

Susan Mallery

*The
Girls
of
Mischief Bay*

Life is better with friends



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The Girls Of Mischief Bay

Аннотация

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR 'Warm, witty and romantic. The perfect feel-good read' – Sarah Morgan on *You Say It First* Three friends, each on the brink of a new beginning... Nicole is learning that there is a difference between being a supportive wife and single-handedly supporting her family while her husband pursues his dream. Pam finds herself at a loose end now that her children have left the nest, but a more unexpected change will soon find her having to re-define herself all over again. Shannon, a sworn career woman, is beginning to question the personal sacrifices she's made for work. Will an unexpected romance mean she really is able to have it all? Praise for Susan Mallery: 'Susan Mallery never disappoints.... She is at her storytelling best.' -Debbie Macomber, #1 New York Times bestselling author 'Heartfelt, funny, and utterly charming all the way through!' Susan Elizabeth Phillips 'Mallery returns to *Mischief Bay* with another set of friends dealing with dramatic yet relatable turmoil, which she treats with compassion, discernment, and subtlety' Kirkus Reviews on *The Friends We Keep* 'An engaging read to be savoured all the way through.' Publishers Weekly on *The Friends We Keep* 'highly original and fascinating page-turner you may lose sleep over. Mallery brings our inner lives to the surface and evokes deep emotions from her readers. You will fall in love with the girls of *Mischief Bay*.' -

RT Book Reviews on The Friends We Keep‘Mallery, a best-selling romance writer, can write a believable love story. But what makes this story remarkable is how strong and relatable the friendship between the characters is. This is a welcome return to Mischief Bay.’ -Booklist

on The Friends We Keep‘Once again, Susan Mallery has created an inviting world that envelops her readers' senses and sensibilities... Fans of Jodi Picoult, Debbie Macomber, and Elin Hilderbrand will assuredly fall for The Girls of Mischief Bay.’ -Bookreporter‘Fresh and engaging...the writing is strong, the dialogue genuine and believable. There's a generational subtext that mirrors reality and the complexities of adult relationships...filled with promise of a new serial that's worth following.’ -Fort Worth Star-Telegram on The Girls of Mischief BayThe Girls of Mischief Bay is the first of Susan Mallery’s funny, poignant, and insightful Mischief Bay series. Perfect for fans of Debbie Macomber, Jennifer Joyce, and Trisha Ashley, don’t wait any longer before you meet the girls of Mischief Bay!

Susan Mallery, the New York Times bestselling author of *Three Sisters*, is world renowned for her “insightful, funny, and poignant” stories (Booklist). With her brand-new *Mischief Bay* series, she brings vivid color to the story of three friends on the brink of a new life.

Nicole Lord wants to be a good wife, but there’s a difference between being supportive and supporting her husband, who quit his job to write a screenplay she’s never seen. He won’t even help take care of their son, leaving Nicole to run the house and work full-time.

Sacrificing a personal life for her career is how Shannon Rigg became VP at her firm, but she wonders now whether she made the right choice. An exciting new relationship with a great guy convinces her that it might not be too late—until he drops a bombshell that has her questioning whether she really can have it all.

Although Pam Eiland adores her husband, she feels restless now that the kids are grown. Finding sexy new ways to surprise him brings the heat and humor back to their marriage, but when unexpected change turns her life upside down, she’ll have to redefine herself. Again.

Through romance and heartbreak, laughter and tears, the girls of *Mischief Bay* will discover that life is richer with friends at your side.

Praise for the bestselling novels of Susan Mallery

“This poignant tale of family dynamics, the jarring impact of

change, and eventual acceptance and healing is sure to please Mallery's many devoted fans."

—Booklist on *Already Home*

"Gritty and magical, angst-ridden and sweet, this coming-home story pulls no punches... Mallery adds layer upon layer to the women's history, while revealing the raw core of each with expert pacing guaranteed to keep a reader up way past bedtime to see how it all works out."

—Publishers Weekly on *Barefoot Season*

"*Barefoot Season* will appeal to book clubs (great discussion topics abound!) and fans of Barbara Delinsky and Jodi Picoult. Susan Mallery weaves a tale of broken friendship with enough twists and turns to keep even the most seasoned reader of commercial women's fiction guessing about where the story will lead."

—Bookreporter

"A character-driven tale of complex relationships, the costs of forgiveness, and the abiding security we can find, lose and rediscover within the complexity of feminine friendships... With strong characters, a vivid sense of place and intricate relational dynamics *Barefoot Season* will hold its own against best-selling women's fiction titles and please fans of mainstream romance as well."

—USA TODAY on *Barefoot Season*

"Susan Mallery gives us a candid, honest look into the turmoil of family life when tragedies and personal crises occur... Mallery

never disappoints and Three Sisters is no exception. It's a winner and should be on everyone's short list of must-reads."

—Fresh Fiction

"Mallery has again created an engrossing tale of emotional growth and the healing power of friendship."

—Library Journal on Three Sisters

"Mallery pulls out all the stops in this highly enjoyable and insightful, funny, and poignant look at self-sacrifice and romantic entanglement."

—Booklist on Evening Stars, starred review

"Bestselling romance author Mallery...maintains her romantic charm and smooth voice yet embraces the freedom of a broader storyline with ease and a bit more depth."

—Publishers Weekly on Evening Stars

The Girls of Mischief Bay

Susan Mallery



THE GIRLS OF MISCHIEF BAY

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to Mischief Bay! This book is the first in what I hope will be a long-running series. I love creating a world that readers step into and experience fully. I'm hopeful it will be one you'll want to return to again and again.

While I love coming up with a fictitious place and discovering all the ways it can be as real as possible, there are challenges. One of the biggest ones is figuring out the types of businesses my characters will encounter and then naming them. Last year, when I was starting this book, I was suddenly and overwhelmingly stymied by the prospect of having to go through that. Realizing that sometimes it does indeed take a village to make a village, I turned to the people I adore most. My friends and readers at facebook.com/susanmallery. I asked for suggestions and you came through. I was amazed by the response, even though I really shouldn't be. You're always there for me.

So, with gratitude, I dedicate this book to those of you who took the time out of your busy lives to help a struggling author. I hope you love Mischief Bay as much as I do. Special thanks to these Mischief Makers:

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Love,

Susan Mallery

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[One](#)

“Did Tyler make that for you?”

Nicole Lord turned to look at the picture she'd posted on the wall of Mischief in Motion, her Pilates studio. Three large red

hearts covered a piece of pink construction paper. A handprint had been outlined over the hearts. The hearts were wobbly and highly stylized, but still recognizable. Not bad, considering the artist in question was not yet five. The handprint had been traced by one of his teachers.

“He did,” Nicole said with a smile. “I promised him I would bring it to work and show everyone.”

Her client, a thirtysomething fighting her way back from a forty-five-pound pregnancy weight gain, wiped sweat from her face and smiled. “He sounds adorable. I look forward to when my daughter can do more than eat, poop and keep me up all night.”

“It gets better,” Nicole promised.

“I hope so. I’d always assumed once I started having kids, I’d want six.” The woman grimaced. “Now one is looking like more than enough.” She waved and walked toward the exit. “See you next week.”

“Have a good weekend.”

Nicole spoke without looking, her attention already back on her computer. She had her noon class, then a three-hour break before her late-afternoon classes. Which sounded nice until she thought about all she had to get done. Grocery shopping for sure—they were out of everything. Her car needed gas, there was dry cleaning to pick up and somewhere in the middle of all that, she should eat lunch.

She glanced at the clock, wondering if she should text Eric to remind him to pick up Tyler from day care at four. She reached

for her phone, then shook her head and sagged back in her chair. No, she shouldn't, she told herself. He'd only forgotten once and he'd felt awful about it. She had to trust him not to forget again.

Which she would, she told herself. Only these days he was forgetting a lot of things. And helping less around the house.

Marriage, she thought ruefully. It all sounded so romantic until you realized that hey, you not only had to live with someone else, but there would also be days when they actually thought you were wrong about things.

She was still trying to figure out in which order she was going to run her errands when the door to her studio opened and Pam Eiland strolled in.

"Hey, you," Pam called cheerfully, an oversize tote hanging off one shoulder.

Anyone who didn't know Pam would assume she had a clutter problem if she needed to haul around that much stuff in her bag. Those who did know Pam were privy to the fact that her actual handbag was fairly small and that most of the space in the tote was taken up by a soft blanket and a very weird-looking dog.

Right on cue, Lulu poked her head out of the tote and whined softly.

Nicole stood and approached them both. After giving Pam a hug, she reached for Lulu. The dog leaped into her arms and snuggled close.

"I see you're in pink today," she said, stroking Lulu's cheek, then rubbing the top of her head.

“We both felt it was a pink kind of day,” Pam told her.

Lulu, a purebred Chinese crested, had white hair on the top of her head, by her ears and on her tail and lower legs. The rest of her spotted body was pretty much naked and an unexpected shade of grayish pink with brown spots. Her health issues were legendary and what with having no fur, she was chronically cold. Which meant Lulu had a collection of sweaters, jackets and T-shirts. Today’s selection was a lightweight, sleeveless pink sweater trimmed with shiny gray ribbon. With money tight and her own clothes threadbare, Nicole found herself in the embarrassing situation of envying a dog’s wardrobe.

Lulu gave her a quick puppy-kiss on the chin. Nicole held onto the warm dog for a few seconds more. Her relationship with Lulu was the least emotionally charged moment in her day thus far, and she was determined to enjoy it.

Pam, a pretty brunette with an easy smile, wore a loose short-sleeved dress over her leggings and workout tank. Unlike the other clients who came in for the noon class, Pam didn’t walk over from an office. Nicole knew the other woman had held a job at her husband’s company years ago. She understood how a small business worked and often gave Nicole sound advice. Aside from that, Pam seemed to have her days to herself. Right now that sounded like a dream come true.

“Who’s coming today?” Pam asked as she pulled the blanket out of the tote and folded it before setting it in a corner of the room. Lulu obligingly curled up, with her long legs tucked

gracefully under her body. Nicole knew the dog wouldn't budge until class was over. She supposed the sweet temperament and excellent manners made up for Lulu's odd and faintly sci-fi appearance.

"Just you and Shannon," Nicole said, clicking on her computer's scheduling program to confirm. She was actually relieved to have a smaller class. Lately she was so damned tired all the time. Pam and Shannon could have run the workout themselves, so there wouldn't be pressure to stay on top of every move.

Even better, all three dropouts had come in early that morning. The studio had a strict twenty-four-hour cancellation policy, which meant she was going to be paid for five students regardless. She accepted her momentary pleasure even though the thought made her a bad person, and vowed she would work on her character just as soon as she figured out how to fix what was going on with her marriage and got more than four hours of sleep on any given night.

Pam had slipped off her sandals in preparation for class. But instead of putting on her Pilates socks, she turned to Nicole and grinned.

"Want to go to lunch?"

Pam's smile was infectious. Her hazel-green eyes crinkled at the corners and her mouth curved up.

"Come on," Pam teased. "You know you want to."

"Want to what?" Shannon Rigg asked as she walked into the

studio. “I’ve had a horrible morning dealing with a misogynistic idiot from the bank who insisted on continually asking to speak to my supervisor. When I explained I was the CFO of the company, I think he had a seizure.” She paused, her blue eyes dancing with amusement. “I offered to send him a scanned copy of my business card, but he declined. Then I told him that if he didn’t get his act together, I would be moving the company’s four-hundred-million-dollar account to another bank.” She paused for dramatic effect. “I think I made him cry.”

Pam held out her arm, hand raised, for a high five. “You both constantly impress me. Nicole juggles her husband, her five-year-old son and her growing business. You’re busy frightening men who really should know better. I, on the other hand, will pick out my dog’s wardrobe for tomorrow and make biscuits from scratch. It’s sad.”

“I don’t even know what you put in the bowl to make a biscuit,” Shannon admitted as she gave her friend a high five, then turned to Nicole. “Do you?”

“Flour, water, something else.”

Shannon laughed. “Yeah, that’s where I would get lost, too. It’s the something else that always gets you.”

Nicole thought about how Pam had described her. Juggling sounded so perky and positive. Unfortunately most days she found herself cleaning up what had fallen and shattered rather than keeping her plates spinning in the air.

Okay, that was a confused and slightly depressing analogy. She

really needed to think more positively. And maybe learn how to make biscuits.

Shannon had on a tailored sleeveless dress and three-inch pumps. Her legs were bare and tanned, her hair a glorious tumbling mass of auburn waves that fell past her shoulders. She wore expensive watches and elegant jewelry. She drove a BMW convertible. If Nicole could pick, she would want Pam for her mother and to be Shannon when she grew up. Only at thirty, Nicole had a feeling she was about as grown-up as she was going to get.

“Wait,” Pam said as Shannon headed for the small dressing room next to the restroom. “I thought we’d go to lunch instead of working out.”

Shannon already had her exercise clothes out of her gym bag. She turned back to Pam. “Not exercise?”

“Sure. We’re the only two today. It’s Friday, my friend. Live a little. Have a glass of wine, mock your uninformed banking friend and unwind.”

Shannon looked at Nicole and raised her eyebrows. “I’m in,” she said. “What about you?”

Nicole thought about her to-do list and the fact that she was behind on the laundry and had a stack of bills to pay and a husband who had walked away from a successful career in computer software to write a screenplay. She thought of the spinning and falling plates and how she spent her life exhausted.

She pulled the tie from her blond ponytail, shook her hair

loose, grabbed her keys and her handbag and stood. "Let's go."

* * *

McGrath's Pub had been around nearly as long as the Mischief Bay pier and boardwalk. Shannon remembered coming here when she'd been a teenager. The drive in from Riverside had taken about an hour, if there wasn't any traffic. She and her girlfriends had spent the whole time talking and laughing, imagining the cute boys they were going to meet. Boys who lived by the ocean and surfed and had sun-bleached hair. Boys not like those they knew in high school.

Because back then all it took to get her heart beating faster had been sun-bleached hair and a retro convertible. She liked to think that in the past twenty-plus years she'd matured.

