldn't have said the things I said. You had your reasons for walking out of the marriage, even if I don't agree with them."

"So, we're back to that again. Your apology makes me sound like the bad guy."

"Come on, Laura. This isn't easy for me. Don't make me grovel."

"Now that would be interesting." She stared at him, and then shrugged. "Apology accepted. I'm still not sure what you're up to, but I have to admit, humility becomes you."

This was the Laura he remembered, all right, all spit and vinegar. But he was willing to overlook her attitude. For the sake of peace, he told himself. It had nothing to do with how her lips had felt under his touch, as soft as a whisper. "Truce?"

"Truce." She picked up a stray goose feather and blew it into the air. It spiraled to the floor, landing in the same spot where it had been lying. "Last night Cassie had a fight with a pillow—the pillow lost. I should probably clean up these feathers before I start tracking them through the house."

He made a motion to rise. "Sit. I'll take care of it."

"No, leave it. Given the condition of this place, getting rid of a few feathers would be a drop in the bucket. Cassie says I should

renovate before I put it on the market, but I think I should just clean it up as best I can and sell it the way it is.”

“So that’s it? You’ve decided to sell?” Although he hadn’t spent much time in the house, he felt a sense of loss. It had been his father’s first restoration project, long before Jake was born.

Dotted with old Colonial-style homes, Middlewood had once been a sleepy little New England town. Charles Logan, Jake’s father, was going to restore these old homes to their original beauty and make his fortune in the doing, but the business had never become the success he had envisioned. Eventually Jake’s parents grew tired of the harsh northeast winters and retired to Florida, leaving the business to Jake. Under his adept management, restoration gradually gave way to construction, and the business flourished.

“I haven’t decided anything,” Laura said. “I’ve even been considering keeping the house, but the thought of living here, in these conditions...”

Jake looked around with a keen eye, but it didn’t take someone in construction to see that the interior had gone downhill. The wallpaper was peeling, its pattern of white roses now yellow with age. All the baseboards were scuffed and splintered, and on the far wall, the window panes were cracked, their wooden frames damaged by water. But the builder in Jake knew that it would take more than cosmetic repairs to whip the house into shape. “You should probably open the place up,” he said. “Maybe knock down that wall in the hallway.”

“That costs money. If I do decide to keep it, I’m going to do only what’s absolutely necessary. The rest can wait. Not that I’d move back permanently, but it might be nice to have a hideaway. A home away from home.” A frown crossed her brow.

“And the problem is...?”

“You know what my childhood was like. This house doesn’t exactly evoke pleasant memories.”

In spite of her gloomy expression, he grinned. “They can’t all be bad. What about all those get-togethers you had, the ones you didn’t invite me to? What did you girls do at those hen parties, anyway? Besides man bashing, or at our age, boy bashing.”

“Correction. I did invite you, and a lot of other boys from school, but Aunt Tess wouldn’t let any of you into the house.” She sighed. “But I suppose this place will always feel like home, regardless of its condition or Aunt Tess. And you’re right. I did have some good times here, with Cass and Ellen...and Cynthia.” She averted her eyes when she spoke his first wife’s name. “But I feel my aunt’s presence everywhere. Home or not, this place can be downright eerie.”

“Maybe it’s haunted,” he said, trying to appear serious.

“This from the man who defines paranormal as ‘indefinable hogwash’? Am I to believe that your definition of reality now includes ghosts?”

“That’s why I’m in this line of work,” he joked. “I enjoy digging up ancient burial grounds for new homes, and all that sort of thing.”

Even though her eyes were laughing, she looked at him reprovingly. "Speaking of work, don't you have a job to go to?"

"That," he said, "is one of the perks in running your own business. I make my own priorities." If only that were true. Although it was still early, he knew that his secretary would be frantic. Mary liked knowing where to reach him in case of an emergency. "And my first priority today is making sure you're all right."

"I'm fine, really." She lay back and pulled the blanket up to her chin. "I'm just a little cold."

"Do you want me to make a fire? What about some brandy?"

"A fire in September? As for the brandy, it's not even eight-thirty! I have to meet the lawyer today, and that's all I need, for him to think I'm some kind of lush. Not that there's any brandy in the house, anyway. You know how Aunt Tess felt about alcohol. But seriously, I would think you have something more important to do than baby-sit me. In the old days nothing could have torn you away from your work."

"Well, the old days are gone," he said.

His words hung in the air like fog, and an uncomfortable silence fell. The only thing that could be heard was the tick, tick of the seven-foot grandfather clock in the hallway, which had marked time for over a century, punctuating the lives of previous generations.

Jake rose from the couch. "Like I told you," he said with forced brightness, "I get to set my own priorities. And right now,

I intend to get something hot into you.” He headed off to the kitchen before she could even think about responding to what sounded like a double entendre. If she had never been married to him, she might have blushed.

“Do you still take cream?” he called from the kitchen.

“Yes!” she called back. “But I don’t have any!”

“What about sugar?”

“No sugar!”

“Where’s the coffeemaker?”

“There isn’t one! Make instant!”

“Where are the mugs?”

“In the cabinet next to the sink!”

Good grief, she thought, if he calls out one more time, I’m getting off this couch and taking over. She smiled to herself. He’d always been such a klutz in the kitchen. Like the time she’d been confined to bed with the flu and he’d insisted on making dinner. At first she’d protested, saying she couldn’t eat a thing, and that he should order a pizza for himself. No, he was going to take care of her, he said. A half hour later he returned to the bedroom, carrying a bowl filled with what looked suspiciously like canned soup. “Ta-da!” his voice rang out. The next morning when she ventured into the kitchen, she found pots and pans, bowls and dishes, knives, forks and spoons all over counter, in the sink and on the stove.

