

*June, 2006*

## **Chapter 1**

I fired up the engine of my BMW, and listened to it purr while I inhaled the leathery new car scent. Last week, I'd come home in love with my handsome ride, but ever since I'd felt guilty about the indulgence. Not so much anymore. I wanted one minute, a mere sixty seconds, simply to sit and savor my success, but I had to go. I'd promised my boys I'd cook dinner. I also had to break the news of my promotion to my husband, and hoped he wouldn't object.

Putting the car in gear, I drove out of the San Francisco International Airport parking lot and wedged my way into the stream of commuters nudging south. It took about an hour to drive the paltry thirteen miles to my home in San Carlos. After a long day of travel and meetings, I was too tired for any kind of TGIF joie de vivre.

I stepped out of the car just as Micah ran out the front door. "Mom's home!"

Jason followed close on his heels. "Mommy!"

I hugged them close. The boys were getting so big, and I wondered how much longer they would race to meet me or call me *Mommy*.

"Hey, give Mom a chance to get inside before you tackle her," Matt half-heartedly ordered from the doorway. He stretched over the boys and pecked my cheek as I passed him.

As soon as we walked into the house Micah asked, "So what's the dinner plan?"

I was fried and really wanted to order a pizza, but I'd already used my free pass the night before with Chinese takeout. Rallying energy, I threw on an apron and dug red bell peppers, zucchini, and chicken out of the refrigerator while my guys settled around the kitchen table.

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“Glass of wine?” Matt already had a bottle of Sangiovese sitting on the counter.

“Love one.” My stomach clenched, but I went for it. “I got the call.”

Matt paused with the wine in one hand and the corkscrew in the other. “What call?”

“The job.” I took a breath. “I was offered the promotion.”

“Oh.” He glanced at me as if surprised and returned his attention to inserting the screw.

“I don’t have to accept.” I tried to sound as if it wasn’t a big deal, but it was. I’d worked hard for that promotion and in the marrow of my bones needed a change for reasons I couldn’t even begin to explain.

Matt meticulously poured an equal portion into each glass and handed one to me. His lips bent up, but his eyes weren’t smiling. “Take it. Sounds like a great opportunity.”

“You sure?”

He took a drink, and his smile became more genuine. “Absolutely. Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” I took a gulp from my glass and the lump in my throat receded.

“So, what will your new title be?”

“Senior Vice President.”

“Impressive. When do you start?”

“Monday, since I’ll already be in New York, and I’ll meet my new boss.” I knew almost nothing about Reese Kirkpatrick. Monday was his first day with Global Security. I didn’t want Matt to know I had any qualms and asked, “How was your day?”

“Dad said we’re going camping 4<sup>th</sup> of July.” Micah looked at Matt. “Right, dad?”

Jason’s face lit up. “Yeah, he said we’d catch fish and eat s’mores at night.”

“Oh, really?” I raised my eyebrows at Matt.

Matt shrugged and this time he changed the subject.

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After dinner, Micah and Jason wandered off to watch a movie while Matt twisted in his chair. He knew he was in the doghouse for promising the boys we'd go camping.

"How's work? Did you get your test results?"

The left side of his mouth lifted. "Yes, the preliminary reports are very promising, but I won't bore you with details you don't understand."

His superior attitude grated on me. Still, I probably wouldn't understand. Matt's work was difficult for most people to grasp. As a computational biologist, he studied genetic sequences in proteins. His work chemically linked the relation between depression and chronic illness, and was equal parts biology, mathematics, statistics, and computer modeling.

Funny, I understood when his colleagues explained what they did.

"I'm happy for you." I emptied the remaining wine into his glass. "So, camping? What happened to La Jolla and the Cove? Snorkeling and a condo with indoor plumbing?"

"I found a campsite along the Truckee River with great trails and fishing. It has flushing toilets and showers." I didn't bite and he threw me a bone. "You don't have to go."

He knew I wasn't big on camping, our vacation time was limited, and now I would be the bad guy if I didn't go. "Some choice you've given me."

"I thought it'd be nice to go someplace where you couldn't use your laptop."

He looked at me with his wide blue eyes and I melted. My vacations were never truly vacations. I always kept up with e-mail and joined important conference calls. Knowing the level of dedication expected by my company didn't alleviate the mom guilt. "You're right." A surge of affection for him filled me. I sat on his lap, and kissed him.

He leaned his forehead against mine. "So you'll come?"

"Will you clean the fish?"

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“Always do.”

“Then I’ll go.” I kissed him again; then moved to get up. He tugged me back on his lap and hardened underneath me. “The boys are awake.”

“They’re watching a movie,” he murmured close to my ear.