As she followed her friends into the pub, her gaze strayed to the sand and the ocean beyond. It was midday and low tide. No surfers out there now. As it was also a weekday in February, there weren't any people playing volleyball. Despite the fact that it was probably seventy degrees.

McGrath's was a three-story building with outdoor dining on the main level. Inside there was a big, open bar. Pam led the way directly to the stairs. They bypassed the second-floor dining room and went up to the top-floor eating area.

"By the window?" Pam asked, already heading in that direction.

The big windows offered a view of the Pacific. Today they were partially open, allowing in some fresh air. When

temperatures dropped to anything below sixty-five they could be closed and in the summer, they were removed completely.

Shannon sat across from Nicole. Pam settled next to Nicole and put her tote on the floor next to her chair. The perfectly trained Lulu would stay hidden until they left.

The first time the three of them had played hooky and gone to lunch, Shannon had spent the entire time freaking out about Lulu. Now she saw the strange creature as the mascot for their friendship—odd, unexpected and over time, very comforting.

She turned her attention from thoughts of a Chinese crested to the restaurant location. The view should have captured their attention and left them speechless. Taupe-colored sand led the way to midnight blue water. A couple of sailboats leaned in to capture the light breeze, and in the distance container ships chugged toward the horizon and the exotic ports beyond.

But this was L.A. and amazing views existed around every turn. Whether it was a star sighting at a Whole Foods or the lapping waters of the Pacific. Instead of talking about the beauty of the moment, Pam passed out menus.

“There’s a burger special,” Pam said with a sigh. “Did you see it? If I get that, will someone eat some of my fries?”

“I will,” Nicole told her. “I get the protein plate here.”

Pam wrinkled her nose. “Of course you do.”

Shannon knew the protein plate consisted of broiled fish and shrimp with a side of steamed vegetables. Healthy, sure, but the low calorie count was of more concern to the body-conscious,

bikini-clad locals.

“I’ll have a couple of fries, too,” she said. They would nicely round out the salad she generally ordered.

Pam poked Nicole in the upper arm. “You’re a stick. You should eat more.”

“I eat plenty.”

“Roots and grubs. Have a burger.” Pam leaned back in her chair. “Enjoy your metabolism while you can. Because one day, it’s all going to hell.”

“You look great,” Nicole said easily. “You’re in terrific shape.”

Pam’s brows rose. “If you say ‘for a woman my age’ I’m pitching you out the window.”

Nicole laughed. “I’d never say that. You’re nowhere near a certain age. That’s old.”

So spoke the thirty-year-old, Shannon thought wryly. Time was going faster and faster every day. She couldn’t believe she was only a few months away from turning forty, herself. She glanced at Pam and Nicole’s hands and saw the wedding bands and diamond engagement rings winking back at her. Not for the first time, Shannon considered the fact that somewhere along the way she should have gotten married.

She’d meant to, had always thought she would. Only her career had been her first priority—a fact that the men she knew didn’t like. The more successful she got, the harder it was to date. Or at least find a man who didn’t resent her devotion to her career. Lately, finding someone interesting and appealing had started to

seem nearly impossible.

She briefly toyed with the idea of mentioning that. All the articles she read said that she had to put herself out there if she wanted to meet a great guy. She had to be willing to tell all her friends that she was serious and looking. Of course, she had a sneaking suspicion that many articles in women's magazines were written by people who had no idea what they were talking about. Besides, she wasn't keen on pity. She was a successful, vital businesswoman. Hell, she was the chief financial officer of a company grossing more than a billion dollars a year. She didn't need a man in her life. Which wasn't to say she might not like having one around.

"How's my favorite young man?" Pam asked.

Nicole smiled. "Tyler is great. I can't believe he's turning five in a couple of months. It's going so fast. He'll be in kindergarten in September." She paused. "In a way, that will be nice. There'll be less day-care juggling."

As she finished speaking, her smile faded and a muscle twitched in her cheek. As if she were clenching her teeth.

Shannon hesitated, not sure if she should ask what was wrong. Because she already knew the answer. The three of them had been in the same exercise class for nearly two years. While she and Pam were faithful participants, the same couldn't be said for anyone else. For some reason, the Friday noon class tended to attract the flakier clients.

Which meant it had often been just the three of them. They'd

talked between Pilates moves, had shared various ups and downs. Shannon knew that Brandon, Pam's youngest, had been a wild teenager—to the point of driving so drunk, he'd wrapped his car around a tree. Now he was a sober, determined student in medical school. She'd listened as Nicole had tried to explain her bewilderment that her stable, hard-working husband had quit his job to write a screenplay and surf. In turn, Shannon had shared the tribulations of her own personal life. Everything from the challenge of being the only female executive at a tech company to the difficulty finding a Mr. Right who supported her career goals.

While Shannon searched for a delicate way to ask if Nicole's comment meant Eric was still determined to conquer Hollywood, Pam plunged right in.

"He continues to be an idiot?" she asked.

Nicole wrinkled her nose. "He's not an idiot. He's..." She hesitated. "Confusing. I know it's been six months, so I should be over it, right? It's not that I didn't know."

Pam angled toward her friend. "Honey, everyone *says* they want to write a screenplay or be on *American Idol* or something, but no one takes them seriously. There are dreams and then there's real life. Eric has a wife and a son. He walked away from a great job to type and surf. Who does that?"

Nicole winced. "He's writing, not typing."

"Details. He's not contributing financially or in any other way."

“He helps,” Nicole said, then sighed. “Sort of. I don’t know what to do. You’re right. Everyone says they want to be rich or famous, and that’s great. But I don’t know. When he walked in and told me he’d quit his job...” She raised her shoulders. “I still don’t know what to say.”

Shannon got that one. She had been just as shocked as her friend and she didn’t have to live with Eric. She supposed a case could be made for everyone having the right to follow his or her dreams, but in a marriage, shouldn’t both parties get a vote? That was what had been so stunning about Eric’s decision. He hadn’t mentioned it or negotiated or anything. He’d simply walked away from his job and told his wife after the fact.

“While I don’t recommend this for every situation,” Pam said slowly, “have you considered smothering him with a pillow?”

Nicole managed a soft laugh. “Not my style.”

“Mine, either,” Pam admitted. “I’m more direct. But it’s an option.”

Shannon grinned. “This from a woman who carefully dresses her dog so she won’t be cold? You talk tough, but on the inside, you’re a marshmallow.”

“Don’t tell,” Pam said, glancing around, as if afraid they would be overheard. “I have a reputation to protect.” She touched Nicole’s hand. “All jokes aside, I know this is difficult for you. You want to shake some sense into him and right now you can’t. Hang in there. You two love each other. That’ll get you through.”

“I hope so,” Nicole said. “I know he’s a good guy.”

“He is. Marriage is like life. Just when you think you have it figured out, it changes. When I stopped working, I felt guilty that John was carrying the whole financial load. But we talked about it and he finally convinced me he liked having me home. I take care of things there and he handles bringing in the money.”

A world she couldn't imagine, Shannon admitted, if only to herself. It was as if Pam was from another planet. Or another era. Shannon knew there were plenty of stay-at-home moms. The difference was she didn't know any of them. Not as friends. The mothers she knew were like Nicole—always scrambling to keep up.

Although now that she thought about it, there were a couple of friends who had left their jobs and become stay-at-home mothers. Only once that had happened, Shannon had lost touch with them. Or maybe they'd lost touch with her.

“There are always rough patches,” Pam said. “But if you remember why you're together, then you'll get through it.”

Two

Pam walked through from the garage to the main house, Lulu keeping pace with her. In the mudroom they both paused. Pam fished her small handbag out of the tote, then hung the larger bag on a hook.

The open area served as a catchall for things that otherwise didn't have a home. There was a built-in storage unit with plenty of hooks, shelves and drawers. The latter were mostly filled with Lulu's various clothes.

Now Pam eyed the lightweight sweater her pet wore and decided it would keep the dog warm enough until bedtime. Like the rest of the family, Lulu wore pj's to bed. Pam didn't care if anyone laughed at her for that. She was the one Lulu cuddled next to under the covers and she wanted her dog wearing something soft when that happened.

They continued through the house to the kitchen. Pam pulled her cell out of her purse and stuck it on the side table by the hall, then checked on the Crock-Pot she'd left on that morning. A quick peek and stir confirmed the beef burgundy was coming along. She added the vegetables she'd already prepared and stirred again, then went out the front door to collect the mail.

The day had warmed up nicely. February in the rest of the country could mean snow and ice. In Southern California there was every chance it would be sunny and seventy. Today was no exception, although she would guess it was closer to sixty-five. Hardly reason to complain, she told herself as she pulled the mail out of the box and started back toward the house.

Mischief Bay was a coastal community. Tucked between Redondo Beach and Hermosa Beach, it had a small pier, plenty of restaurants, a boardwalk and lots of tourists. The ocean regulated the temperatures and the steady light breeze made sure there wasn't much in the way of smog.

She and John had bought their sprawling ranch-style home ages ago. Jennifer, their oldest, had been what? Three? Pam tried to remember. If Jennifer had been three, then Steven had been a

year and she'd been pregnant with Brandon.

Oh, yeah. She *had* been pregnant all right. There'd been the charming moment when she'd thrown up in front of the movers. Brandon had been a difficult pregnancy and she'd been nauseous a lot. Something she brought up every so often—when her son needed a little humbling. As all children did, now and then.

She paused to wait for Lulu to do her business by the bushes and studied the front of the house. They'd redone much of both yards a few years ago, when they'd had the house painted. She liked the new plants that edged the circular drive. Her gaze rose to the roof. That had been replaced, as well. One of the advantages of having a husband in construction—he always knew the best people.

Lulu trotted back to her side.

“Ready to go in, sweet pea?” Pam asked.

Lulu wagged her feathered tail and led the way. Pam glanced down at the mail as she walked. Bills, a letter from an insurance agent she'd never heard of—no doubt an ad—along with two car magazines for John and a postcard from the local high school.

Pam frowned at the postcard and turned it over. What on earth could they...?

Lulu walked into the house. Pam followed and automatically closed the door. She stood in the spacious foyer, afternoon light spilling onto the tile floor.

But she didn't see any of that. She didn't see anything but the stark words printed on the postcard.

Class of 2005. Fellow Cougars—save the date!! Your 10-year high school reunion is this August.

There was more, but the letters got blurry as Pam tried to make sense of the notice. A ten-year high school reunion? Sure, Jennifer had graduated in 2005, but there was no way it had been ten years, had it? Because if Jen was attending her ten-year reunion, that meant Pam was the *mother* of a woman attending her ten-year high school reunion.

“When did I get old?” Pam asked, her voice a whisper.

Involuntarily, she turned to stare at the mirror over the entry table. The person staring back at her looked familiar and yet totally wrong. Sure the shoulder-length dark hair was fine and the irises were still hazel-green. But everything else was different. No, not different. Less...firm.

There were lines around her eyes and a distinct softness to her jaw. Her mouth wasn't as full as it had been. Ironically, just last November she'd turned fifty and had been so damned proud of herself for not freaking out. Because these days fifty was the new thirty-five. Big deal, right?

John had thrown a huge party. She'd laughed over the gag gifts and had prided herself for achieving the big 5-0 with grace and style. Not to mention a pretty decent ass, thanks to the three-times-a-week classes she took at Nicole's studio. She hadn't felt...old. But that was before she had a daughter who had just been invited to her ten-year high school reunion.

Sure, she'd had kids young. She'd married John at nineteen

and had Jen when she'd turned twenty-two. But that was what she'd always wanted.

She and John had met at Mischief Bay High School. He'd been tall and sexy, a star player on the football team. His family had a local plumbing company. One that worked in new construction rather than fixing stopped-up toilets.

John's plans had been set. He was going to get his AA in business from Mischief Bay Community College, then work in the family firm full-time. He would start at the bottom, earn his way to the top and buy out his parents by the time he was forty.

Pam had liked how he'd known what he wanted and went after it. When he turned his blue eyes on her and decided she was the one to share the journey, well, she'd been all in.

Now as she studied her oddly familiar and unfamiliar reflection, she wondered how the time had gone by so quickly. One second she'd been an in-love teenager and now she was the mother of a twenty-eight-year-old.

"No," she said aloud, turning away from the mirror. She wasn't going to freak out over something as ridiculous as age. She had an amazing life. A wonderful husband and terrific kids and a strange little dog. They were all healthy—except for Lulu's ongoing issues—and successful and, best of all, happy. She'd been blessed a thousand times over. She was going to remember that and stay grateful. So what if she wasn't firm? Beauty only went skin deep. She had wisdom and that was worth more.

She headed into the kitchen and flipped on the wall-mounted

TV. John got home between five fifteen and five thirty every day. They ate at six—a meal she'd made from scratch. Every Saturday night they either went out to dinner or had an evening with friends. Sunday afternoon the kids came over and they barbecued. On Memorial Day they held a big party, also a barbecue. It was LA. When in doubt, throw meat on a grill.

She automatically collected the ingredients for biscuits. Self-rising flour, shortening, sugar, buttermilk. She'd stopped using a recipe years ago for nearly everything. Because she knew what she was doing. John liked what she served and didn't want her to change. They had a routine. Everything was comfortable.

She measured the flour and told herself that comfortable wasn't the same as old. It was nice. Friendly. Routines meant things went smoothly.

She finished cutting in the shortening, then covered the bowl. That was the trick to her biscuits. To let them rest about twenty minutes.

Lulu sat patiently next to her bowl. As Pam approached, the dog wagged her fluffy tail and widened her eyes in a hopeful expression.

"Yes," Pam told her. "*It is* your dinnertime."

Lulu gave a bark, then followed her to the refrigerator, where the can waited.

Lulu's diet was an on-going challenge. She was small so didn't need all that much. She had allergies and skin conditions, not to mention a sensitive stomach. Which meant she ate prescription

dog food, consisting of a “novel protein” diet. In her case, duck and sweet potato.

Pam stuck a quarter cup of water into the microwave and hit the start button. After measuring out the right amount of canned food, she swapped the plate for the measuring cup, then started the microwave again. Hot water was stirred into kibble. Lulu had delicate teeth and couldn't eat regular kibble. So hers was softened with hot water.