In spite of being sick, in spite of having to clean up the mess, she’d seen this as one of the good times. It was one of those

rare times when he'd been there for her. And here he was again, fussing about in the kitchen, when she was feeling under the weather.

Here he was again, telling her what to do.

The phone rang on the side table next to the sofa. "Don't move!" he called from the kitchen. "I'll get it!"

"No, I've got it!... Edward! How are you?... I don't know, at least another few days, maybe a week.... I have three weeks' vacation, remember? Don't worry, we'll have plenty of time for a honeymoon. My vacation time starts all over in January.... What do you mean I'm a bum! You're just jealous because you can't take that much time off, as if you could tear yourself away from your practice for even a week.... Look, I'm a little busy at the moment. Why don't I call you tonight?... Yes, the meeting with the lawyer, and afterward, lunch with Cassandra.... No, I haven't forgotten the hospital dinner next Saturday. I'll be back before then, Friday at the latest.... Yes, I know it's a whole week away, but you'll just have to survive without me for a little while longer. I've got to go now, darling. I'll talk to you later." She hung up the phone.

"The guy in the picture, I presume," Jake said formally, standing under the archway. He was carrying a tray with two cups of black coffee. "Sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

"And I presume you didn't mean to snoop, either," she replied tersely. "What were you doing, snooping around in my bedroom? You had no right to go in there."

"I was looking for your body," he answered dryly. He set the tray onto the coffee table, next to the sketchbook. "It's ready, darling. But there was no cream, darling. You'll have to take it black, darling. Where do you think you are? In a 1940s movie? When did Cassie become Cassandra?"

Good grief, he was acting like a jealous lover. It was almost comical—and ironic. He had always been so sure of her; it had never been the other way around.

He sat down beside her. "Look, I was worried about you. I thought you'd been hurt. But you're right, I shouldn't have snooped. And I'm glad you've found someone, really I am. It's time you got on with your life. It's time you forgave yourself."

A warning bell went off in her head. "Excuse me?"

He held out his hand as if to ward her off. "Hear me out. I'm trying to bury the hatchet."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Go on..."

"Sometimes when I think about the past, I still get angry. I know it'll take me a while before I can get to where you are now, but I want you to know, I forgive you."

Their three years together came hurtling back, resurrecting resentment. "You forgive me? Just who do you think you are? If you got down on your hands and knees, I wouldn't forgive you." She took a deep, slow breath. "Tell me something, were we ever really married? Where were you all that time? I don't mean physically. You were always there physically, that is, when you weren't working—which was most of the time. But when you

were home, it was as if you were looking right through me. The only time I ever had your attention was when you were telling me what to do and how to run my life.”

His gaze slid from her face, downward. “You have my attention now,” he replied, his eyes raking her boldly. “My full attention.”

Laura knew that there was something about her when she got angry, something that either sent his libido into overdrive or made him want to throttle her. His libido, so it seemed, had won.

He reached across the couch, encircling her with his arms. Every instinct told her to push him away, every nerve in her body screaming, Run, Laura, run! She let out a gasp as he pressed his mouth on her throat, his breath warm and moist on her skin, his scent reminding her of timber and grass. “Jake, no,” she whispered into the air, not sure if she’d even said the words aloud. He ran his tongue along the side of her neck, up to the coil of her ear, sending little shivers down her spine. Her pulse throbbed wildly.

She jerked herself free. “I said no.”

“Could have fooled me.” His voice was dripping with mockery. “Like I said, some things in life don’t change.”

In an instant she was on her feet, her face hot with humiliation. She wanted to lash out, yell, throw something. On his lips he wore that awful, smug smile, but it was his cool, knowing eyes that sobered her. “In case you haven’t noticed,” she spoke in a dull, flat voice, “I’m not your plaything anymore. That’s all you

ever wanted, anyway. A plaything for you, and a nanny for Cory. Poor, sweet Cory. I wish he had been mine. I wish to God I could have taken him with me. Not that you would have noticed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Something in her snapped. Words she’d kept locked up for years started pouring out in a furious torrent, and she couldn’t have stopped them if she’d tried. “Tell me something, did you ever really see him? Did you ever really see me? Well, I’ve got news for you. Some things do change. I have a full life now, which includes an attentive, caring man who knows I exist. And let me tell you something else, Mr. Macho, you made the same mistake with Cyn you made with me.”

“Be careful, Laura...”

She ignored his warning and continued her tirade. “Did she ever tell you she gave up going to college to become your wife? Ever since we were kids, she’d wanted to study design. Do you have any idea of the sacrifice she made? And speaking of Cynthia, it would have been nice if once in a blue moon, you hadn’t taken her to bed with us. I’m not talking about sex, lover-boy. Get your mind out of the gutter. I just wish that you had remembered it was me you were sleeping next to. Just once I wish you had known I was even there.”

Afraid her legs would buckle under her, she stepped back to lean against the credenza. “I loved her, too,” she said in a tired voice. “She was my best friend. Not a day goes by when I don’t think of her. But she’s dead, Jake. She’s gone.”

He gave her a hostile glare. “What are you talking about? What does Cynthia have to do with us? Let me remind you that you were the one who left me. Where do you get off thinking you were blameless?”

“Go home,” she said without expression. “I have a life to get on with.”