This was not Matt’s typical behavior, but I liked it and my body responded. I led him by the hand to our bedroom. Before the door shut, Matt had his shoes kicked off and was unzipping his jeans. I locked the door and undressed, too. I pictured a pre-show of tasting and touching before the main event. Matt had a different agenda. He thrust his tongue in my mouth and thrashed it around as if we were having a tongue war. The strange thing was it didn’t feel like it stemmed from passion. It was habit. I pulled away.

No matter how many times he did the crazy tongue thing, or how many times I jerked back, Matt never clued in that I hated it. I wanted to tell him just how much I hated it, but was afraid of wounding his ego. In a blink, he mounted me and a few blinks later, he collapsed on my chest. He pecked my cheek and murmured, “That was great.” Then, he went to the bathroom. No kissing, no cuddling, no post-coital chat.

A weight on my chest kept me down. I should be happy. I’d just finished having sex with my husband. It hadn’t been great, but not horrible either. At least we had sex.

Matt walked back in the room. “You tired?”

“A little bit.”

He pulled on his boxers with his back to me and looked over his shoulder. “Think I’ll watch the movie with the boys. You mind?”

“Go ahead.” They were watching *Cars* for at least the hundredth time. I got up, finished the dishes, and went to bed.

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The next morning, Matt slept snoring beside me while I lazed in bed daydreaming about the guy who worked at the Safeway fish counter. He had deep dark eyes and, while not great looking, exuded manly sexuality. I imagined how our first contact would be made.

*“May I have four trout fillets, please?” I asked.*

*“You got it! Do you have a good recipe for trout?”*

*“No, I thought I would just throw them on the grill.”*

*“If you’d like, I’ll write one down for you.”*

*“That’s very kind.”*

*“My pleasure.” He handed me the recipe with a rakish wink.*

*Instead of a recipe, it’s a confession that he watches for me. If I’m interested, call him.*

Silliness. Even though it was Saturday, and my bed was comfy, I got up. Maybe I could get through at least one cup of coffee in peace before Saturday morning cartoons started blaring from the television. I made a pot of coffee, poured a cup, and headed for the back porch. The cool air bit my skin, but curling up on a lounge chair, I was comforted by the early sun on my face. As I sat enjoying the morning, sipping coffee, my thoughts wandered back to my increasing awareness of other men.

Last week, I had even caught myself checking out a Safeway bagger’s butt. He couldn’t have been more than twenty, but his chinos looked good on him. I imagined myself as Blanche DuBois. *“Young man! Young, young, young man...I just want to kiss you once, softly and sweetly on your mouth!”* How pathetic. I shook my head clear.

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Everyone who knew Matt and I would attest we were happily married. We didn't fight. Neither of us indulged in excessive bad habits. Matt wasn't abusive. He didn't cheat. As my mother repeatedly said, I was lucky to have a man like Matt. So polite, so steady... so reliable.

He'd changed very little since we'd met while attending Northwestern University. I was getting my master's in Acting, and he was getting his in Biological Engineering. One day I decided to eat in the cafeteria. When I couldn't find an empty table, I hunted for any open seat. Then I caught Matt staring at me. He was sitting alone, and he was pretty darn cute.

I walked up to his table and smiled down at him. "I saw you looking at me. Would you like to invite me to sit down?" He chuckled and turned a deeper shade of red. I noticed the serious pile of books on the table. "It's too noisy in here to study anyway."

As long as I could remember, I'd had a weakness for smart men. The fact that Matt was blue-eyed and blond was a bonus. His eyes were pools of clear blue water, and they crinkled adorably when he smiled. After half a dozen coincidental meetings, he asked me out. I'd thought it was fate, but Matt later confessed he sought out places where he guessed I might be. He thought I was exotic with my dark features and second-hand-store-chic clothes. I never considered myself particularly unusual; however, being an actress, I had been *dramatically* different from the women he had dated. He had been different for me too.

There was never any great passion between us, but we were compatible in our way. His apartment became my haven from the craziness of my theater friends. He calmed me. My roommate, Serena, thought he was a looker, but *flat*. That's what she called him. "Flat." As in absence of fizzle. If being even-tempered and reliable was *flat*, then it was good with me.

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I was twenty-three when we married. At the time, Matt loved me, adored me even. I remember the moment I sensed a shift in him. It was at our wedding reception. I had envisioned us inseparable as we celebrated our big night, but Matt wanted to catch up with college buddies.

“I have the rest of my life with you. I just want to talk to my friends.”

Not wanting to appear needy or selfish, I kissed him and let him go. Subtle though the change was, a moment of absolute clarity hit me. I had transformed to a fixture in his life that no longer required special attention. We were married, and I would be there when he finished with other things. I supposed that’s what marriage was. I just never thought it would happen so soon after we exchanged vows. It didn’t mean Matt stopped loving me. Things simply had changed.

Now here we were, thirteen years later. Lucky thirteen. Last week our wedding anniversary came and went without much fanfare. After the boys had gone to bed, I presented Matt with a watch. He gave me nothing, not even a card. The next day I bought the BMW on impulse. I told him it was an early birthday present for me.