They went through this ritual every night, Pam thought as she held out the bowl. Lulu immediately sat, as she was supposed to, then lunged for the bowl and devoured her meal in less than eight seconds.

“You do remember you had breakfast this morning and a snack after lunch, right? You act like we feed you weekly.”

Lulu was too busy licking her bowl to answer.

Pam rolled out the biscuits and put them on the cookie sheet. She covered them with a clean towel and started the oven. She'd barely finished setting the table when she heard the faint rumble of the garage door opener. Lulu took off running down the hall, barking and yipping in excitement.

A few minutes later John walked into the kitchen, their ridiculous dog in his arms. Pam smiled at him and turned her head for their evening kiss. As their lips touched, Lulu scrambled from his arms to hers, then swiped both their chins with her tongue.

“How was your day?” John asked.

“Good. Yours?”

“Not bad.”

As he spoke he crossed to the bottle of wine she'd put on the counter in the butler's pantry off the kitchen. It was a Cab from a winery they'd visited a few years ago on a trip to Napa.

“Steven's working on a bid for that new hotel everyone's been talking about. It's right on the water. Upscale to the max. He said they were talking about the possibility of twenty-four-karat gold on the faucets in the penthouse. Can you believe it?”

“No. Who would do that? It's a hotel. Everything has to be scrubbed down daily. How do you clean gold?”

“I know.” John opened the drawer to pull out the foil cutter. “It's a bathroom. They're idiots. But if the check clears, what do I care?”

As they spoke, she studied the man she'd been married to for thirty-one years. He was tall, just over six feet, with thick hair that had started going gray. The dark blond color meant the gray wasn't noticeable, but it was there. Being a man, it only made him look more appealing. A few months ago he'd asked why she wasn't going gray, too. When she'd reminded him of her visits every six weeks to her hair person, he'd been shocked. John was such a typical guy, it had never occurred to him she colored her hair. Because he thought she was naturally beautiful.

Silly man, she thought affectionately, as she watched him.

He had a few wrinkles around his eyes, but otherwise looked as he had when they'd first met. Those broad shoulders had

always appealed to her. These days he claimed he needed to lose ten or fifteen pounds, but she thought he looked just fine.

He was handsome, in a rugged kind of way. He was a good man. Kind and generous. He loved his wife and his kids and his routine. While he had his faults, they were minor and ones she could easily live with. In truth, she had no complaints about John. It was the her-getting-older thing she found faintly annoying.

He pulled out the cork and tested it with his thumbnail, then poured them each a glass of Cab. She slid the biscuits into the oven and set the timer.

“What are we having?” he asked as he handed her a glass.

“Beef burgundy and biscuits.”

His mouth turned up in an easy smile. “I’m a lucky man.”

“Even luckier. You’ll be taking leftovers for lunch tomorrow.”

“You know I love me some leftovers.”

He wasn’t kidding, she thought as she followed him through the kitchen. His idea of heaven was any kind of red meat with leftovers for lunch the following day. He was easy to please.

They went into the sunroom off the back of the house. In the cooler months, the glass room stayed warm. In the summer, they removed the glass and used the space for outdoor living.

Lulu followed them, then jumped up on the love seat where Pam always sat and settled next to her. Pam rubbed her dog’s ears as John leaned back in his chair—a recliner with a matching mate in the family room—and sighed heavily.

“Hayley’s pregnant again,” he said. “She told me this

morning. She's waiting until three months to make a public announcement."

Pam felt her mouth twist. "I don't know what to say," she admitted. "That poor girl."

"I hope this one takes," John said. "I don't know how much more of her suffering I can stand."

Hayley was John's secretary and desperate to have children, but she'd miscarried four times over the past three years. This would be try number five. Rob, Hayley's husband, wanted to look into adoption or a surrogate, but Hayley was obsessed with having a baby the old-fashioned way.

"I should send her a card," Pam said, then shook her head. "Maybe not." She took a sip of her wine. "I have no idea how to handle this."

"Don't look at me. You're in woman territory."

"Where if you stray too far, you'll grow breasts?"

"Damned straight."

"I'll write a note," she decided. "I can say we're rooting for her without a you're-having-a-baby message. Did the doctor say she would be okay if she could get to three months?"

Her husband forehead furrowed. "I don't know. She probably told me, but I barely want to know if she goes to the bathroom. Baby stuff is too intimate."

"You're not a complex man, are you?"

He raised his glass to her. "And that's why you love me."

He was right. She did love that he was dependable and

predictable. Even if every now and then she wanted something different in their lives. A surprise trip to somewhere or a fancy bracelet. But that wasn't John's style. He would never plan a trip without talking to her and as for buying jewelry, he was more of a "go buy yourself something pretty" kind of man.

She didn't object. She'd seen too many of her friends endure surprises of the not-very-pleasant kind. Ones that involved other women or divorces. John wasn't looking for more than she had to offer. He liked his routine and knowing that gave her comfort.

"Jen got mail from the high school today," she said. "An invitation to her ten-year reunion."

"Okay."

"You don't think it's stunning that we have a daughter old enough to have been out of high school ten years?"

"She's twenty-eight. So the reunion is right on time."

Pam sipped her wine. "I was shocked. I'm not ready to have a daughter that old."

"Too late to send her back now. She's used."

Despite her earlier distress, Pam laughed. "Don't let her hear you say that."

"I won't." He smiled at her. "And you're not old, sweetheart. You're barely in your prime."

"Thanks." She heard the timer chime and stood. "That's our dinner."

He scooped up Lulu and followed Pam back to the kitchen. As Pam went about serving the meal, she reminded herself she

was a very lucky woman. That a bit of sagging and a few lumps and bumps didn't change who she was as a person. Her life was a blessing. If there weren't any tingles anymore, well, that was to be expected. Wasn't she forever hearing that you couldn't have it all?

* * *

It's just drinks, Shannon told herself as she pushed open the door that led into Olives—the martini bar/restaurant where she was meeting her date. Her online date.

She wanted to pause and maybe bang her head against the wall. Why did she do this to herself? It never went well. Dating wasn't her strong suit. It just wasn't. She was a successful businesswoman. She earned mid six figures and fully funded her 401K every single year. She had friends, she had a beautiful condo with an ocean view. Okay, there had been a string of boyfriends over the years and she'd been engaged twice, for no more than fifteen minutes each time. But no marriage. Not for her.

The truth was, she didn't have good romantic relationships. Maybe it was her, maybe it was men, but she had to accept the truth that having it all simply wasn't going to happen. Not to her. So why was she back dealing with the nightmare that was dating? Worse—online dating.

The only saving grace was that ProfessionalLA.com was a halfway decent site that actually screened subscribers. So the guy was going to look like his profile picture and wouldn't have

any felony convictions in his past. But the distance from that to happily-ever-after seemed insurmountable.

Still, she was here. She would go in and say hi. She would be pleasant and as soon as she was able to duck out without seeming wildly rude, she would run back to her office, get her car and head home. One glass of wine, she promised herself. She could survive that. Maybe what's-his-name would be great.

She paused for a second, as panic set in. What was his name? Crap. Double crap. She kept moving even as her brain hustled toward whatever synapses stored short-term memory. Andrew? A something. Adam? Right. Adam. Adam something she would never remember. He sold cars maybe. He was about her age, divorced and possibly blond?

She made a mental note to spend a little more time with the profiles, even as she scanned the people in the bar and hoped to find someone who looked vaguely familiar.

A man rose and smiled at her. He was about six feet, with dark hair and eyes and a crooked smile. He was tanned and fit, but not in a look-at-me kind of way. And he was staring at her as if she had a monkey on her head.

She did her best to appear casual as she glanced over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't being followed by Taylor Swift or someone else who would cause a grown man to simply stare. There wasn't anyone of note. So she kept moving toward him and hoped for the best.

"Shannon?" he asked as she got closer.

“Yes. Hi.”

“I’m Adam.” He held out his hand and they shook. “Thanks for meeting me.”

He continued to look at her in a way that made her wonder if she’d forgotten to check her teeth or had grown a wart on her nose in the five minutes it had taken her to walk from the office to the bar. It couldn’t be that she looked different from her picture. She’d used a business head shot. Nothing that would overpromise.

They sat down.

Olives was the kind of place that catered to locals and tourists alike. The bar was well lit, without a diner feel. Tables were spaced far enough apart that you didn’t have to worry about everyone listening to your conversation. The restaurant was upscale-casual, with an eclectic menu. Except for a few paintings of olives and martini glasses on the walls, they hadn’t gone crazy with the motif.

Shannon liked it for a first date because she came here just enough to be familiar with the staff and all the exits. If a first date went bad, she could easily call for help or bolt. It was also within walking distance of her office, which meant she didn’t have to worry about a second drink before driving. If it was time to leave, but she wasn’t ready to get behind the wheel, she simply returned to her office and did something mindless until she was ready to make the six-minute commute to her condo.

Adam’s gaze was steady. Shannon couldn’t stand it anymore.

“You’re staring at me,” she said, trying to keep her voice as friendly as possible. “Is something wrong?”

His eyes widened, then he glanced away before returning his attention to her. “No. Sorry. Jeez, I’m being an idiot. It’s just... you. Wow. You sent a picture and it was so great, I figured there had to be a mistake. Then when I saw you just now and you were even more beautiful in person...” He verbally stumbled to a stop, then cleared his throat.

“Can we start over or do you want to leave?”

His expression was both chagrined and hopeful. Shannon tried to remember the last time anyone had been so rattled by her looks. She knew she was pretty enough and when she made an effort, she could up her game, but she wasn’t the kind of woman who left men tongue-tied. Or staring.

She smiled. “We can start over.”

“Good. I’ll do my best not to be scary.” He smiled. “It’s nice to meet you, Shannon.”

“Apparently.”

He chuckled and motioned to the server. “What can I get you to drink?”

She ordered a glass of the house red while he chose a Scotch. He added the fruit and cheese plate to the order. When they were alone again, she leaned back in her chair.

He was nice, she thought. A little awkward, which meant he didn’t date a lot. At least he wasn’t a player. She didn’t need any more of them in her life. Divorced, if she remembered correctly.

“So, Adam,” she said. “Tell me about yourself.”

“What do you want to know?”

Everything that had been in his profile, she thought, wishing she'd paid just a little more attention. The thing was she didn't like online dating. She counted on the service to screen the men and then moved fairly quickly to a meeting. For her, emails and a couple of calls didn't provide any insight into how things would go in person.

“Do you live in the area?” she asked.

“Sure.” The smile returned. “I was born and raised right here in Mischief Bay. Most of my family is still in the area, which means it's hard to get away with anything.”

“Do you try to get away with things?”

The smile turned into a laugh. “I gave that up when I was a teenager. I'm a bad liar and if I cross the line, I get caught. So I don't bother with either anymore.”

His smile faded. “You're not in to bad boys, are you?”

She had been, and had the heart scars to prove it. “Not anymore. They're great in theory, but life isn't about theories. It's about real people who take the time to show up.”

“I agree.”

They were on opposite sides of a small table. Adam leaned toward her. “You're in finance?”

“Yes. I'm a CFO for a software company.”

She tried to speak normally, knowing that when she mentioned her job she tended to be both defensive and proud.

An awkward combination at best.

The problem was some men resented her success and some men were intimidated by it. A few had seen her as a way to the easy life, but fortunately they weren't usually very subtle about their hopes of being kept. The ones who accepted that she'd done well and worked hard were often the keepers, albeit rare and therefore hard to find.

"Are you in line to be president next?" he asked.

She smiled. "No. I'm comfortable being the queen of the checkbook. I like the financial side of things." She shifted toward him and lowered her voice. "Software is not my thing. I'm better than most on a computer, but it's never been easy for me. You should see some of the college kids we hire every year. They're brilliant. What about you?"

"Not brilliant."

She laughed. "Thanks for the share. I meant, tell me about your work."

"Oh, that. My family's in construction. Large projects, mostly. Office buildings, hotels. I'm the foreman on a hotel we're dealing with now. It's just south of Marina del Rey. It's high-end, twenty stories."

Impressive, she thought. "Foreman sounds like a lot of responsibility."

Adam grinned. "I stand around and tell other people what to do. It beats a real job."

Their server arrived with their drinks and the cheese plate.

Adam raised his glass.

“To unexpected surprises.”

She touched her glass to his and thought he was certainly that and more. She'd had no expectations for their date, but here she was, having a nice time. So far Adam was funny and charming. There had even been hints of his being genuinely nice. She knew better than to get her hopes up, but the evening was turning out better than she'd anticipated.

“Tell me about the family that doesn't let you get away with anything,” she said.

“I'm one of five kids and I could practically walk to four of their houses from here. Same with my parents.” He shrugged. “My youngest brother is back east, but then he's always felt he had something to prove.”

She stared at him. “You're one of five?”

“I know. I told my dad they figured out what causes pregnancy, but he said he and Mom always wanted a big family. I have to say it was a fun way to grow up.”

“And loud,” she murmured.

“Yeah, there was noise.”

“How many boys and girls?”

“Three boys, two girls, and we alternate. I'm in the middle. My older brother was never interested in the family business. He's a graphic designer. Very talented. My older sister always wanted to be a veterinarian, so by the time I was six or seven, Dad was starting to get nervous that no one was going to go into

the business. Fortunately my idea of a good time was building things. I got my first job at the company when I was fourteen.”

He took a piece of cheese. “I know. Not very exciting.”

“Exciting is highly overrated,” she murmured. All this and stable, too. So what was the flaw? Emotional unavailability? A secret life as a serial killer? There had to be something, because to be honest, her luck simply wasn’t that good.

“Where did you grow up?” he asked.

“Riverside. I’m an only child, so I can’t relate to your noise. My house was always quiet.”

“Were you the smartest girl in the class?”

“Sometimes. I liked math, which made me unacceptable to most groups. But I wasn’t brilliant enough to major in it. Finance seemed like an interesting way to spend my days.”

His brown eyes crinkled with amusement. “If I had a nickel for every time I looked forward to spending time working on the company’s financial records...”