He stared past her for a long moment and finally stood up. With hands clenched stiffly at his sides, he turned on his heels and left the room.

She slumped down on the couch, listening to his footsteps thundering in the hallway. The front door opened with a creak, then slammed shut. From the living room she could hear the squeal of his tires as he pulled out of her driveway.

In the hallway the grandfather clock erupted in a series of chimes. She sat in the living room a little while longer, and when she finally reached for her coffee, she wasn’t surprised to find that it had grown cold.

Chapter Three

It was close to nine-thirty by the time Laura finally found the energy to rise from the couch. On the way to the kitchen, she caught her reflection in the antique mirror hanging next to the clock. Her face was ashen and smeared with mascara, her hair damp and tangled like a fallen nest after a storm.

Good Lord, had Jake seen her like this? She thought of Cinderella before the ball. Except in Laura's version of the story, there was no fairy godmother, and the prince got to see Cinderella at her worst.

After downing a glass of juice and some dry toast, she climbed the stairs sluggishly, her body still aching from sleeping on the floor. Inside her room she glanced in the mirror over the bureau. Her linen suit was a rumpled mess, her panty hose twisted at the ankles. This is what she had worn at the ball, except there hadn't been a ball; she'd gone to her aunt's funeral, and there her prince had rebuked her.

He had no right to talk to me that way, she thought. Who does he think he is? And why should I care that he saw me looking so disheveled? For that matter, why should I care that he didn't bother to show up at the house yesterday after the service? Not that it makes any difference, but he did come by this morning. Except he forgot to bring the glass slipper.

She recalled the way he'd pulled her onto his lap, teasing

her, mocking her, expecting her to react exactly as she had, and once again her anger rose. She was angry with herself for having responded. Angry with him for being a jerk.

This was no Cinderella story. The man was no prince.

She watched herself in the full-length mirror on the bedroom door as she stripped off her wrinkled suit. Here I am again, she thought. I seem to follow me everywhere. Her eyes swept over the reflection of her petite frame, stopping to appraise her toned legs, her flat stomach, her narrow waist. Her gaze continued upward to her firm breasts, visible through a sheer rose-pink bra. Not bad, she admitted reluctantly, remembering when she'd been heavier. She'd always been self-conscious about her body. Even now, she focused on what displeased her, noting the lines of fatigue on her forehead and the dark circles under her eyes. Maybe I should get rid of all the mirrors in the house, she thought.

She pulled her green fleece robe from the closet and went into the bathroom. Still wearing her bra and panty hose, she reached into the shower and turned on the faucet, wincing as a brown liquid trickled out. She knew she would have to wait five minutes before the water started running hot and clear. The plumbing was shot. Coronary artery disease, she imagined Edward saying. Eroded arteries caused by fatty streaks along the inner walls.

What would the meticulous Dr. Palmer's reaction have been to her appearance this morning? He could never acknowledge that she could be anything less than perfect. The prestigious heart surgeon probably would have had a coronary himself.

Be fair, she reprimanded herself. Isn't this what you always wanted? To be perfect in someone's eyes? To sit up there, high on that proverbial pedestal?

Tell me, doesn't it get lonely up there, alone in your ivory tower?

Be quiet, she imagined herself telling Jake. I'm happy now. Edward and I are perfect for each other. You shouldn't put him down; he's a lot like you—handsome, bright, driven by his career. Oh yes, there's one more thing. Like you, he doesn't want children. Except there's one small difference. You don't want more children, and he doesn't want any. But any way you look at it, it comes down to no children in my life, now that I no longer have Cory or the ability to conceive. So you see? Edward and I are made for each other. What's that, Jake? Why did I leave you, only to hook up with someone who's a lot like you? The difference between the two of you is that he knows I'm around. He adores me. In his eyes I'm perfect.

She ran her fingers along the bridge of her nose. Well, almost perfect. Edward was always urging her to get that little bump removed. He didn't see it as an addition to her character, as Jake always had.

Maybe she would have her nose fixed, after all.

Looking in the vanity mirror over the sink—oh, those damn, cruel mirrors!—she rubbed her hand against the side of her neck. With clarity she remembered the sick feeling she'd had when she'd first discovered the swelling. She'd tried to ignore it, hoping

it was only a sign of another cold—the third in two months. But the swelling didn't go away, and she was exhausted all the time, often waking up in the middle of the night in a sweat. It was Ellen who had insisted that she undergo tests, and it was Ellen who had diagnosed her with Hodgkin's disease.

A chill spread through Laura's body as she recalled her friend's words. She remembered how the air in the room had been suddenly sucked away. This is what drowning must feel like, she'd thought with cold detachment. Even though Ellen had insisted that the prognosis was excellent, Laura had felt as though she'd been given a death sentence. It was then she realized that whether she lived for fifty more years or only one, she didn't want to spend whatever time she had left in a one-sided relationship. She deserved more. It was then she had decided to leave Jake.

Her fingers left the base of her neck, slowly moving down between her breasts, to the left side of her upper abdomen. After the diagnosis, her spleen had been removed and she had undergone a regimen of chemotherapy. The scar from the surgery was gone, only a long telltale line remaining. The first time she'd spent the night with Edward, two years ago, he'd remarked that the surgeons had done an excellent job, that Laura was a good healer. She was a lucky woman, he'd added jokingly, telling her she'd be a good candidate for a facelift when the time came. She'd punched him playfully in the shoulder.

Her incision may have healed, but the wound from the chemotherapy would never go away. She recalled the oncologist's

words, that dark day a lifetime ago. Dr. Waring had told her, as gently as possible, that as a result of the treatment, Laura would likely never be able to have children.