“Mom, where are you?” I turned and Micah stood all of three feet from me.

“Right here.” I knew what he wanted.

“Oh. What’s for breakfast?”

“French toast and bacon sound good?” It was a rhetorical question.

“Mmmmm. Thanks, Mom. Can I watch cartoons?”

“Sure, but keep the volume down. Daddy and Jason are still sleeping.”

Less than a minute later, the television blasted. I jumped up and followed the noise.

“Micah, turn it down.” He didn’t respond. “Micah, that means now.”

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I think I was louder than the television. His face scrunched, but he did as told. I went to the kitchen to start breakfast and heard Jason stumble out of bed and make his way to the family room. A minute later, Matt loped in looking sleepy eyed. He headed straight for the coffee.

He took a sip and smacked his lips. “Good coffee.” I dropped a slice of battered bread in the pan, and it made a pleasing sizzle. Matt leaned over, and inhaled the scent of vanilla and cinnamon wafting from the skillet. “Mmmm, smells delicious.”

His unexpected compliment brightened my mood. “It’s such a beautiful day. Let’s take the boys to Bean Hollow Beach this afternoon. We haven’t been there in ages.”

Matt looked at me a bit confused. “We’re going to the A’s game.”

“You didn’t tell me, but it sounds fun. What time do we leave?”

Matt looked at the coffee mug in his hand and then back at me. “I only got tickets for the boys and me. I thought we’d have a boys’ day. You don’t mind, do you?”

How could I object? Matt went to the bedroom to get dressed. I fought an urge to fling the spatula in my hand at him, but I flipped the French toast instead, wiping a tear before it dripped into the pan. I shouldn’t be so angry and hurt. I wanted him to be a good father, but I *was* hurt. The game was something I could do with them, too.

I told myself it didn’t matter. A week’s worth of laundry waited for me. Besides, since the guys would be gone all day, I could treat myself to a shopping trip in San Francisco. Recently, I’d recommitted to an exercise plan and lost fifteen pounds. None of my suits fit properly, and I wanted to make a good first impression when I met my new boss.

After breakfast, I helped the boys find their A’s caps and baseball gloves, and then lathered them up with sunscreen. Just before they climbed into Matt’s Honda minivan, I gave



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everyone a hug, including Matt. I was still upset with him as they drove away. I hated that minivan. I had encouraged him to buy an SUV or Jeep.

Once inside, I missed the noise that had worked my nerves only moments ago. The quiet wasn't peaceful. It seemed inexplicably loud. I turned on the radio to drown it out, and a familiar tired restlessness crept over me while a weight settled in my chest. As I moved from room to room, gathering laundry, I kept expecting the impatient, heavy feeling to go away. It didn't until I walked into Neiman Marcus, my place to go when I really wanted to splurge.

Beyond pleased that the size 6 suit hung unattractively on my body, I asked the sales girl to bring me a size 4. It was perfect. "I'll take it," I declared and started to get undressed.

She gathered my selections and asked, "Anything else I can help you find?"

"I could use something for going out. Not for Business." I don't know where that came from. I didn't have plans to go anywhere.

She was back in a flash with an armload of clothes. After I dismissed her first few suggestions, she held up a printed wrap dress. It reminded me of something my mother might have worn in the seventies when she was a young divorcee on the hunt for a new husband.

"Who's the designer?"

"Diane Von Furstenberg. You've got a rocking figure and can pull it off."

Flattery always helped. I put it on and she was right. The dress was low cut and emphasized my newly flattened stomach and slenderized waist. I turned for a side view.

She studied my reflection. "Have you ever tried a push up bra?"

Okay, that was not flattering. My breasts weren't as perky as they used to be. Breast feeding two boys and gravity had taken its toll. I tried the suggested miracle bra with the dress.

She echoed my thoughts. "It's very sexy, but still sophisticated."

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I had to hand it to her. She was good. I floated out of *Needless Mark-up* on heady shopping high with two suits, a dress, a bra with the matching underwear, and two pairs of shoes.

I hustled home to put my things away before Matt saw them. It wasn't because of how much I'd spent. Matt handed me the bills years ago when I started making more money than him. Other than the car, I'd always handled our money responsibly. It wasn't the money. It was the dress. I was embarrassed by how provocative I looked in it and wasn't sure what possessed me to buy it. If I wasn't comfortable modeling it for Matt, why did I bother?

I knew. I thought about it while I packed the dress in my bag Monday morning. When I looked in the fitting room mirror at Neiman Marcus, I saw who I used to be, and maybe still was under my standard little sweater sets which I accessorized with my little pearl necklace. After Matt and I had married, I changed my style to please him. I wanted one night to please myself. One night to have fun and pretend I wasn't the suburban soccer mom. The dress was my "costume."