“You wouldn’t have a nickel?”

“Something like that.”

She smiled. “Your profile said you’re divorced?”

He nodded. “Nearly a year now. We were separated before that.” He shrugged. “It wasn’t anything dramatic. We were married young and over the past few years realized we didn’t like spending time with each other.”

There was something about the way he spoke that had her leaning forward. As if there was more to the story.

“That’s no fun,” she said quietly.

“Tell me about it.” He looked at her, then swore softly. “Hell. Okay, she cheated. I don’t like to say that because it makes me look like an idiot. I didn’t know. She came to me one day and said she’d been having an affair and that she’d fallen in love with the guy. She didn’t want to marry him or anything, but she’d realized that if she could be in love with someone else, she wasn’t in love with me anymore.”

He moved his glass back and forth on the table. Tension pulled at his mouth. “I was shocked and hurt and didn’t know what to do. I grabbed some stuff and moved out that night. About a month later, when my pride and ego weren’t so much in the way, I realized we’d been growing apart for a long time.”

“That must have been hard,” she said, thinking that if he was telling the truth, then she was liking him more by the second.

“It was. We have two kids. Charlotte is nearly nine and Oliver is six. We share them. One week on, one week off. Tabitha and I live about two blocks away from each other. Slightly awkward for us, but easy for the kids.” Humor returned to his eyes. “Of course, my parents and three of my siblings live in the neighborhood, too, so I’m going to go out on a limb and say it’s way more awkward for her than for me.”

“As long as it works,” Shannon told him.

“And you?” he prompted.

Yes, the inevitable questions. “No kids, no ex-husband. I was engaged twice, but never quite made it down the aisle.”

“Who made the decision?”

“One time him, one time me.”

She'd also had a long-term on-again, off-again relationship with a music producer, who'd been very bad for her, but there was no reason to mention him. At least not on the first date.

“What do you do for fun?” Adam asked.

“I love to travel. Take two or three weeks and go somewhere I've never been.”

“Like?”

She smiled. “I've been on every continent except Antarctica. I was thinking of taking one of those ships there, but after one got stuck a couple of years ago and made headlines, I changed my mind.”

“What's your next trip?”

She laughed. “You're going to be shocked.”

“I doubt that.”

“Okay. Machu Picchu.”

His eyes widened slightly. “Remind me to listen to you next time. That's Peru, right?”

“Yes. I'm going with a girlfriend and it's going to be great. We'll be hiking the Inca Trail. The ruins are at seven thousand feet above sea level so I'm a little worried about my athletic ability. I'm—”

A familiar ringtone drifted from her purse. She reached for her bag.

“Sorry,” she said as she pulled her phone out of its pocket and

glanced at the screen. "It's work. I need to take this."

She was already standing and heading out of the restaurant. When she stepped onto the sidewalk, she pushed Talk.

"This is Shannon."

"Len Howard in the Seoul office. Sorry to bother you but we have a problem with the South Korean finance minister. He's insisting on speaking with you."

Shannon glanced back at the bar and saw Adam glancing her way. Adam, who appeared to be pretty darned close to perfect.

"Based on my other conversations with him, I'm guessing he wants me to phone him in the next few minutes."

"If possible."

Because he was a man of power and she needed his help with some banking regulations. Nolan, her boss, wanted their Asian headquarters in Seoul, which meant Shannon had to make nice with the finance minister.

"Please tell him I'll call him back in fifteen minutes," she said. "From my office."

"Will do."

She walked back into the restaurant. Adam rose as she approached the table.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm so sorry. I have to get back to work. There's a crisis in South Korea and I need to be on the phone in fifteen minutes."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I was hoping we could grab dinner.

Should I wait?"

She wanted to say yes. He was an unexpected find. But once she was done calming things down, she would have to call her boss and do paperwork.

"It's going to be a late night." She gave him a smile. "But I enjoyed meeting you."

She wanted to say more. She wanted to ask him not to be intimidated by what she did. She wanted to say it would be great if he mentioned he wanted to see her again. Instead, she reached for her wallet.

"No way," he told her. "I've got this. Go make your call."

"Thank you."

She waited a second, hoping he would say more. When he didn't, she smiled. "It was so nice to meet you."

"You, too."

She walked to the door and out into the cool evening. Her office was only a few blocks away. She would make it back in time with no problem.

Thoughts swirled and competed for her attention. If only, she thought, then pushed the words away. She'd wanted her career. She'd wanted to be successful and know that she could always take care of herself, no matter what. And she had that. There was no way she was going to feel bad about what she'd accomplished.

It was just that sometimes, she found herself wanting more.

Three

Nicole turned on the coffeemaker and leaned against the

counter to wait for it to work its magic. It was early still. Quiet. The time of day she liked best—except when she was exhausted, which was most of the time.

She told herself that eventually the situation would get better. That she would figure out a schedule that worked, that Tyler would get older and need her less, that Eric would get a real job and start helping support the family again.

The last thought made her feel both guilty and angry. Not a happy combination. Because as much as she loved her husband, there were times when she didn't like him very much.

No, she thought. She didn't like what he'd done. There was a difference.

Back before he'd quit his well-paying, very steady software development job to write a screenplay, things had seemed more balanced. She'd been comfortable in their roles. But lately...not so much.

She told herself she had to be fair. That he had the right to follow his dream. Only it wasn't the dream she minded as much as the fact that he hadn't asked her first. Instead, he'd announced what he was doing. And that announcement had come two days after he'd already resigned.

She closed her eyes against the memory, but it crowded into the kitchen, anyway. It had been a Friday morning. She'd been standing in the kitchen, just like she was now. Eric had walked in to the room, wearing shorts and T-shirt.

"Don't you have to get dressed for work?" she'd asked.

He'd taken her hand. "I have to tell you something. I've quit my job. I'm going to write a screenplay."

There had been more talk. She was sure of it. But she hadn't heard anything beyond the keen screaming of fear that had filled her head.

Quit? How could he quit? They had a mortgage and she was still paying back her old boss for buying out the exercise studio. They had a four-year-old and college to save for and nearly no savings. They'd put off having a second kid because they couldn't afford it.

The coffee flowed into the mug Nicole had left in place. She waited until it was nearly full, then expertly shifted the mug out of the way and the carafe into its spot without missing a drop. She inhaled the perfect earthy scent before taking her first sip of the day.

"Mommy?"

She took another quick sip, then turned as Tyler walked into the kitchen. He was tousled and still half-asleep. One hand held his battered, red stuffed toy, Brad the Dragon. The well-loved plush dragon was based on the popular series of children's books. The author must make a mint from all the merchandising, she thought as she put her mug on the counter, then bent down to scoop up her son.

She wrapped her arms around his waist. He settled his around her neck, while hanging on with his legs. She pretended to stagger as she lifted him.

“You grew!”

He giggled at the familiar comment. “I can’t grow *every* night,” he told her.

“I think you can.”

She kissed his cheek and breathed in the scent of his skin. Whatever else went wrong in her day, Tyler was always right.

“How did you sleep?”

“Good.” He snuggled close. “Brad had bad dreams, but I said he was safe with me.”

“That’s very nice of you. I’m sure he appreciated having you to protect him.”

She carried Tyler over to the table. He released her to stand on his chair. With a quick, graceful movement, he settled into a sitting position.

Based on how athletic he was and how well he did in preschool, Tyler seemed to have inherited the best from her and Eric. Nicole could only hope. She’d wanted to enroll him in a dance class, but Eric had nixed the idea. For a while he’d wanted his son to attend a computer camp. But that interest had faded when he’d started writing his screenplay last year. She supposed they could agree on drama camp or something. Assuming Eric didn’t stop writing his screenplay to follow another surprise dream.

She walked over to the pantry. “Oatmeal and berries?” she asked.

Tyler looked at Brad the Dragon, then nodded. “We like that.”

Because Brad was consulted on most decisions.

Nicole would have been worried about her son's constant companion, except Brad stayed home when Tyler went to preschool or day care and from everything she'd read, his attachment was completely normal. She was sure having a couple more siblings would ease his dependence on the stuffed toy, but there was no way that was happening anytime soon. She was barely able to keep them financially afloat as it was. If she got pregnant... She didn't want to think about it.

Not that it was much of an issue. She barely saw Eric these days. They passed in the hall and their brief discussions were generally about logistics regarding Tyler. Sex wasn't happening.

As she measured out the oatmeal, she mentally paused to wonder if Eric was cheating on her. He was by himself every day. She didn't know how much time he spent writing. She wasn't here to see for herself and he didn't volunteer the information. Once he was done surfing for the day, he could be seeing anyone.

Her stomach tightened at the thought, then she turned her attention back to getting breakfast for her son. She had to get Tyler fed and dressed with one eye on the clock. Once she got him to preschool, she had a full day of classes to teach, payroll to run for her two part-time instructors, groceries to buy and life to deal with. Worrying about Eric's possible affairs was way down on her list.

As she carried the oatmeal over to Tyler, she thought maybe her lack of concern was the biggest problem of all. The question

was: What, if anything, did she do about it?

* * *

Pam wrapped her towel around her body and reached for the tube of body lotion. While she stuck to a fairly faithful regimen for her face, when it came to body products, she liked to mix things up. Right now she was enjoying Philosophy's Fresh Cream—a vanilla-based scent that made her feel like she should have chocolate-dipped strawberries for breakfast.

But for once the thick lotion didn't make her smile. Probably because she was fully aware that while she was applying it, she was doing her best not to look in the mirror.

The shock of Jen's impending ten-year high school reunion hadn't gone away. It had faded, only to return. Telling herself age was a number and she was a lucky, happy woman wasn't helping, either. It seemed as if every time she turned around, there was yet another reminder that her days of being a hot thirtysomething were long over.

She put down the tube, braced herself for the horror and tossed the towel over the tub. Then she stared at her naked self in the very wide, very unforgiving mirror in the master bath.

She wasn't fat, she told herself. She'd gained the most weight with Jen when she'd thought pregnancy meant a license to eat. And she had. Yes, her daughter had been a robust eight pounds and the rest of the associated goo had some weight and volume, but it didn't excuse the seventy-five pounds she'd packed on.

Losing them had been a bitch, so with her next two

pregnancies, she'd only gained a reasonable thirty. Still, her body bore the battle wounds—including stretch marks and a definite doughlike puddle where her once-flat tummy had been.

Her breasts were worse. More tube socks than mammary-shaped. She got by with a good, supportive bra. Of course at night, when she just had on a sleep shirt, they eased back into her armpits. On the plus side, getting a mammogram wasn't a problem. Her breasts oozed into place on the tray. Still, there'd been a time when they'd been full and round and damned sexy.

There were a handful of spider veins on her legs, a distinct lack of firmness to her jaw and—

“Kill me now,” Pam muttered out loud, then reached for her panties. What was the point in all that self-assessment? It wasn't as if she was going to get any kind of plastic surgery. She worked out three days a week at Nicole's studio and walked on the treadmill at least two other days. She was fifty. She'd better get used to not being anything special. She had a feeling it was only downhill from here.

She finished dressing, then combed her hair off her face. At least it was still thick and had a nice wave. She kept the length just past her shoulders and layered, to take advantage of the waves. Color and a few highlights in summer meant no one had to know about the encroaching gray.

The thing was, she thought as she applied her anti-aging serum—the one that didn't seem to be doing its job as well as it had a couple of years ago—there wasn't any warning. Sure, everyone

knew that old age was inevitable. It was that or death and she was willing to admit she was pretty happy to be alive.

But what about the rest of it? AARP had been chasing her for the past six or eight months. In addition to their chronic invitations to join, they should send a heartfelt letter that told the truth. Something along the lines of “enjoy it now—in ten years, you’re going to look in the mirror and see your grandmother staring back at you.”

Perhaps not the most effective marketing campaign, but at least it would be honest.

She patted the eye cream into place, then used her fingertips to pull at her skin. What about a face-lift?

She studied the results, liking how pulling her skin up and back gave her a nice taut look. She didn’t want to be scary—one of those women who almost seemed plastic. But maybe a little nip and tuck wouldn’t hurt.

She dropped her arms to her sides and watched her face return to its normal position. Who was she kidding? She wasn’t ever going to have a face-lift. Surgery on her face for vanity? No way. She wasn’t some megarich celebrity. She was a normal woman freaking out about the unkindness of time and gravity.

She leaned closer to the mirror. Although maybe she could get some kind of injection. A filler or BOTOX. Didn’t everyone do BOTOX these days?

She left the bathroom and walked into the bedroom. Her morning chores awaited. John had left for the office nearly an

hour before, but there was still plenty to do. Make the bed, throw in some laundry, clean up the kitchen dishes. She had a once-monthly cleaning service come in. Those hardworking women always made her feel guilty, but she still let them scrub her floors.

After preparing the marinade for the chicken pieces they would be barbecuing that night, Pam collected a light jacket for herself and a violet knit shirt for Lulu. She let the dog out for a quick potty break, then picked her up and tucked her under her arm. They had an appointment with the vet.

While Lulu was a sweet, loving, well-behaved little girl, she came with several expected Chinese crested issues. She had skin allergies and soft teeth, luxating patellas and tummy problems. They were lucky in that her eyes were fine. And her moving kneecap didn't seem to be a problem yet. John said it was because the dog never walked anywhere.

"You're cute," Pam told her pet as she carried her to her small SUV. "Of course people want to carry you."

Lulu was six years old and had a veterinary file so thick, it was broken up into two folders at the vet's office. Pam had a feeling that a lot of other families wouldn't have been able to afford her chronic medical costs, but she and John were blessed. For all his complaints that Lulu cost as much as sending any one of their kids to college, the truth was, he adored her.

Now Pam climbed into the driver's seat of her SUV. Lulu scrambled into her doggie car seat. Pam put her in her harness and made sure it was attached to the restraining leash, then

confirmed the air bag was off.

“Ready to see Dr. Ingersoll?” she asked.

Lulu wagged her tail in agreement.

The drive was only about ten minutes. Come summer, it would take three times that long. Tourists loved Mischief Bay. Despite the fact that it was often warm and sunny all winter long, most visitors didn’t bother their little community until Memorial Day weekend. Which made it nice for locals.