A lucky woman. Lucky? She supposed she was. She was alive, wasn't she? She had been in remission for almost five years, which according to many was the magic yardstick for being considered cured.

She pressed her hand across the flatness of her belly. Edward was always complimenting her on her slim, youthful shape. She was well preserved for an old lady of thirty-three, he liked to say in jest. Slowly, she inched her hand down to the satiny expanse of her firm thighs, trying to remember the last time she and Edward had made love. Sex was no longer an important part of her life, hadn't been for a long time. Trying to conjure up the image of Edward's face, she told herself she was lucky to have found someone who felt the same way she did.

A lucky woman. She frowned. When had she put sex on the back burner? When she left Jake, she admitted to herself. She'd once read that sex was often the last thing to go in a relationship; she now questioned if it had been the only thing, outside of being a mother to Cory, that had kept her in the marriage. If it hadn't been for the sex, would she have left a lot sooner? She considered what her life might have been like. She might have met someone else and had a child of her own, before the cure for her terrible disease had left her sterile.

Tell the truth, Laura. It wasn't only the sex that kept you and

Jake together. At least not on your part. After he had proposed to her that night at Freeman's Pond, they had lain under the stars for hours, talking about the future. Her happiness had been complete, and she had believed with all her heart that it would endure.

She removed her bra and rolled down her panty hose, every muscle in her body screaming in protest. She stepped into the shower. For a long while she just stood there, immobile under the rusty showerhead, allowing the steamy, now clear stream to beat against her face. After she had arrived at the house two days ago, she had immediately gone to work scrubbing down the upstairs bathroom, and afterward, replacing her aunt's face and body soaps with her own special preferences. She'd always had a penchant for expensive toiletries—it was her one personal luxury, she liked to tell herself. But she found herself wondering why she had brought so many of her things here in the first place.

Just how long was she planning to stay?

Still lingering in the air, the smell of cleaning disinfectant assaulted her nostrils, taking her back to that Saturday in December at the indoor community pool. It was the winter she turned twelve, and she had just finished her first period. Jake had accidentally-on-purpose bumped into her under the water. Pressing his body against hers, he dragged her poolside as if he were rescuing her from drowning. Big hero. All he wanted was to cop a feel off her newly budding breasts. But as angry as she was, she also felt a tingling in her stomach, although at the time

she couldn't identify the sensation. "I think she needs artificial respiration," Jake announced to all their friends. She pushed him away and ran off to the lockers, Cassie and Cynthia following closely behind.

Like I said, some things in life don't change.

It's true, Laura thought now—some things never change. Jake was still the same cocky adolescent. Every time she thought about what had happened earlier that morning, she felt her blood churning.

There you go again, Laura. Can't you ever tell the truth? Sure, you loved him and for you it wasn't just the sex that kept you in the marriage, but let's be honest here—the sex was good. Once again she caught herself thinking about the night he had proposed. Admit it, Laura, it wasn't just the talking you remember so well. And speaking of sex, didn't it feel nice, that day at the community pool so long ago, when he pushed his cool, bare chest against the thin layer of your bathing suit top? Haven't you always regretted, one little bit, running off to the lockers before he had a chance to perform mouth-to-mouth?

She picked up her favorite soap, My Secret Sin, and her body sponge from the caddy over the faucet, and began washing her arms and legs. Gradually, the cleansing gave way to a slow massage, the nylon both fleecy and scratchy against her skin. The aroma of the scented suds merged with the memory of Jake's woody scent, blotting out the last traces of disinfectant. She closed her eyes. Once again she tried to picture Edward's face,

and once again she failed. “Go away, Jake,” she moaned into the vapor. “Some things in life do change.” Oblivious to the groaning in the pipes behind the wall, she stood under the slow, hot flow, and then, dropping the sponge, slid her hand down her soap-streaked belly, seeking the softness below.

She was thinking of him three hours later as she sat at a table outside the Café St. Gabriel in Ridgefield, sipping a glass of chardonnay. Although Jake had always preferred to dine at what he called less “artsy” places like Joe’s Burger Hut or Mama Rosa’s Pizza Pub, he had taken her here from time to time to please her. A neighbor to Middlewood, Ridgefield was acclaimed for its restaurants, and the café was one of Laura’s favorites.

The trendy French restaurant hadn’t changed in the time she’d been away. Inside, heavy wooden beams lined the ceiling, and the far wall boasted a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace. The décor outside, with its provincial blue-and-yellow tablecloths, accentuated a French country motif and was as welcoming as it was inside. The day had warmed up unexpectedly, and the patio was filled with patrons enjoying what remained of summer.

A voice drifted into her consciousness. “Would you like something with your wine, Madame Logan?”

“Uh, no thank you,” Laura answered, startled out of her reverie by the sound of her married name. She’d taken back her maiden name, Matheson, when she’d left Jake. “I’m waiting for a friend.” She glanced down at her watch, a gift from Edward on her last birthday. The polished stainless steel case of the Cartier

gleamed in the sunshine, the numbers on the mother-of-pearl dial showing that Cassie was fifteen minutes late.

“What about an appetizer in the meantime? May I suggest our house smoked salmon? Or perhaps you’d prefer the steamed mussels?”

She looked up at the stocky, well-dressed man hovering over her. They sure pay their waiters well, she thought, taking note of his Armani suit. “I’d like to wait for my friend, if you don’t mind,” she said, growing impatient with his persistence.