Pam drove along T Street and then turned right into the parking lot of Bayside Veterinary. Lulu whined until she was released from her harness, then jumped into Pam’s arms for the short carry inside.

“Hi, everyone,” Pam said as they walked into the foyer.

The two receptionists smiled at her. “Good to see you, Pam. How’s our favorite girl?”

“Doing well on the new cream.”

Pam set Lulu on the ground. The slightly pink dog with the dark patches raced behind the counter and greeted the two women.

There was much skittering of nails on linoleum and yips of excitement as she was given her soft cookie. When Lulu finished munching, she returned to Pam and waited to be picked up.

Heidi, one of the techs in the office, appeared with Lulu’s file. “He’s just finishing up with another patient. Let’s get her weighed and in a room.”

Pam carried Lulu to the scale in the hallway. Lulu sat

obligingly until she was told she could move.

“Exactly ten pounds,” Heidi said, making a note. “Same as always. I wish I could maintain my weight as well.”

“Me, too,” Pam admitted.

“We’re in room two.”

Lulu jumped off the scale and led the way through the open doorway. Pam picked her up and put her on the examination table while Heidi went through the usual visit stats. Seconds later she left Pam alone and a few minutes after that, Dr. Fraser Ingersoll walked in.

“How’s my best girl?” he asked with a smile.

Pam knew he was asking the question of Lulu, but every now and then she pretended it was addressed to her.

Dr. Ingersoll, a tall, slim, dark-haired man in his early forties, radiated sex appeal. Pam couldn’t explain it, nor did she want to. It was one of those things best left undefined.

She was sure half his female pet parents had a mad crush on him, and she was comfortable adding herself to the ranks of the swooning. Vivid blue eyes stared out from behind adorable glasses. He always had an easy smile ready, along with a quick touch of reassurance. Sometimes, it seemed to her, that touch lingered.

While she loved John and would never do anything to screw up her marriage, every now and then she allowed herself a little daydream. One involved a request from Dr. Ingersoll to meet for coffee. She would reluctantly agree, he would suggest a place

outside of Mischief Bay and she would pretend not to know why. Over lattes and muffins, he would confess his attraction to her and while she would be genuinely tempted, in the end, she would let him down as gently as she could. After all, she was a married woman. She might not have been a virgin on her wedding day, but John was the only man she'd ever been with. She wanted to *fantasize* about Dr. Ingersoll, not actually sleep with him.

Still, those little moments helped when her day was tedious or she was annoyed by always having to take care of everyone.

But now she was less sure of her crush. Did Dr. Ingersoll see her as a sexy, slightly older, vital woman? Or was she simply Lulu's old and wrinkled pet mom?

"How's the new skin cream working?" the vet asked. He stroked Lulu as he spoke.

"She's scratching less."

"Her skin looks clear."

Pam watched him pet her dog and noticed that while the backs of his hands were smooth and taut, she'd developed a few age spots on hers. She held in a sigh. She didn't like this, she admitted to herself. Not the questioning or the concerns. Not the self-absorption. She'd always considered her life to be one that was blessed. She was lucky. Lucky people didn't get old and wrinkly, did they? Which brought her back to what the AARP really should be doing for their future members—warning them about the coming apocalypse of old age.

* * *

Shannon finished the quarterly reports and hit the send button. She would meet with the CEO later to discuss the actual results, but she wasn't worried. The numbers looked good.

She'd recently revamped the timetables and discounts in accounts payable. Cash flow was better, which meant the company's expansion could be funded internally. When interest rates were low, taking out a loan made sense, but she had a feeling they were going to start climbing. Better to keep the money at home.

While a lot of finance people saw the products their companies produced as interchangeable "widgets," she didn't agree. Every company was different. The challenges to produce a physical good varied between industries and even within them. Cars were different from furniture and software was nothing like envelopes. Her attitude had been the key reason she'd been hired nearly five years before. Nolan could have hired any one of a dozen applicants, but he'd chosen her. She had a feeling her rant on the fact that manufacturing products shouldn't be reduced to the pejorative term "widget" was a part of the reason.

She glanced out the big window by her desk. The sun had set a while ago. There was no hint of light coming from the sky—not counting the bright lights from around the office building, of course. She'd been at the office since six thirty and except for taking a class at Mischief in Motion during her lunch break, she'd pretty much been chained to her desk.

She saved her files and began to shut down her computer. She

would stop for some Thai food on her way home and spend a quiet evening by herself.

Because she didn't have a date. Certainly not with Adam, who had yet to call after their single meeting.

She'd been hopeful, she thought as she watched her computer move from saving to shutting down. Hopeful that he was man enough to accept her success, her career demands, to respect them, even. But he hadn't and that meant he wasn't for her. But being logical didn't help the dull ache she'd learned to recognize as loneliness.

Sure there were friends she could call. With Eric so busy with his screenwriting, Nicole was often up for dinner out. Tyler came with her, which was fine with Shannon. She enjoyed hanging out with the charming, happy little boy. Or she could see if Pam and John wanted some company for an after-dinner glass of wine. No doubt there would be delicious leftovers for her to dine on.

But while she loved her friends, she wasn't lonely because of them. Every now and then, she wanted to find "the one." That ridiculous concept she'd been unable to shake, no matter how she tried. Sometimes Shannon worried that all the talk about pair bonding in humans just might be true.

She pulled open the bottom desk drawer and removed her handbag. She reached for her cell only to have it buzz with an incoming call.

The screen flashed with the icon she'd linked with the name. A skull and crossbones. Humorous, but also a warning. Because

hearing from Quinn was never good.

She considered letting the call go to voice mail. Mostly because that was the safest action. He wouldn't leave a message. No doubt she wouldn't hear from him for weeks. But if she did answer...

She grabbed her phone and pushed the talk button.

"Hello?"

"Gorgeous."

That was all it took. A single word in that low, smoky voice. Her tension eased, her breathing slowed and between her legs she felt the telltale combination of hunger and dampness. She could talk all the successful-career, self-actualized crap she wanted, but at the end of the day, she was little more than Quinn's bitch.

"Hey," she murmured, even as she glanced at the clock on the wall and calculated how long it would take her to drive to Malibu at this time of the evening.

"Come over."

Quinn didn't ask. He instructed. He took charge. It was the same in bed, where he decided what they were going to do and who came first. She should have resented it, but she didn't. There was something to be said for a man who took charge. She relaxed around him because there was no point in fighting the tide.

"I can't stay," she said—a feeble attempt to take control. But she'd learned the hard truth. Better to get what she wanted and escape than spend the night.

"No problem."

There was a soft click. She knew the call had been disconnected.

She dropped her cell into her handbag, then crossed to the private bathroom that came with her C level title. After using the bathroom, she freshened her makeup and brushed her teeth. Then she left and headed for her car.

The drive to Malibu was simple. Head north on Pacific Coast Highway, which became Sepulveda and a half dozen other streets through Marina del Rey and Venice. She picked it up again in Santa Monica, then followed the road until she reached Malibu.

When people thought of that town they pictured beachfront mansions and star sightings. Both were plentiful, but much of the community was also old and a little worn around the edges. Tiny restaurants favored by locals nestled against the larger, more famous attractions, like Gladstone's.

Shannon turned onto a small street. In one of those weird L.A. ironies, the most beautiful homes often had completely deceptive entrances. There was a garage, a secured gate and what looked like the beginning of a modest thousand-square-foot bungalow. All of which concealed eight or ten million dollars' worth of luxury living and incredible views.

Quinn's house was similar, although his gate kept anyone from pulling into the driveway. Shannon punched in the code. In that split second before the heavy iron gate swung open, she wondered if it would. Because she knew there would come a day when her code would no longer work. She often told herself that would be

a good thing. Some days she even believed herself.

But it wasn't tonight, she thought as she drove into the open garage and parked next to his Maserati.

She got out and walked inside.

Quinn's house was built on the side of a cliff. The tri-level home was probably about five or six thousand square feet with an unobstructed view of the ocean from all three levels. During the day, the rooms were filled with light. At night, electric blinds protected the privacy from those who would try to capture a glimpse of how the beautiful people lived.

Shannon left her shoes in the foyer by the garage door and walked barefoot through the living room. Music played. She didn't recognize the man singing, but she was sure he was one of Quinn's latest finds.

A couple of lamps had been left on to guide her, but she could have found her way blindfolded. She ignored the elegant furniture, the expensive artwork, the too casually arranged throw pillows and headed for the stairs.

Down a floor was the kitchen and another living room. This was where Quinn spent most of his time. The upper floor was for entertaining. A dumb waiter allowed whatever catering service he was using to deliver food quickly and easily.

Instead of elegance, this level was all about comfort. Oversize leather furniture and a giant TV on the wall dominated the room. The electronic equipment could probably intimidate a NASA scientist. Being a successful music producer paid well.

Shannon circled to the final staircase and took it down a floor. She passed a small guest room and walked into the master.

The glass doors were open. Cool night air and the sound of the ocean mingled with the scent of wood burning in the fireplace. There was a large, custom bed, a couple of chairs and a man. Her attention zeroed in on the latter.

Quinn had been reading. He put down his e-reader and rose as she approached. His blond hair was too long, his blue eyes slightly hooded. He was the kind of man who took what he wanted and he looked the part. Despite the loose cotton shirt and chinos, he was dangerous. Like a beautiful, yet venomous snake—the more appealing the appearance, the more you had to beware.

She dropped her bag onto the carpet. He removed his shirt by simply pulling it over his head and tossing it aside. His pants followed. Being Quinn, he didn't bother with underwear.

Shannon studied the honed lines of his body. Defined muscles swooped and hollowed. The man was pushing forty and yet could have easily been hired as a butt double for stars half his age.

He was already aroused.

She hesitated. Just for a second. It was like being in the first week of a diet when cravings were insistent and tempers ran high, and someone offered you a brownie. Did you accept it and promise to start again tomorrow, or did you do the right thing, take the empowering step and walk away?

She knew she'd already made her decision. Answering the call had been the equivalent of picking up that brownie. Now all she

had to do was take that first bite.

She walked over to him. Quinn drew her close and kissed her. With the stroke of his tongue, she surrendered to the inevitable and promised herself she would do better tomorrow.

Four

“And hold,” Nicole said, her tone encouraging. “Five seconds more.”

Pam stayed in the plank position. Every muscle in her body trembled with the effort, but she was determined to make it the entire minute. The image of her naked self still haunted her. The least she could do was give her all in exercise class.

“Time,” Nicole called. “And you’re done, ladies.”

Pam collapsed onto the mat for a second to catch her breath. Her stomach muscles were still quivering. She would be sore well into tomorrow, which was kind of depressing considering she did three classes a week.

She rose and staggered over to the shelf that held the cleaner spray and the towels, and wiped down her mat and the equipment she’d used. The other students did the same. She kept her eye on Shannon, wanting to make sure they had a chance to talk. She figured of all the women she knew, Shannon was the one most likely to have a referral. Or at least be able to get one.

“She’s trying to kill us,” Pam said, moving next to the annoyingly firm redhead.

“I think that, too.”

They collected their personal belongings from the cubbies

by the waiting area. Lulu stood and stretched. Pam stuffed the blanket Lulu had been on into her tote, then walked toward the door. Lulu walked along with her.

When they were outside and heading for their cars, Pam scooped up the dog and wondered how exactly she was supposed to bring up such a personal topic.

“Do you have a second?” she asked.

Shannon stopped and faced her. “Sure. What’s up?”

Pam took a second to admire the other woman’s smooth face. No saggy jawline for her. And her skin was really bright. Pam had noticed a couple of dark spots on her cheek and forehead. All that time in the sun when she’d been a teenager was coming back to haunt her. Day by day her complexion was moving from human to dalmatian.

“I don’t mean to imply anything,” Pam began, wishing she’d planned this better. “Or be insulting. It’s just...I don’t know who else to ask.”

Shannon’s mouth curved into a smile. “I suddenly feel like you’re going to ask me if I’ve had a sex change operation. The answer is no.”

Pam tried to smile. “It’s not that. I was thinking about maybe getting some BOTOX and wondered if you knew anyone who ever had or something.”

“Oh, sure. That’s easy. Of course I can give you a name. I have a person.”

Pam frowned. “A person who does it?”

“Sure.”

“Because you get it?”

“I have for about five years.”

Pam’s frown deepened as she studied her friend. “But your face is so smooth and natural looking.”

“Which is kind of the point,” Shannon told her. “I’ve been using it to prevent wrinkles.”

“They can do that?”

“They can.” Shannon moved her hair off her forehead. “I’m trying to scowl. Any movement?”

“Not much.”

“So it works. I’ll email the contact info for the place where I go. They’re very good. The shots hurt—I won’t lie. But after it’s done, it’s no big deal. Then about a week later, you have fewer wrinkles.”

“That sounds easy,” Pam murmured, even as she wondered if she’d left it too long. She was years past preventative care.

“I love it,” Shannon told her. “But I will warn you, it’s a slick road to more work. I’m flirting with the idea of injectable. Maybe a little filler in my lips, that kind of thing.”

“Filler?” Pam’s stomach got a little queasy. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

“So start with BOTOX. The rest will be waiting.”

“Thanks.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, then headed to their cars. As Pam strapped in Lulu, she sighed.

"I was kind of hoping she would tell me I didn't need anything done," she admitted.

Lulu wagged her tail.

"Be grateful," she told the dog. "You'll always be a natural beauty."

* * *

Nicole walked into the house at 6:28 p.m. Not a personal best, but pretty darned good, she thought. She ignored the ache in her back and her legs and how all she wanted to do was sleep for the next twenty-four hours. At least tonight was one of her early nights. Tuesdays and Thursdays she worked until eight.

"Mommy's home! Mommy's home!"

Tyler's happy voice and the clatter of his feet as he raced toward her made her smile. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays she didn't get to see him in the morning. Her first class started at six, which meant she was up and out by five thirty.

She dropped her bag on the floor and held out her arms. Tyler raced around the corner and flung himself at her. She caught him and pulled him close.

"How's my best boy?"

"Good. I missed you. I practiced my reading today and Daddy made sketty for dinner."

"Spaghetti, huh? Sounds yummy."

"It was." He kissed her on the lips, then leaned his head against her cheek. "I love you, Mommy."

"I love you, too, little man."

She lowered him to the floor. Tyler headed back to the living room and she walked into the kitchen. There were dishes everywhere. The plastic container that had contained the “sketty” Tyler had enjoyed, along with everything from breakfast and lunch.

The pain in her legs moved up to her back. Frustration joined weariness. She walked into the bedroom and saw the laundry she’d sorted at five that morning still in piles. Hadn’t he done anything?

Eric walked into the kitchen and smiled at her. “Hey, hon. How was your day?” As he spoke, he stepped close and kissed her. “I know you’re going to say fine and that you’re tired, but I gotta tell you, you look hot in workout clothes.”

The compliment defused her annoyance for a second. “Thank you and my day was fine. Long, but good. How was yours?”

“Excellent. I rewrote a scene three times but now I have it right. At least I hope so. I’ll find out at my critique group on Saturday. In the meantime, I have class tonight, so I’ll see you later.”

She stared at the man she’d married. He was so similar to the guy she remembered and yet so totally different. He still wore his hair a little too long and had hideous taste in loud Hawaiian shirts. But the old Eric had taken care of the details of their life, while this guy didn’t seem to notice anything beyond his screenplay.

She told herself to breathe. That yelling never accomplished anything.

"I'd love to read the new scene," she told him.

"You will. When it's perfect."

The same answer she always received. Because he'd yet to let her read a word of his work. Which sometimes left her wondering if he was writing anything at all. Which made her feel guilty, which led to her wanting to bang her head against the wall in frustration.

"I gotta run." He kissed her again, then straightened. "Well, shit. I forgot to do the dishes. Leave them. I'll do them when I get home. Or in the morning. I promise."

"Okay," she murmured, knowing she would do them herself. Something inside of her made it impossible to relax with a sink full of dishes sitting around. "Any chance you got to the sheets today?"

His expression turned blank. "Did I say I would?"

"Yeah, you did."

"Oh, man. I'm sorry."

"I appreciate that, but Eric, we need to talk about this. You're excited about your screenplay and that's great, but lately it seems you're doing less and less around here."

"I'm not. I do the grocery shopping and take care of Tyler when he's not in day care. I forgot the dishes, but I'll do them. And the laundry." His expression tightened. "You have to understand. It's all about the writing for me. I've got to focus. That's my job. I know it's not paying anything right now, but it will. When I'm working, I'm as committed as you are at your job."

I need you to respect my time.”

“I do.” Sort of, she thought grimly. “I need to be able to depend on you.”

“You can. Trust me.” He glanced at his watch. After picking up his backpack, he headed for the door. “Tomorrow. I swear. I’ll get it all done. Gotta go. Bye.”

And he was gone.

She stood alone in the kitchen and let various emotions wash over her. Annoyance, confusion, exhaustion, regret. They churned and heated until they formed a large knot in her belly.

Respect his time writing while she busted her ass to support them all? She closed her eyes. No, she told herself. That wasn’t fair. He was working. At least she hoped he was.

The changes in her relationship with her husband had started so quietly, in such tiny increments, that she’d barely noticed. Excluding his decision to quit, of course.

At first he’d taken care of stuff around the house. The laundry, the grocery shopping. But over time, that had changed. He forgot to get everything on the list. He put clothes in the washer, but not the dryer. He didn’t pick up Tyler at day care. Now he wasn’t cleaning up the kitchen as he’d promised.

She thought about going after him to talk about what was happening, then shook her head. He would be focused on getting to class. Soon, she promised herself. She would sit down with him and talk about what was wrong. She didn’t want to have a roommate, she wanted a husband. Someone who was invested in

their family, and not totally focused on his own dream.

Did he really think he was going to sell a screenplay? The odds against that were what? A billion to one? Talk about ridiculous. And yet there was a part of her that wondered if he would make it happen.

The knot in her stomach didn't ease. But that wasn't important right now. She picked up the empty laundry basket. Prioritize, she told herself. She could probably stay awake through two loads, so which were the most important?

Five minutes later their old washer was chugging away. She turned the radio on to an oldies station and danced with Tyler as they worked together to tidy the kitchen. Or rather she worked and he shimmied while "Help Me, Rhonda" played. By seven the dishes were in the dishwasher and the food put away. Tyler had had his bath the previous night so they had a whole hour before his bedtime.

She sank onto the floor in front of her son and smiled at him. "What would you like to do? We could play a game, or watch a show." She didn't offer to read a story, because that went without saying. Except for the two nights she worked late, she always read him a story. Usually some adventure about wily Brad the Dragon.

"A movie!"

"There's only an hour."

"Okay."

Tyler took off running toward the family room. His shows and movies were on a lower shelf where he could browse on his own.

She walked to the refrigerator and opened the door. Nothing much inspired her, although she knew she had to eat. She picked a blueberry yogurt and an apple.

“This one,” Tyler told her, holding out a familiar and battered DVD case.

Nicole studied the grainy picture on the front. It was sixteen years old. She’d been all of fourteen and this was a copy of her audition performance for The School of American Ballet in New York. For their summer session.

Not the actual audition. No one was allowed to watch, let alone record that. But she’d re-created the dance for her mother. On the same DVD were a half dozen other performances.

“Honey, you’ve seen that so many times,” she reminded her son. “Don’t you want to watch something else?”

He thrust out the DVD—his small face set in a stubborn expression she recognized.

“Okay, then. Dancing it is.”

She put in the DVD, then settled on the sofa. Tyler cuddled up next to her. She offered him some of her yogurt, but he shook his head. On the TV, the picture flickered, then familiar music filled the room.

Nicole watched her much younger self perform. She was all legs, she thought, without the usual gangliness of adolescence. Probably because she’d been studying dance since she’d been Tyler’s age.

She’d made it into the summer program only to be told at the

end that she didn't have what it took to make it professionally in ballet. At the time she'd been both heartbroken and secretly relieved. Because her being a famous ballerina had been her mother's dream for her.

Nicole's mother had cried for two days, then come up with a new plan. There were many kinds of dance, she'd informed her only child. Nicole was going to conquer them all. There had also been acting classes and voice lessons. She'd barely managed to get the grades to graduate from high school because she was always attending some coaching session or another.

On the screen, the scene shifted to yet another performance. Nicole figured she'd been about seventeen. It was the year her mother had started complaining of headaches. By the time Nicole had received word of a full dance scholarship at Arizona State University, her mother had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. The funeral had been the Saturday before Labor Day. Nicole had already started at ASU.

So many choices made that weren't really choices at all, she thought, pleased she'd reached the point of only sadness. For a long time she'd tasted bitterness, too, when she'd thought about her past. Maybe watching the DVDs with Tyler helped. He only saw the beauty of the dance. There weren't any emotional judgments. No history fogged his vision.

Nicole hadn't been so lucky. Her mother had wanted her to be a star. The origin of the dream wasn't clear. Something from her own childhood perhaps. But they hadn't talked about that.

Instead, their most intimate conversations had been about how Nicole could do better, be better. Always strive for more, her mother had told her. How disappointed she would be today.

Sometimes Nicole wondered if she was disappointed, too. How different things would have been if she'd been just a bit better. A hair more talented. Not that regrets helped, she reminded herself. They only wasted time and energy because regrets didn't change anything.

She stared at the screen and watched her younger self dance with a grace and confidence that seemed to be lacking these days. While she didn't regret not being famous, she knew that somewhere along the way she'd lost something important. All the elements of a happy life were there—a growing small business, a husband, a wonderful son, friends—but somehow they didn't come together the way they should. She accepted the exhaustion. That came with the territory. It was everything else—the sense of never having quite found what made her happy, the wondering if she'd made a mistake somewhere along the way. That was what kept her up nights.

* * *

Sunday morning Pam double-checked the contents of her refrigerator. The whole family was coming over for dinner later that afternoon and she needed to make sure she had all she needed.

Sunday dinners were an Eiland family tradition. When the kids had been younger, they were all required to be home by four,

regardless of whatever fun they might be having somewhere else. Exceptions were made for travel, of course, and now, vacations. But otherwise, Sunday dinners were required.

During the summer, they were casual affairs, mostly outside with barbecued whatever as the entrée. Come September, there was usually a football game playing and when favorite rivalries were on the line, dinner became a buffet in the family room.

For today Pam had decided on prime rib. She'd ordered a large one so she and John could have plenty of leftovers. The rest of the menu was simple. Mashed potatoes and green beans. Steven, their middle child, had requested her jalapeño-corn biscuits. She'd made pies yesterday. Custard and chocolate. She liked to do as much in advance as possible so that when her kids arrived, she didn't have to spend all her time in the kitchen.

She wandered into the dining room and walked to the built-in hutch along the far wall. She opened the cabinet doors and studied the stacked dishes. There were three sets of them, all inherited from grandmothers. One was only used for special occasions. She looked at the other two and picked up a side plate with blue-and-green swirls. She put it on the table, along with a tablecloth and a stack of napkins. John would set the table later, using what she'd set out.

There would be six of them today. Jen and her husband, Kirk, Steven and Brandon. Steven used to be allowed to bring a date but he went through women like most people went through chewing gum. Pam had grown tired of liking girl after girl only to have

them disappear. It was discouraging. Now Steven was under a very strict rule. No girlfriends allowed at family functions until they'd been together for at least six months. Which meant they hadn't met anyone he'd dated in the past three years.

She told herself he would grow out of it. He was only twenty-six. Which seemed young. How funny. John had only been twenty-two when they'd gotten married. But times were different now. People were different.

The doorbell rang and Lulu took off toward it, barking excitedly.

Pam followed her. "You know, I can hear it, too."

Lulu was unimpressed by the information and continued to bark until Pam scooped her up and opened the door.

Hayley Batchelor held out a plate of cookies. "Hi. I haven't seen you in forever. Is this a good time?"

"Sure."

Pam stepped back to let in her neighbor and John's secretary. Hayley set down the plate of cookies and held out her arms. Lulu made an easy jump from one cuddler to the other.

"How's my favorite girl?" Hayley asked.

Lulu snuggled close and gave a quick chin kiss.

"So sweet," Hayley murmured. "Why did your mom get you fixed? There could have been more Lulus in the world."

"Given her health issues, I don't think that's a good idea," Pam told her. "Come on. I have herbal tea in the kitchen."

"John told you," Hayley said.

“He did. Congratulations. You must be excited.”

“I am. It’s going to be different this time. It has to be.”

Pam admired her determination and belief. Hayley had suffered a series of miscarriages in her quest to get pregnant. She’d been probed and tested and there didn’t seem to be any specific reason for the problem. She wasn’t allergic to her husband’s sperm—or so she’d shared with Pam a year ago. Pam hadn’t known such a thing could happen. Allergic to sperm? What were their bodies thinking?

The plumbing all worked and was in the right place, the hormone levels were good, she wasn’t lacking in any vitamins or minerals. But Hayley was unable to carry a baby past twelve weeks.

With the last pregnancy, she’d gone straight to bed rest the second she’d found out she was pregnant and that hadn’t helped, either.

Now Hayley sat in one of the stools at the bar-level counter while Pam put water on to boil. She pulled out her tea tray and chose her friend’s favorite—a white tea with pear.

“How far along are you?” she asked.

“Seven weeks. Only five more to go.”

“You feeling okay?”

“I feel great.”

Pam nodded. So that wasn’t different. Hayley always felt perfectly healthy right up until she started bleeding.

“I wish I could help,” Pam told her. “Give you something.”

“You offering to be my surrogate?” Hayley asked, her voice teasing.

“God, no.”

Hayley laughed. “I figured.” Her humor faded a little. “I appreciate what you’re saying, though. I’d like some of whatever magic it is that so many other women get to take for granted.”

Pam nodded. She’d been pregnant three times and had three healthy children to show for it. She’d suffered bad morning sickness with Brandon, but otherwise, the pregnancies had been uneventful. She’d never considered how many other women had to deal with so much more.

“How’s Rob doing?” she asked.

Rob, Hayley’s husband, worked two jobs to help pay for the various fertility treatments Hayley wanted them to try. He was a good guy and Pam knew he worried about his wife.

“Good,” Hayley said brightly. “Excited I’m pregnant again.”

Pam nodded without speaking. She would bet Rob was a whole lot more worried than excited. She knew he wanted Hayley to stop trying. To give her body a rest. Not that Hayley listened.

Pam poured boiling water into two mugs and passed one to Hayley, along with the tea bag and spoon. She dropped a bag of Earl Grey into her mug just as John strolled into the kitchen.

“Hey,” he said as he walked around to Hayley and gave her a quick hug. “How’s my favorite secretary?”

“Good.”

“I see you brought cookies. I’ve always liked you. Remind me

to give you a raise on Monday.”

Hayley grinned. “I will.”

John winked at Pam, took a couple of cookies from the plate and headed for the garage. Lulu, sensing the possibility of a snack, followed her dad.

“John is about the nicest man I know,” Hayley said when the door had closed. “Everybody at work loves him.”

“I was lucky to find him,” Pam said, knowing that nice was more important than exciting and after thirty years anyone—even George Clooney—could seem less thrilling. It was simply how life worked.

Hayley mentioned something about the hotel project the company was working on. Pam mostly listened. The light had shifted and she noticed a subtle glow to her friend’s skin.

Hayley was what? Thirty? Thirty-one. She had a firm jaw and no wrinkles at all. Her hands and arms were so smooth. Pam drew in a breath as she realized that except for John, she was nearly always the oldest person in the room. And while she should probably be happy that so many young people wanted to hang out with her, she would rather it was because she was young, too.

She mentally gave herself a firm shake. She had to stop thinking about herself all the time. She was becoming obsessed and tedious.

She tuned back in to Hayley’s conversation and laughed over a comment about a client.

“I should head home,” Hayley said, coming to her feet.

“Thanks for the tea and the company.”

“When does Rob come back?” One of Rob’s two jobs involved business travel.

“In a few days.”