“Forgive my impudence,” he said, as if sensing her displeasure. “I was hoping you’d recognize me. You and Monsieur Logan used to come here sometimes. If memory serves me, he always ordered the sixteen-ounce sirloin with fries on the side.” Disapproval flashed in his eyes. “But you,” he continued, now smiling, “preferred our finer selections. As I recall, your favorite was the coq au vin.”

“Michel! Michel Dubois! I’m sorry, I didn’t recognize you.” She flushed, embarrassed that she’d mistaken him, the proprietor, for a waiter.

“It’s the goatee,” he said, fingering a sparse spread of whiskers on his chin. “It even confuses my wife. Bien, here’s your friend now.” He pulled out the chair for Cassie. “Will you be having your regular?” he asked as she sat down next to Laura.

Cassie was as chic as ever, in a high-neck jade shell and a knee-length black skirt, her outfit complementing her lively green eyes and bobbed dark hair. Next to her Laura felt dowdy.

In her shower that morning, it was as if Jake had sneaked in beside her, and afterward she had wanted to cover up as much of her flesh as possible, as though to compensate for having exposed herself to his eyes—and touch. Now, sitting in the golden September sun, she was uncomfortably warm in her gray cashmere turtleneck and black wool slacks. She should have reserved a table inside.

“Yes, I’ll have the regular,” Cassie said. “How are you, Michel? And how is Madame Dubois?”

“I’m fine,” he answered. “Madame is well, too. She’s in her last month, big as a bathtub and still growing. The doctor says twins for sure.” Laura’s back stiffened in her chair. As though he had taken her gesture as a personal rebuke, Michel took on a more formal demeanor. “It’s nice to see you again, Madame Logan. I’ll send a waiter over with the menus shortly. I hope you enjoy your meal.” He nodded at the two women, and after bowing his head, walked off to another table.

There’s something wrong with me, Laura thought. Other than not being able to have children. Other than I’m having wild fantasies about the most wretched man in the world, even though I’m engaged to the most wonderful man in the world. Why is it that everywhere I go, I seem to tick someone off? I can’t go through life alienating people this way. I can’t go through life pretending that people don’t have children.

Cassie instantly picked up on Laura’s frame of mind. “Did you see him bow?” she said, lowering her head as Michel had

done, trying to make her friend laugh. “Give me a break! How pretentious can one get? Let me tell you, the man is as French as an English muffin.”

Leave it to Cassie. That woman could probably cheer up a turkey the week before Thanksgiving. “Tell me, is your regular still a gin-vermouth martini, straight up with an olive?” Laura asked, smiling in spite of her mood. “No, make that two olives. Not very French, either, I must say.”

“As if there’s anything French at all about this restaurant. Michel Dubois, my foot! His real name is Mike Dunbar and he’s from New Jersey.”

“Shhh! What if he hears you?”

Cassie waved her hand dismissively. “As if his day could be worse than mine. Last night, after I left your house, I got an offer on an estate for a smooth ten million, and this morning I found out that the mortgage company won’t finance. The whole deal fell through. That commission would have put a guest house, gazebo and pool in my backyard.”

“But you don’t own a house,” Laura said, laughing out loud at her friend’s outrageous fabrication.

“So I’ll buy one. I’ll buy your house”

“My backyard’s not that large, and you hate yard work.”

Eventually the joking settled down. Cassie sat back in her chair, her legs crossed at the knees, while Laura leaned forward, her elbows on the table.

“So tell me,” Cassie said. “How was the meeting with John this

morning? Any surprises?" She stared across the table. "Laura?"

"What? Oh, John Collins. The lawyer. It went just as I suspected. No surprises. The money's all gone. Every red cent."

A server arrived with the martini, and Cassie took a healthy swig. "If it's just as you expected," she said after he left, "what's got you so down?"

"It's like you said. My aunt got a free ride, living in the house. I can't believe she spent all the money from my parents' insurance! The will stipulated that the money was to be used for expenses, which to me includes the upkeep of the house. It's obvious she never made any repairs. What did she do with it all?"

"You already knew there was nothing left. John only confirmed it." Cassie reached across the table and took her friend's hand. "What's really going on here? This is me you're talking to."

Two doves flew into the courtyard and landed near the next table. "I've decided to keep the house," Laura said, watching the birds as they pecked at crumbs. "I know it's a mess right now, and it's dark and gloomy. But it's not hopeless. I could make it into a kind of retreat. I could spend my spare time there, painting, gardening, relaxing..."

Cassie nodded her approval. "I was hoping you'd sell so I could make a big fat commission, but hey, this is much better. I'd love to have you back again, but what does Steady Eddy say? He doesn't strike me as a small-town kind of guy."

"It's not like I'd be asking him to commute. We wouldn't

actually be living here. And if we change our minds, we can always sell.”

“You mean you haven’t consulted him?” Cassie narrowed her eyes. “Exactly when did you make this decision?”

“When you threatened to buy it,” Laura kidded. In truth, although she’d been mulling over the idea, only now had it crystallized into something tangible, something attainable. It had something to do with the sound of the cicadas in the yard, and the smell of the night air when the temperature dropped. She belonged in Middlewood, where she had grown up, and if she couldn’t move back permanently—Edward was a New Yorker through and through—at least she could visit. And she would paint, on weekends, over the holidays, on her vacations.

“Actually, I just decided now,” she said. “So tell me, what do you think?”

Cassie smiled broadly. “I think it’s a wonderful idea! So why the blues?”

“Repairs aren’t cheap. And don’t forget the property taxes.”