“If you need anything or get scared, just grab your pillow and come over,” Pam told her. “You’re always welcome. We have that guest room sitting empty.”

Hayley nodded, then hugged her. “Thanks. It helps to know you’re right across the street.”

“And down two houses. You go across the street, you’ll find yourself at the Logans’ and they have those really mean cats.”

Hayley laughed. “Good point.”

Pam walked her out. When she turned to go back to the kitchen, she saw John and Lulu walking toward her.

“Everything okay with her?” he asked.

“So far.” She drew in a breath. “I don’t want to send a message to the universe or anything, but I have a bad feeling about this. Why can’t the doctors figure out the problem? And when are they going to tell her that all these miscarriages are a bad idea?”

She’d bled a lot with the last one and Pam had ended up insisting she go to emergency.

John put his arm around her. “She really wants a baby.”

“And I want her to have one. Just not like this.”

Her husband squeezed, then released her. “Jen texted me. She and Kirk are coming over an hour early. They want to talk.”

Pam pressed her lips together. “Why didn’t she text me?”

“Probably because she knew you would ask questions.”

“Didn’t you? Is something wrong?” A thousand possibilities, all of them horrible, flashed through her mind. “You don’t think one of them is sick, do you? Or maybe Kirk shot someone and is going to be indicted for murder.” She pressed a hand to her chest as her breathing hitched. “Oh, God. What if they’re getting a divorce?”

Her husband chuckled. “I have to admire your ability to see disaster in every situation. You think they’d tell us that together, before Sunday dinner?”

“Probably not.”

“Then maybe stay calm until we hear what it’s about. For all we know, they want to move in with us to save money.”

Pam rolled her eyes. “Don’t even joke about that.” Her mind stopped swirling with disastrous possibilities and she tried to think of good ones. “I wonder if they’re getting that puppy they’ve been talking about. Jen called me last week to ask about how long it took to house-train Lulu. A puppy would be nice.”

“I’m sure they’re getting a puppy.”

“I don’t know if that’s a great idea. They both work, so they’re gone all day.”

John kissed the top of her head. “You are the queen of finding the cloud in every silver lining.”

She smiled. “Okay. Point taken. I’m going to get the roast ready.”

“Need any help?”

“No, thanks.”

She returned to the kitchen, Lulu walking beside her. The dog curled up in her kitchen bed while Pam set the roast on the counter. She would let it warm up for about an hour before popping it in the oven. In the meantime she could peel the four hundred pounds of potatoes they would be eating tonight. Unlike a lot of their friends, she and John saw their grown kids a lot. They’d stayed close geographically and seemed to like hanging out with their parents.

So far they’d been blessed with their children. Jen, their oldest, had been sweet and funny. Steven had been a typical boy—always getting into trouble. But he had a good heart and lots of friends. Brandon, their youngest, had been more difficult. He’d been moody and attracted to trouble. High school had been hell. He’d skipped class, hung out with horrible kids and discovered he liked to party. The summer he turned seventeen, he’d wrapped his car around a tree.

Angels had been with him, Pam thought, as she peeled her potatoes. The crash should have killed him, yet he’d walked away with nothing more than some bruises and a broken arm.

She and John hadn’t known what to do, so they’d erred on the side of tough love. They’d sent him to rehab for six weeks. Not one of those touchy-feely kinds with meetings where you shared and did crafts, but one with a boot-camp philosophy and lots of lectures from people in recovery. Brandon had quickly realized he was far from the biggest, baddest dog in the pack. He’d come

home older, wiser and, most important, sober.

He'd completed his senior year with a 4.0 GPA and had made what had seemed like the impossible decision to be a doctor. But he'd stuck with it and was now in his second year of medical school.

"My son, the doctor," Pam murmured.

They were all in a good place right now. She would be grateful and not borrow trouble. Although she did think that Jen and Kirk might not be ready for a puppy.

Five

Pam sat next to John on one sofa while Jen and Kirk sat on the other. Her daughter, a pretty brunette, smiled broadly.

It didn't *seem* like there was anything wrong. They both looked happy. Kirk was relaxed, which he probably wouldn't be if he'd shot someone in the line of duty and was going to prison. Plus, they would have seen it on the news.

Pam glanced at the clock. It was barely two—probably too early to make herself a Cosmo. Although she would like to point out that it was already five in New York and probably tomorrow in Australia.

She reached for John's hand. He gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze.

"All right, you two," he said. "You've kept us in suspense long enough. What's going on? Is it a puppy?"

They were moving, Pam thought, looking at their faces. Kirk had gotten promoted or something. No, that wouldn't work. He

was on the Mischief Bay police force. It wasn't as if they were going to relocate him to San Francisco.

Jen glanced again at Kirk, then turned back to her parents. She drew in a breath and laughed.

“No puppy. We're pregnant!”

Pam felt her mouth drop open.

“What?” John stood and crossed to them. “Pregnant? How far along? Did you plan this? Pregnant!” He pulled his daughter into his arms. “My baby's going to be a mommy. That's great, honey. We're so happy for you.”

Pam felt the room shift a little. As if one side of the house had suddenly dropped a couple of feet. She managed to stand and felt her face moving, so guessed she'd smiled. Kirk walked up to her and she hugged him because it was the obvious thing to do.

Jen pregnant. There was going to be a baby. She loved babies. Adored them. She couldn't be happier for her daughter and son-in-law. There was only one unbelievable catch.

She was going to be a grandmother.

* * *

The Farm Table was an upscale, organic, locally sourced restaurant. The kind of place completely at home in the beachy, LA-vibe quirkiness that was Mischief Bay. Everything in the restaurant was either sustainable or repurposed. The floors were bamboo, the tables and chairs rarely matched and the dishes were all old Lenox, Spode and Wedgwood patterns. But the odds of any one table getting two place settings that were the same were

slim.

Eclectic didn't begin to describe the decor. A combination of elegant, shabby chic and country, with a rabid interest in recycling to the point that the restaurant kept a pig and two goats to eat any food leftovers that couldn't be given to a local organization that specialized in feeding the homeless. The food was extraordinary.

There was generally at least a three-week wait to get a reservation. Which meant getting a call from Adam inviting her to dinner was only half as shocking as hearing his suggestion as to where they would go. The man obviously had some pull, she thought as she stopped in front of the valet and handed over her keys.

She tucked her clutch under her arm, walked into the restaurant and glanced around. Adam was already there, standing in the foyer. He smiled when he saw her—a warm, welcoming smile that made her feel just a little bit giddy.

She was willing to admit she had been more than a little pleased to hear from him. She hadn't thought she would. Now, as she moved toward him, she saw his gaze drop to take in what she was wearing. The sudden widening of his eyes added to her sense of anticipation.

She'd put a lot more thought into what she would wear on this date, as opposed to the last one. Despite the fact that it was late February, this was still Southern California and evening temperatures weren't going to dip below fifty-eight. She'd been

able to wear her favorite outfit and bring a pashmina as a wrap.

The dress was one of her rare clothing splurges. An Oscar de la Renta silk cloqué cocktail dress. The fabric—a textured silk—was simply tailored. A scooped-neck tank style, front and back, fitted to the waist, then flaring out. She'd left her red hair loose and wavy, and added diamond studs for her only jewelry. She'd left her legs bare, with only a hint of a shimmery lotion to add a glow, then finished off the outfit with a classic pair of black pumps.

Honestly, she'd been hoping for some kind of a reaction and Adam didn't disappoint. He crossed to her and took both her hands in his.

"I know this is going to get old, but wow."

She smiled. "Thank you. You're looking very handsome yourself."

Dress at The Farm Table was generally nice to fancy. Adam wore a suit and tie. Men had it easy, she thought. Give them some decent tailoring and they look great.

He excused himself and gave his name to the hostess, then returned to her side.

"It'll just be a few minutes."

"Thank you." She stared into his dark eyes. "I was surprised to hear from you."

His brows drew together. "Why?"

"I didn't think our first date went very well."

Genuine confusion tugged at his mouth. "Seriously? I thought

it was good. We were getting to know each other. If you thought it went badly, why did you say yes to dinner?"

She touched his arm. "I meant I thought I wouldn't hear from you because I got called back to work. I'm not saying it happens all the time, but when it does, I have to take care of the problem."

There it was—her career out there. So far she liked Adam. He made her hope in a way she hadn't for a long time. But she wasn't going to pretend to be other than who she was for anyone and she wanted to make sure he got that.

He relaxed. "Oh, that. It's okay. You have a job with demands. I do, too. Would you have a problem if I had to cancel because of a crisis at the job site?"

"No."

"So we both get that we have responsibilities."

As easy as that? "It's my turn to say wow."

He chuckled. "If that impresses you, then I'm doing a whole lot better than I thought. Makes me glad I called in all those favors to get the reservation here."

"I am impressed by you and the venue. So it's a win-win."

"I like that in a date."

His gaze dropped to her mouth for just a second longer than was polite.

Shannon knew it was silly to let the man's obvious attraction win her over. She had to be feeling it, too. But she had to admit it was pretty nice to be wanted.

A voice in her head pointed out that Quinn also wanted her.

Only it was on his terms, his way, on his schedule. Theirs wasn't a relationship. It was some kind of twisted addiction. Adam just might be the right antidote.

The hostess led them to a small table by a window. They were tucked into a private alcove, a little bit away from the other diners.

"Have you dined here before?" she asked.

They both said they had.

"Then you know how our menu works. The chef has some very special dishes in store for you. Enjoy."

The Farm Table's menu was information, not a choice. The items changed every week and there were a few vegetarian options for main courses. Otherwise, you ate what was put in front of you. They were taking a stand and Shannon could respect that.

She glanced at the five-course menu and was grateful she hadn't put on Spanx. At least she would have some extra room for all the yummy food.

Adam picked up his menu. "What's a squash blossom and how do you put salmon in it?"

"It's a plant."

"You're guessing."

"No, I'm sure it's a plant-based thing that has an opening or can be stuffed or something."

He looked at her, his brows raised.

She sighed. "Fine. I have no idea what it is. I'm sure it's

delicious. Do you know what sorrel tastes like? We have sorrel sauce in our third course.”

“Not a clue.”

“Then I guess we’ll find out together.”

He nodded and put down his menu. “Want to go with the wine suggestions?”

“Sure.”

“Me, too.” He leaned toward her. “I really was okay about the job thing.”

“I get that now.”

“I didn’t call right away because I was away on business. The guy who’s building the hotel insisted I fly to Denver to meet with him personally. He doesn’t like email updates.”

“Not a problem.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was flaky. Or not interested.” He leaned back and smiled. “I see the biggest problem here is that you’re too attractive. I’m not sure I can see you as a person.”

“What would I be if not a person?”

“An object.” The smile faded. “All joking aside, Shannon, I’m not in this to get laid. I’m not that guy. Don’t get me wrong. Of course I want to sleep with you. I’m breathing, right? I guess what I’m trying to say is I’m a divorced father with two kids and the thought of playing the field exhausts me. I want to find somebody special. Somebody I can care about and share things with. A relationship, I guess.”

He paused and grimaced. “That was sure more than you

needed to know. Sorry. Did I mention I'm not the greatest first date?"

"This is our second date."

"That, too."

He looked embarrassed, but she wasn't put off by what he'd said. It was honest, and lately it seemed honest men were hard to find.

He wasn't looking to play games or torment her or be totally in charge. He wanted to connect on a level that was meaningful.

"I appreciate what you've said," she told him. "And I get it." She did her best not to smile. "Especially the part about not wanting to sleep with me. Because every girl longs to hear that."

He groaned. "Of course I want to sleep with you. I said that. I made that really clear."

Their server appeared. If she'd overheard what they were saying, she didn't let on.

"Good evening and welcome to The Farm Table. I'll be taking care of you tonight."

Despite the fact that it was a set menu, it still took a good three or four minutes to perform the niceties and order the wine. After their server left, Shannon stretched out her hand, palm up.

"It's okay," she told Adam.

He put his hand on top of hers. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm not going to sleep with you tonight."

He sighed. "Would you have before I said anything?"

"Not a chance."

He brightened. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"You are very strange."

"I've been told that before."

The server returned with their first glass of wine. When she left Adam raised his.

"To the most beautiful woman I've ever gone out with and the fact that she won't sleep with me."

"At least tonight," she added, before touching his glass with hers.

Adam cleared his throat. "Temptation. I like it."

She laughed and sipped her wine. "I'm going to have to time my tempting moments. You have children and shared custody. How does that work?"

"Friday is our exchange day. My week starts when they get out of school. I have the kids this weekend, but they're spending a night with my folks."

"So no curfew."

"Don't. You're only teasing."

"Yes, I am."

Conversation shifted to his work and the big hotel project. As he described it, Shannon felt as if she'd heard a conversation like this before.

"Do you know John Eiland?" she asked.

"John? Sure. His company is installing all the plumbing. Why?"

"I know them. Pam and I are friends and I hang out at their

house every now and then. I've been to the big Memorial Day barbecue they have."

"No way. Was last year your first one, because it's the only one I've missed. I've been going since I was a kid and I would have remembered you."

She laughed. "It was my first. I met Pam at Mischief in Motion. It's an exercise studio. We take a class together three days a week."

He shook his head. "What I would pay to see you work out."

"Really?"

"Too much? Sorry. I'll get my mind back in the game. John's a great guy. And Pam's a sweetie. She reminds me of my mom."

"What are your thoughts on Lulu?" she asked. "Cutest dog ever or frightening genetic experiment?"

"A test. Okay, I'm good at these. Um, great personality, very well trained and the weirdest-looking dog, ever. What's up with the clothes?"

"She's naked. She gets cold." Shannon sipped her wine. "And I agree with you. I love Lulu, but the spots, the pink skin. It's not natural. Dogs should shed. It's nature's way of keeping us humble."

Their first course arrived. Caviar on some kind of leaf with three drizzled sauces. There were also tiny shaved white things—turnips, so they said.

Adam stared at the dish. "You first."

She grinned. "So you're not the wild adventurer type."

"I can be. But turnip and caviar? Who thought that up?"