Cassie let out a derisive laugh. “You can’t be serious. Steady Eddy would lend you the money in a heartbeat. He’d even give it to you, no strings attached. What kind of marriage are you entering into? Don’t tell me he’s making you sign a prenup!”

“I suggested it, but he wouldn’t hear of it. One thing about Edward, he’s very generous. But the house is my responsibility, not his.”

“He’s going to be your husband. Why not let him help? You

said it yourself, repairs aren't cheap. You'll need to completely revamp the plumbing, not to mention the roof. And I imagine you'll want to paint and redecorate."

"I don't want Edward's money," Laura said firmly. "Besides, I'm not helpless." Ideas were forming in her head faster than she could speak. "I could do a lot of the work myself. Like painting the rooms and tiling the kitchen floor. I could do it over time. As for the immediate problems, like the plumbing and the roof, I could take out a loan. It's not as if I have a mortgage to pay. Aunt Tess's room is the largest, so I'll use that as my studio, once I figure out how to bring in more light. I wonder how much it would cost to double—no, triple—the size of the window. You're in the business, Cass. You could probably refer me to someone who would cut me a good deal."

"Oh." Cassie's eyes went cold. "You don't need me to cut you a deal with him."

"Don't 'oh' me. I have no intention of going to Jake for help. But even if I did, it would be strictly business."

"Right. Strictly business. I should have known. Your glum mood has nothing to do with Michel's wife being pregnant, and it has nothing to do with money."

"Don't give me that look," Laura warned. "I know what you're thinking."

Cassie raised her hand defensively. "I know you don't want to hear my opinions about Jake, but I have to tell you, I'm worried. You finally have your life in order, and there's a great guy waiting

for you in New York. I'd hate to see you screw it up."

"If you think Edward is so great," Laura said testily, "why do you always refer to him as Steady Eddy?"

"You know I'm only teasing. I think Edward's perfect for you. You're both so...organized. It's a match made in spic-and-span heaven. And you're always saying he has your best interest at heart, which is something Jake never did." Cassie studied her friend's face. "Trouble in paradise?"

"No, of course not. Edward and I are fine. Look, I'm sorry I snapped at you. I know I'm being ornery. It's just that coming back here has revived old feelings as well as old hurts. But don't worry, it's just a momentary lapse into the past. Call it a momentary lapse of sanity, if you want. Forget I ever mentioned Jake. I'll bring in a team from New York to work on the house."

"Can you?"

Laughter suddenly erupted from the table next to theirs. "Can I what?" Laura asked, studying the man seated there. With his classically handsome profile and short-cropped dark hair, he bore a striking resemblance to Edward.

"Can you forget you ever mentioned him?"

Laura's gaze left the scene at the next table and fell back on the two doves. They were now less than a foot away, squabbling over a crust of bread.

She didn't answer.

Laura knew what Cassie had been thinking.

She picked up another carton. She was planning to spend the

afternoon going through the boxes in the pantry, keeping the good memories, discarding the rest.

Her thoughts returned to the conversation at lunch. Cassie was wrong. Laura had no intention of jeopardizing her relationship with Edward.

Steady Eddy, Cassie called him.

So what if he liked things just so? So what if he was... fastidious? So was Laura. They were completely compatible. There were no ups and downs, no roller coasters in this relationship.

And no surprises, either. She sat down on the faded linoleum floor, imagining what the meticulous doctor would say about the way she was dressed now. She knew exactly what he would say—in a breezy but disapproving tone—about her old gray sweats and bunny rabbit slippers.

She debated calling him. She wanted to talk to him about keeping the house, certain he'd agree it was a good idea. A home in Connecticut would make a wonderful place for entertaining. A wonderful place to schmooze with the bigwigs who worked at the hospital—as long as he didn't have to mingle with neighbors.

She decided she would call him later.

She sliced open the top of the box with a knife. Inside was a bundle of envelopes bound together with a stretched-out rubber band. With a start she realized that these were the letters Cynthia had given to her for safekeeping. Letters written to Cynthia by a man whose existence Jake had never suspected. Letters given to

me so that Jake wouldn't find them, Laura recalled with hostility. She'd always felt like an accomplice in her friend's deception, and had resented Cynthia for involving her.

After the accident, there had been no reason for Laura to keep the letters, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to dispose of them. They were a part of Cynthia, and Laura hadn't been ready to relinquish any part of her friend, as if preserving a memory, even a shameful one, could somehow bring her back.

No, that wasn't it at all. She had kept them because she was angry. Angry with Cynthia for deceiving Jake. As long as I held on to my anger, Laura rationalized, I could justify loving my best friend's husband. I kept them to remind me of her guilt, hoping to dispel my own. I would not have married Jake if Cynthia had lived.

Cynthia had also asked her to keep a few mementos as well, but no matter how curious Laura had been, she had never once considered going through her friend's things or reading her letters. She carried the small carton into the kitchen, without further examining what was inside.

The garbage trucks would be coming by on Monday. Several of her aunt's cartons were already lined up next to the door, to be taken out to the curb for removal. Why on earth had Aunt Tess kept all this stuff? Why would anyone hang on to torn curtains and linen? Who would keep old shoes and hats? These cartons were Aunt Tess's links to the past, Laura realized, thinking about her own memory boxes. Laura hadn't thrown those out, either,

when she'd left home.

She picked up another box. Inside was a child's tea service, complete with cups and saucers, sugar bowl, creamer and teapot. Had the set belonged to her mother? She tried to picture her aunt and mother as children sitting at their kitchen table in Ridgefield, hosting a tea party for themselves and their dolls. But Tess had been six years older than Laura's mother. Would she have been interested in a child's tea party? Maybe what Reverend Barnes had said was true. Maybe Aunt Tess had been a warm and doting sister, Caroline's true caretaker.

Laura remembered another child sitting at a different kitchen table, passing a cup and saucer to a fair-haired woman. The child, wearing a brightly colored party dress, could not have been more than three years old. I was that child, Laura realized. Fingering the delicate bone china, she tried to bring the memory into focus.

The sound of the doorbell broke into her daydream. She wiped her hands on her sweatpants. Back in New York, she never would have answered the door dressed like this, but this was Middlewood. Pretentious was not a word in the town's dictionary.

The doorbell was ringing insistently, and Laura hurried through the hallway, calling "I'm coming! I'm coming!" She threw open the front door without asking who was there—something else she would never have done in New York. Under the overhang outside the front door stood a tall, thin boy. Laura hadn't seen him in five years, but she recognized him immediately. Although he wore a frown, and his cheeks were

smudged with dirt, his face was still the mirror image of Cynthia's, and like Cynthia's eyes in her final year, his were filled with sadness.

Chapter Four

“I heard you were back and I was wondering if you wanted to be on my paper route.”

Cory’s shoulders were almost level with hers. He’s so tall, Laura thought. Tall like his father. But it was Cynthia’s face she was looking at, her high exotic cheekbones, her gold-flecked hazel eyes, her smooth olive skin. “I think we should talk about this,” Laura said, trying to imitate the serious tone in Cory’s voice. “Come on in.”

He glanced inside. Shrugging, he stepped into the hallway.

She motioned for him to follow her into the kitchen. “Are you hungry? I have peanut butter cookies and cake. Marble cake with vanilla frosting. Why don’t you wash up at the kitchen sink while I fix you a snack?” she suggested, glancing at his muddy hands. “So, tell me. Are you still in Peewee? No, of course not. You’d be in Little League by now.”

“Nah, baseball’s dumb. All they do is swing a stupid bat and run around a field.” He turned on the faucet. Underneath the sink, a pipe rattled. “How come the water’s brown?”

“Give it a few seconds. It’ll run clear.” She filled a plate with cookies and squares of cake from yesterday’s gathering and placed it on the table. “I won’t be needing the paper during the week, but maybe you have a weekend deal?”

“Sure, no problem. Lots of people only get the paper on

the weekend. You know, for the comics.” The clanking of the pipes suddenly stopped, and clear water began gushing from the tap. “Tommy’s grandmother saw you at the funeral. I’m sorry about your aunt. She said you looked different, skinnier. I mean, Tommy’s grandmother said it, not your aunt. She’s dead. I don’t mean Tommy’s grandmother. She’s alive. Anyway, I’m sorry. I mean, about your aunt.”

“Thank you, Cory,” she said, suppressing a smile. She searched through her memory. Tommy? Tommy Pritchard? Wasn’t he that short, frail-looking kid who’d been in Cory’s kindergarten class? “And how is Tommy these days?”

“He’s okay.” Cory turned off the faucet and wiped his hands on a dishcloth, leaving a dirty stain in the floral pattern. Eyeing the cookies hungrily, he sat down.

“Go ahead, take one,” Laura said, pouring him a glass of milk. She sat down across from him. “Take two, if you want.”

“Dad says my teeth will rot.”

“You’ll brush when you get home. Go ahead, eat.”

He reached for a cookie and started munching. “Dad said that you were sick and that’s why you went away. Are you better now?”

Seeing him again, sitting across from him, listening to him speak, was almost more than Laura could bear. “What else did your father say?” she asked, suppressing the urge to jump up and hug him.

“He said you were never coming back. Can I have some cake,

too?”

“Help yourself. That’s what it’s here for.”

He picked up a square and popped the entire piece into his mouth. Traces of frosting dotted the sides of his face. “He lied. You came back.”

Gingerly, she reached across the table and wiped away the icing. He didn’t pull away. “Your dad didn’t lie,” she said in a thick voice. “He didn’t know I was coming back.”

“But you’re here. So what he said wasn’t true. How come you left, anyway?”

What could she say that he could understand? She thought for a moment, and then spoke slowly. “Sometimes married people, even though they still love each other, can’t live together. I got sick, and we thought the best thing I could do was go to New York. They have good doctors there. I got better, but the problems between your father and me didn’t go away.” It wasn’t the complete truth, but it was all he needed to know.

“This is where you tell me that your going away had nothing to do with me. You still love me and all that crap.”

She ignored the crass word—for now. Apparently, Cory had been given this lecture before.

He took a big swallow of milk. “Tommy’s parents got divorced. His father takes him every second weekend and buys him neat stuff. He bought him a computer. How come you never bought me a computer?”

She knew that Cory wasn’t talking about electronics. “You

aren't my natural child," she said plainly and honestly. "If you were, I would have taken you with me to New York after I got better. I wanted to come back and see you a million times, but I thought...your father and I thought...it would be better if I didn't."

"You made a mistake," Cory said, his face solemn. "You should have come." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "But that's okay. No one's perfect. Dad says even grown-ups make mistakes."

"Your father is right. No one's perfect." Especially grown-ups.

He reached for another piece of cake. "Tommy heard his grandmother say that you stole my father from my real mother. Tommy said that's why you got sick. Because God punished you."

Laura gasped. "That's a load of...crap. What did you say? You didn't believe him, did you?"