"The famous chef in the back." She lifted the leaf and took a bite. The saltiness blended with the faint bitterness of the leaf, while the shaved turnip piece was surprisingly sweet.

"It's really good."

Adam looked doubtful but followed her lead. He chewed and swallowed. "I don't hate it."

"Then you need to write a review." She looked around the restaurant. "Pam and John came here for their last anniversary. They are such a great couple. I love watching them together. It makes me believe that true love is possible."

"Otherwise you don't believe?" he asked.

"Not exactly. I think it's hard for people to stay together. I've never gotten married. You're divorced. My friend Nicole, she's the owner of Mischief in Motion, is having trouble in her marriage right now."

"That's never easy," Adam said. "What's going on?"

"Her husband decided to write a screenplay. Only he didn't discuss it with her first. He just quit his job. He hasn't worked in nearly a year. They have an almost five-year-old and Eric barely helps out at all. I feel so badly for her, and I have no idea what to say. It's hard."

"You're a good friend."

"Thanks. I try. Now, tell me about your kids," she urged.

He smiled. "They're great. Char—Charlotte—is going to be nine in a couple of months. Sometimes I swear she's pushing

thirty instead. She's bossy and she would draw blood to protect her little brother. She loves anything princess-related and can't wait to start wearing makeup. She's beautiful and I'm terrified to think about her starting to like boys."

He paused. "Oliver is my little man. He's all boy. He likes trucks, building things and breaking things. He's six. He'll be seven this summer."

She could hear the love and pride in his voice, which was very appealing. She'd dated plenty of guys who didn't seem that interested in the families they'd already created. "Do you like having them half the time?"

"I'd rather have them all the time, but I accept the compromise."

"Are you and your ex friendly?"

"We get along. I regret that my marriage failed, but I don't miss our relationship, if that makes sense."

"It does. I like that you don't call her names."

"Why would I? I married her and chose to have children with her. Calling her names means I'm the moron."

Their server appeared to remove their plates. Conversation flowed easily throughout the rest of the meal. It was after ten when she and Adam left the restaurant. He handed her ticket to the valet, then pulled her to the side of the waiting area.

"I had a great time tonight," he told her.

"Me, too."

"Next time maybe you'll let me pick you up. You know, like

a real date.”

She smiled. “Next time I will.” She leaned in and lightly kissed him. His mouth was firm and warm. She drew back. “You have the kids this week, right? So we’ll keep in touch by text?”

He looked startled. “You’re okay with that?”

“Sure. It’s way too soon for them to know about me.”

“Thanks for understanding. Or to repeat myself...wow.”

She laughed.

He put his arm on her waist and drew her against him. “About that sleeping together thing.”

“Not a chance.”

“You’re amazing.”

“You are the only man I know who would say that after being told he *isn’t* getting laid.”

“I’m special.”

“You are.”

She had more to say but he kissed her and suddenly talking seemed highly overrated. His mouth lingered. Had they been anywhere else, she would have wanted a little more. But they were outside at a valet stand, waiting for their cars. This wasn’t the time to get into tongue.

She heard a car engine and stepped back. “That’s me,” she said, pointing at her convertible. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Promise.”

Shannon got in her car and drove away. As she headed for home, she thought about the tingles and the quivers. How just

being with Adam made her feel good. This was so much better than the post sex-with-Quinn drive of shame. Something she had to remember.

* * *

Pam typed quickly on the laptop in Nicole's small office, while Nicole sat in the chair beside the desk and waited for the news.

When she'd first bought Mischief in Motion, she'd only been able to afford basic remodeling and had put every penny into the studio itself. Her small down payment had been supplemented by money from a business angel network called Moving Women Forward. They'd given her advice along with start-up funds.

With no money left over for something as frivolous as an office, she'd made do with what she had. Her six-by-eight work space was little more than a human cubby, with a desk, two chairs and an overly bright light fixture.

Not that it mattered much to her. She was in her office as little as possible. Technology allowed all her clients to sign up for classes online. Once they created an account, they could purchase sessions individually or in packages. She received a report every day, the money was automatically deposited in her account and, best of all, she didn't have to pay for a receptionist. That savings meant that she'd been able to hire a couple of part-time instructors and cut her work hours down to sixty instead of eighty.

About a year ago, she'd been struggling with her accounting software. She'd casually mentioned it and Pam had offered to

help. Now her friend spent about an hour every couple of weeks going over the books and making sure Nicole stayed on top of things like taxes and the mortgage. Because she hadn't just bought the business, she'd also bought the building. An expense that sometimes had her lying awake at night, wondering if she was ever going to feel that they were financially stable.

"You're in great shape," Pam said as she looked up. "And I'm not just talking about your ass."

Nicole smiled. "You're sure?"

"Yes. I haven't had to correct any entries for at least a couple of months. With the automatic payment reminders in place, you're able to hold on to your money as long as possible and still get the bills paid on time. You, my dear, are turning into a tycoon."

"I think tycoons take home more than what I do."

"It's all a matter of perspective."

Nicole wished she had her friend's confidence in herself. Pam had worked in her husband's company for years so all this came easily to her. She'd also most likely paid attention in school. Nicole had grown up with the idea that an education was for other people and that she needed to focus on her *art*. All fine and good until the moment when art ended and the real world began.

Pam tilted her head. "Are you all right? You really are doing well. You're putting aside money for taxes and into savings every month. The monthly costs are fairly stable and the business is growing. So why aren't you smiling?"

"I'm smiling on the inside." Nicole shifted in her chair. "I'm

sorry. I really appreciate the help and you're right. The news is great. I'm just tired."

Pam nodded, but didn't speak. She was good at that, Nicole thought. Knowing when to ask and when to keep quiet. Was it a mom thing? Would she develop the skill as Tyler got older?

The silence stretched on a few seconds more. Nicole gave in to the inevitable and sighed.

"Eric and I aren't seeing much of each other these days," she admitted. "I'm always heading to work and when I get home, he's going out to his critique group or his screenwriting class. It's hard."

What she didn't mention was that her husband was getting home later and later, often smelling of beer. She understood that a few people in class wanted to go out afterward, but Eric had a family to come home to. She didn't understand what was happening to him. To them. And the unknown scared her.

"I know it's hard," Pam told her, her tone caring and warm. "I don't know how you haven't killed him. I swear to you, if John came home and told me he was quitting his job to write a screenplay, I'd back the car over him."

"John would never do that. He's a responsible guy. Predictable."

Pam body tensed a little, then relaxed. "You're right. And most of the time, that's a good thing."

"When isn't it a good thing?"

Her friend shrugged. "After thirty years of marriage, a little

unpredictability would be nice.”

“Is everything okay?” Nicole asked. Because selfishly, she needed Pam’s marriage to be better than her own. Somehow knowing Pam was okay gave her a safe place to be.

“We’re fine,” Pam assured her. “It’s just...” She drew in a breath. “I’m fifty.”

Nicole waited for the revelation. When Pam didn’t say anything else, she searched for some kind of meaning. “I was at your birthday party last fall. You’ve been fifty for a while.”

“I know, but I didn’t feel it before.” She waved her hand. “You’re thirty and gorgeous and you won’t understand, but trust me. One day you’re going to look in the mirror and wonder what happened. It’s not that I’m unhappy with my life. I get the blessings. My kids are still talking to us and coming over to dinner every Sunday. They’re happy. John and I are healthy and I’m pleased to see him at the end of the day. It’s just I didn’t think it would happen so fast. Me getting old.”

“Pam, you’re not old. You’re fantastic. You’re one of my best students. You can keep up with anyone. You’re in terrific shape.”

“You haven’t seen me naked,” Pam muttered. “It’s nothing like what it used to be.”

Lulu wandered into the office. Pam bent down and picked her up, then petted her.

“All I can tell you is pay attention to what you’re doing, because you’re going to blink and it’s going to have been twenty years.”

Nicole wasn't exactly sure what she meant, but she nodded, anyway. "I can see that with Tyler. He's growing so fast. He still thinks watching my old performances is great fun. In a few years he'll pretend he doesn't know me."

"They do go through that stage." Pam cradled Lulu in her arms. "I'm glad you had all those tapes put onto DVD. You'll always have them."

"They're not all that great to watch."

"To you, maybe. I've only seen a couple, but they were beautiful. You're a talented dancer."

A few months ago talk during class had turned to her former dancing career, such as it was. Pam and Shannon had insisted on seeing proof of her claims to have danced professionally and she'd brought in a DVD.

After graduating from ASU, she'd done what every other self-respecting dancer did. She'd headed for New York. Armed with determination, a lifetime of her mother telling her that she had to be a star and recommendations and introductions from her instructors, she'd started the arduous process of going to auditions.

It had taken two brutal winters for her to realize that she simply wasn't Broadway material. Or off-Broadway. She managed to get hired for two different Rockette shows and had danced for free for a few small productions that no one had seen. But she hadn't had whatever it was that got dancers noticed. At the end of those two years she'd returned to LA, where at least

she could be poor and hungry in a sixty-degree winter.

She'd been down to her never-to-be-touched emergency five hundred dollars. It was all that stood between her and finding a bed at a shelter. A sign outside of Mischief in Motion had said the owner was looking for someone to teach a dance-based exercise class. She'd been desperate enough to try.

Nicole had found that she liked the work. Over the next couple of years, she'd gotten certified in several kinds of fitness instruction, including Pilates. Now six years later, she owned the studio. So at least that part of her life was doing well. And she had Tyler. As for her marriage, well, maybe that was a problem for another day.

"I like what I do now," Nicole said, knowing that she had been luckier than most. "I just need to get better at juggling."

"Balance is never easy. I'm not sure it's possible." Pam rose, Lulu still in her arms. "Trust me. I think it's like those fake holidays created by the greeting card industry. We pay attention to different things at different times in our lives. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we don't."

"Always with the wisdom," Nicole teased. "Can I be you when I grow up?"

Pam smiled. "You're already grown-up. See? Everything happens when we're not paying attention."

Six

"I never get tired of that DVD," John said as he turned off the TV.

“It’s a good one,” Pam agreed.

They’d just watched *The Bourne Identity* for maybe the four hundredth time. She didn’t mind the movie repeats. It gave her a chance to catch up on her magazine browsing. John didn’t require her to pay attention so much as he liked her to be in the room.

She set her unread magazine back in the basket by her side of the sofa. The ones she’d gotten through would go into recycling. Lulu, curled up in her bed on the other end of the sofa, raised her head, as if asking if it was time.

“Ten o’clock, baby girl.”

Lulu stood and stretched. Ten o’clock was the phrase that meant “last time to pee before morning” or however the dog translated it in her head.

John got out of his recliner—because yes, they were that couple. The ones with a recliner in the family room. At least they weren’t at the stage of having two recliners. John had suggested it, but Pam knew she wasn’t ready. She was sure the time would come, but not today.

“You going to take her out?” he asked, which he did every night.

Pam wanted to ask when he let the dog out. Not that he wouldn’t if she asked. But the routine was him asking and her doing it.

How did things like that happen? she wondered. How did people get stuck in ruts? It must be part of the human condition—a need to not think about everything, maybe. So the brain

found routines and being in a routine was oddly comfortable. Until it became a rut, at which point it wasn't comfortable anymore.

Pam smiled at her husband. It wasn't his fault she was thinking too much these days. "I'll take her out."

John nodded and walked past her. As he did, he paused to lightly pat her butt.

She would guess he didn't even know he was doing it. That if she mentioned it, he would look at her blankly. Which was so like him, and mostly endearing. It was yet another routine. A signal that the outside observer would never catch, but that a wife of thirty years knew intimately.

Later, when he finished in the bathroom, he would look at her expectantly. The question would hang in the air until she nodded and said something along the lines of "I'd like to." Because the butt pat was John's signal that he was interested in sex that night.

Pam and Lulu walked to the back door. She opened it for her little dog, then waited while Lulu took care of business. They walked back to the bedroom.

When Steven had moved out, they'd done a remodel of the rear of the house. They'd expanded the master and added a second bathroom, while redoing the first. They'd also enlarged the closet. Pam didn't mind sharing any part of her life, but she'd always wanted a completely girly bathroom and a few years ago, she'd gotten it.

There was a huge shower with a built-in bench so she could

shave her legs easily. She had an oversize tub, a single sink with long countertops on both sides and as much storage as the makeup department at Macy's.

John's bathroom suited his needs, as well. There was a TV so he wouldn't miss any part of a game if he had to pee, a steam shower and a vanity that was several inches higher than usual.

Now she went into the closet and pulled out the drawer designated for Lulu's pj stash. The little dog had already gone over to the bed and used the pet stairs to make it onto the high mattress. Pam selected a soft T-shirt—pink, of course.

“All right, little girl,” she said softly as she sat on the bed.

Lulu dropped her head as Pam removed the light sweater. The garment slid off easily. Then Pam held out the T-shirt. Lulu stuck her head through the opening and raised her left front leg to step into the arm hole. She always tried to do the right one, too, but usually missed. Pam got her shirt on. Lulu went up to the decorative pillows on the bed and burrowed in behind them, where she would stay until the humans got into bed.

Pam retreated to her bathroom where she removed her makeup, applied three kinds of serums and creams, then brushed her teeth. As she performed the familiar rituals, she tried to think sexy thoughts to get herself into the mood. But she couldn't seem to summon any energy about it.

Sex with John was fine, but it wasn't exciting anymore. She remembered how it had been at the beginning. The thrill of seeing him naked. The constant need to make love. How every

touch had been arousing. Time and familiarity made that difficult to maintain. Add to that three kids and busy lives and it just wasn't the same.

But she loved him and wanted him to know that. While the words were always welcome, he also needed her to desire him. Something she'd figured out the second decade of their marriage when she'd been caught up in the exhaustion that came from having three active kids in the house.

She slipped on her nightgown and returned to the bedroom.

John was already there, sitting up, reading. He wore reading glasses—something that he'd resisted until any kind of printed material had become impossible. Lulu was on his lap. When she spotted Pam, she jumped up and came over to her side.

She put the dog in her bed in the corner. John put down his glasses and e-reader, then flipped back the covers and patted the mattress invitingly.

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