"Nah, he's crazy." Cory grinned. "Hey, you're okay, Lulu. Dad always yells at me when I say that word. He says it sounds like hell. Oops, I mean heck."

"He's right." She tried to keep her face stern, but inwardly she was smiling. He had called her Lulu. Lulu had been the first word he had ever spoken, at fourteen months, two months after Cynthia had died, and it had remained his name for her.

"I beat him up."

"Who?"

"Tommy. I told you, he's crazy. And he has a lot of uncles. You know, guys who stay over and pretend to like him. They buy him

stuff, too. But nothing like a computer. Stupid stuff. Yesterday this short guy with a big head and no neck bought him a yo-yo. How stupid is that? But I told Tommy it was the perfect present, seeing how Tommy is a yo-yo himself. He said I probably have a lot of uncles in New York. He said you probably brought me back a dozen yo-yos. So I hit him."

"Sorry, no yo-yos."

"What about uncles?"

"Nope. No uncles." Would he consider Edward an uncle?

"No uncles," he repeated. "That's good. I hate yo-yos."

She regarded him closely, remembering how he had towered over all his friends at school. "Do you think it's fair beating up on guys who are smaller than you?"

"Who, Tommy?" Cory's eyes widened. "I'm a midget next to him! He's a whole head taller!"

They sure grow up big in Middlewood, she mused. Must be the brown water. She looked at the torn pocket at the front of Cory's backpack. "I can mend that for you, if you'd like. How did it happen?"

"Last week Tommy called me a geek. So I punched him. He got mad and threw my backpack across the schoolyard."

"You punched him because he called you a geek?" She shook her head. "What does your father say about all this fighting?"

"He yells a lot. Says I'm a problem child. Maybe he'll send me to correction school. You know, jail for kids? I hear New York's full of those schools. And you don't have to sleep there. You go

there in the daytime and you sleep at home, or wherever. I mean, you could stay at somebody's house, if you knew someone in New York. I used to hope he'd send me to one of them. I mean, when I was little."

"I don't think you need correction at all," she said, tears welling up behind her eyelids. Maybe a little attention, she thought. No, make that a lot of attention. An idea began to take hold in her mind. "I could sure use some help around this place," she said, wiping the moisture from her eyes. "Look at this pigsty! I know you're busy with homework and friends and your paper route, but maybe you could come over once in a while and give me a hand. I'd even pay you."

"Like a real job?"

"Exactly."

"I'd have to ask my dad. I can't do anything without asking him first."

She looked at him with squinted eyes. "Does he know you're here?" She dreaded the thought of calling Jake, dreaded hearing his voice.

"Oh, yeah, sure. I told Rose. She must have called him. But she's really old. Maybe she forgot. Dad says I have to tell her where I'm going. He treats me like a baby. He thinks I'm going to have an accident and die like my real mother."

"Fathers worry," she said, trying not to appear shocked at Cory's words. Stepmothers worry, too, she thought. As a parent, she had been just as protective as Jake. She remembered

how she had felt after moving in. What did she know about being a mother? Even though Rose Halligan, Jake's longtime housekeeper, had been there to guide her, Laura had been plagued with anxiety.

"Where have you been all this time?" she said, frowning. The elementary school was only two blocks from her house, and school had let out an hour ago.

"I went to the park. You know, to mess around." He stared down at his hands. "So is it true what Tommy's grandmother said? Did you steal my father from my mother?"

"No. Tommy's grandmother was wrong." A thought suddenly occurred to her, and she added, "Your father must have told you that your mother and I were friends when we were kids. Would you like to see some pictures?"

"You have pictures of my mother?" he said, his face lighting up. "Dad doesn't keep any around the house."

Laura wasn't surprised. Jake had never wanted mementos of his first wife. You'd think I would have been happy, she thought. A second wife doesn't need constant reminders of the first one—a face on the mantel in the living room, next to the bookcase, on the desk in the den.... But the lack of any pictures had had a reverse effect. It had confirmed what Laura had always feared, and apparently, nothing had changed. After all this time, Jake still hadn't recovered from the pain of losing Cynthia.

"You don't have any pictures of your mother?" she asked, thinking about her own parents. It had been terrible growing

up not knowing what they looked liked. It was still terrible, not knowing.

“I have some in my room, but she was all grown-up when they were taken. It would be cool to see what she looked like when she was a kid.”

“Come on, Cory, you’re in for a treat,” she said, taking his hand. “I have loads of pictures. Your mother and I weren’t just friends, we were best friends.”

“I guess it’s not true then. I mean, best friends don’t steal from each other, do they?”

“No, Cory. Best friends don’t steal.”

Jake sat at his large rectangular desk, surveying his office. On the wall to his right hung a watercolor of the town center, painted by Laura before they were married. The painting showed five young children building a snowman in the town square. It reminded him of when he was young, and he often imagined he’d been one of those kids. He liked to stare at the painting for long stretches of time. It gave him inspiration.

The folder containing the plans for the new community center lay unopened on his desk. But no matter how long Jake stared at the watercolor, inspiration evaded him. He couldn’t seem to summon up any enthusiasm for work.

The board had accepted his proposal only last week. This was more than a coup on his part; it not only added another supporting column in the structure of his financial security, it also served as a concrete affirmation of his integrity. Jake’s bid had not been

the lowest, as he had been unwilling to compromise his standards in any way to secure the contract. He'd always taken pride in his work, refusing to sacrifice quality and safety by cutting corners. Having lived in Middlewood all his life, he was interested in more than just profit; he'd invested his heart.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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